

Our men talk treaty

By NATALIE CROMB



THE momentum for the Treaty campaign is building, following a meeting of First Nations people in Victoria unanimously rejecting Constitutional Recognition last month and the 'Men speak out for Treaty' event in Redfern last week.

Organised by Stop the Intervention Collective Sydney (STICS) and hosted by journalist Jeff McMullen, the men's event had a robust panel including Wiri (Qld) man and Australia's first Indigenous legal Senior Counsel Tony McAvoy, Narungga (South Australia) Elder and advocate Tauto Sansbury, Awabakal (NSW) man and chair of National Tertiary Education Union Indigenous policy committee Terry Mason, Gurang Gurang (Qld) man and chair of the Stronger Smarter Institute Dr Chris Sarra and Djambarrpuynu (NT) man and Yolngu Nations Assembly Spokesperson Yingiya Guyula.

Mr McAvoy said he was a strong advocate for a treaty, as outlined in the opinion piece and framework he wrote, regarding an Assembly of Nations, in the *Koori Mail* on December 16.

"It is achievable within the next few years that we will have set the framework for the treaties to be entered into by First Nations," he said.

The Assembly of First Nations model, which has been developed over the past three years, envisions a truly representative body that will debate and pass resolutions, in much the same way as the United Nations General Assembly, and be the negotiating body on behalf of First Nations people for treaties with governments.

Mr McAvoy said a treaty would need to



The panel at the Men speak out for Treaty event in Redfern last week, from left, Tony McAvoy, Tauto Sansbury, Terry Mason, Yingiya Guyula, Chris Sarra and Jeff McMullen.

have four main heads of agreement:

- an acknowledgement that Australia was not settled and that First Nations people are sovereign peoples;
- land reform;
- reparations, compensation and equitable benefit sharing; and
- structural reform.

The packed audience was in agreement with Mr McAvoy's approach to a treaty.

"The dilemma which confronts us is how we create the environment where the economic and cultural imperatives that saw us through millennia can be maintained in the Western world in which we now live," he said.

Mr Sansbury conceded he is not an expert in the legal and political machinations of achieving a treaty, but he said he is determinedly against constitutional recognition. He referenced the South Australian experience with constitutional recognition and how very little it had achieved beyond the "feel good" symbolism for which

the Government could pat itself on the back. He said the continued poor performance of social indicators showed that change is not achievable without action.

Mr Mason was one of the 200 First Nations people who unanimously rejected constitutional recognition at a meeting in Victoria last month.

Applause

"They used the term 'sovereign people', not 'Victorian Aboriginal people', in the meeting, because they are not owned by the Victorian Government," he said, to resounding applause.

Mr Mason said he felt there was a real momentum for change as people "resist the Government's intent to split into focus groups" and, instead, choose to remain united and speak "black fulla way" about what was and is affecting them – not the agenda set by the Government.

Mr Mason said the march towards a treaty

didn't need to be rushed. "Because it may not be for us or our children – but it might be for our grandchildren," he said.

"It doesn't matter how long it takes, as long as it is done right and includes genuine grassroots consultation."

Mr Mason spoke of the importance of including people who cannot travel to capital cities and forums like the Redfern event and said that without genuine consultation with all communities, First Nations people would be selling themselves short.

Mr Guyula spoke of the importance of preserving culture and lore. He entranced the audience with his ceremonial song and then allowed those present to see lore in action in a brief video that demonstrated the real disconnect between lore and law. Mr Guyula said it was on that basis he is running a treaty platform in his campaign for the next NT election.

He recalled the "immediate and real changes" following the NT Intervention.

"Our lore was immediately pushed aside and ignored," Mr Guyula said.

"We are experiencing the highest rate of suicide. Our people are locked up at a rate six times higher than a black man in South Africa during apartheid. It is self-determination and self-government or poverty, exile and death – we need treaty."

Dr Sarra was the final speaker and had perhaps the simplest yet most powerful statement in favour of a treaty.

"It would finally be an acknowledgement of our humanity in an honourable way," he said.

The panel was followed by robust discussion in favour of a treaty. The vast majority of the audience who contributed to discussion made clear statements in favour of grassroots consultation with one audience member suggesting involvement at a land council level was a good starting point.

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