

Occasional Address

Royal Exhibition Building, Saturday 14 December, 6.00pm

Pat Anderson AO

Chairperson, Lowitja Institute

Recipient of Doctor of Laws (honoris causa)

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, graduands, families, brothers and sisters:

I acknowledge