



Pilbara Aboriginal people call for fresh, local approach to Close the Gap

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Federal Indigenous Australians Minister the Hon Linda Burney MP address the 2023 Yule River meeting.

(Image: José Kalpers, YMAC)

Unity, action, leadership, and a voice for Aboriginal people of the Pilbara were key themes of this year's Annual On-Country Bush Meeting at the Yule River Meeting Place.

Taking place on Kariyarra Country, the 8th annual meeting was held 12 and 13 July 2023. Over 500 people gathered over the two days, to discuss local empowerment and a fresh call on the government to Close the Gap for Aboriginal people from across the region.

In opening the meeting, Nyamal-Pitjkarli Elder Mrs Doris Eaton said, "We've been doing this for a long time. It didn't work before, so we need to do this differently. We should be telling government differently. We must respect this place. Let's do this for our people of the Pilbara, and let's do this for the old people."



Day 1 saw Aboriginal attendees discuss and endorse a Call to Action that calls for a more genuine, grassroots approach by government to working with community on placed-based solutions in six key areas of concern: Systemic Reform; Education; Health; Housing; Wellbeing; Community Safety.

The Call to Action highlights these key concerns, proposed solutions, and identifies how they align with government commitments and targets such as the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the State Government Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.

Community members spoke of the need for action, unity and leadership to create significant change, as well as the need for a well-resourced Pilbara leadership group and hub to lead this change and better connect government and community. Access to land, waters and the protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage were concerns also raised by attendees.

Day 1 also featured a presentation from Mr Thomas Mayo, member of the Federal Government's Voice Referendum Working Group. A Q&A followed his presentation. Following community discussion, the meeting co-chairs called for a show of hands in support of the Voice to Parliament. An overwhelming majority raised their hands, with others wanting further information.

On Day 2, community members presented the refined Call to Action to Federal Minister for Indigenous Australians the Hon Linda Burney MP, State Minister for Education and Aboriginal Affairs the Hon Dr Tony Buti MLA, Senator Dorinda Cox, WA Commissioner for Children and Young People Ms Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, and the many local, state and federal government representatives in attendance. Also there, was Acting Prime Minister the Hon Richard Marles MP, who joined the meeting to speak with community members and discuss their concerns.

In her response, Minister Burney said, "I am hearing the frustration. This is an opportunity to change that frustration and for you to have direct say about what's going on in the portfolios and areas of action that you have spoken about.

"I want each of every one of you to understand that we are listening. We are. And we are learning. The support for a change to a constitution will bring about a different way this country will operate. It will make us equal. In 2023, we are finally getting the opportunity to truly recognise first nations people. WA is critically important to this referendum. We have everything to gain and nothing to lose."



With respect to the idea of local resourcing to support change, Minister Burney indicated a Pilbara hub was “something we’ll pursue.”

Minister Buti referenced both his education and Aboriginal affairs portfolios in his address. He said, “[Minister Burney] referenced whole of government – we have been wrong in the past by ghettoising people to an Aboriginal portfolio. The Empowerment Strategy is the State Government’s response to try and Close the Gap.”

In her speech, Senator Dorinda Cox noted she sees a decade of change ahead. “We have to get behind the change,” she said. “By the end of this year, we will have a referendum. We all need to get on board with that.”

The State’s Commissioner for Children and Young People was passionate in her response. Ms Jacqueline McGowan-Jones said, “We need to make sure at Yule and Yamatji meetings - and everywhere - that our kids are brought together to talk about what they need.” She went on to state she would be delighted if an invitation was issued for her to meet with young people to discuss their concerns with her directly, and described the co-design process she is currently undertaking with young people, saying “we are at the table, all day, every day, doing a process and with the kids leading the way. The focus on systemic change and structural reform is key to making change.”

Following the meeting, Ngarla-Nyamal leader Mr Danny Brown, who co-chaired the two days of discussions, shared, “Aboriginal people in the Pilbara have been clear about what they know are the local problems and, more importantly, what they see as the answers to these problems. We need to be at the table with government, as a regional voice - representative of the Pilbara’s diversity - advocating for positive changes and real outcomes.”

Kariyarra leader Ms Raylene Button, who also co-chaired the meeting, reflected, “YMAC organises the Yule River Bush Meetings to inform and empower community to identify priority issues and propose culturally-safe, place-based responses and solutions. This year’s Call to Action demonstrates our willingness to work with government to improve the lives of our people here in the Pilbara. My hope is that government really listens to us, especially our Elders, and partners with us, to deliver on these actions and make some really significant and meaningful change. We’ve got the model, we just need the right support to put it in place.”

The draft Call to Action was developed following an April workshop of community Elders and emerging leaders hosted by Yule River meeting coordinator Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation (YMAC). The working group nominated by those attending at the April meeting -



and who presented at Yule River - are: Danny Brown, Raylene Button, Ashley Councillor, Linda Dridi, Mrs Doris Eaton, Terry Jaffrey, Maureen “MK” Kelly, Henry Lockyer, Pat Mason, and Ethan Tittums.

In a region often referred to as the Australian economy’s engine room, the Pilbara is home to multiple language groups and cultures. Aboriginal attendees expressed deep frustration that many of their people are still living with disadvantage. “At the rate we are going, the gap will be as wide as the Yule River,” observed Ms Button.

Simon Hawkins, CEO of YMAC said, “Over the years, Traditional Owners showing up for the Yule River meetings have consistently demonstrated their passion and proactiveness. In 2017, they saw the need to establish a regional representative advisory group – the Pilbara Aboriginal Voice. Unfortunately, their progress has not been met by the government’s, nor has adequate resourcing been provided to support this important initiative. Further, prior to this year’s meeting, YMAC was unable to ascertain a status update or any other reporting on the State Government’s implementation of its Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy - even on previous years’ progress – demonstrating its failure in terms of current processes and political leadership. The State Government needs to be held to account on this new Call to Action, as the solutions within it directly address Closing the Gap and the empowerment framework. Community is ready and willing – it is government that is holding up progress.”

Other guests at the meeting included the Hon. Rosie Sahanna MLC, Member for Mining and Pastoral Region; Ms Jody Broun, CEO of the National Indigenous Australians Agency; representatives from the offices of Senators Pat Dodson and Sue Lines; and senior management and staff from the departments of Communities, Education, Country Health, WA Police, and the Office of the Ombudsmen.

YMAC will work with the Call to Action Working Group to finalise the statement, incorporating additional actions identified by community, and release to government in coming weeks.

About Yule River Bush Meetings

Meetings held at Yule River are historic, having been organised by Aboriginal people in the vast Pilbara region for decades. The dry riverbed off the North West Coastal Highway, just south of Port Hedland, is seen as a place where people from different language groups can come together to discuss common issues affecting Aboriginal communities across the region. The meetings stemmed from the actions taken in the lead up to the 1946 Pilbara Strike, when Aboriginal people held secret meetings in remote bush locations to plan an ambitious three-year walk-off by Aboriginal pastoral workers who were living on cattle stations in conditions of virtual slavery. Pilbara Aboriginal people continued in their efforts to advocate for improved conditions and outcomes by organising bush meetings. During the land rights era, from the late 1970s, Yule River became the focal point for such gatherings that were often attended by up to 2000 Aboriginal people from all over the Pilbara. At this time, “Old Man Parker” (born Herbert), was the Pilbara representative for the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee, the first national body elected by Aboriginal people introduced by the Whitlam Government. Mr Parker presided over these meetings



Yamatji Marlpa
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on the river's sandy banks as Aboriginal people from all over the Pilbara region gathered to talk about lands trust business, housing complaints and land rights. Many important initiatives have come from Yule River meetings, with both concerns and solutions coming directly from Pilbara Aboriginal people; and with government expected to attend to hear and address their concerns. Through the efforts of then-YMAC Co-Chairperson, Mrs Doris Eaton (whose father was a key player in the 1946 Pilbara Strike), and the YMAC Pilbara Regional Committee, the Yule River meetings started again in 2014. All language groups from across the region are invited to attend these meetings and share their concerns. Much like they were decades ago, gatherings at Yule River are an important opportunity for a diverse range of Aboriginal voices to be heard.

About Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation

Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation (YMAC) is the Native Title Representative Body (NTRB), delivering native title and other services across the Pilbara, Mid West, Murchison and Gascoyne regions of Western Australia. YMAC is run by a First Nations board of directors, representing several native title groups, each of whom have their own language, culture, traditions and protocols. YMAC services include native title claim and future act representation; heritage services; executive office, community, and economic development assistance; land administration, and natural resource management support.

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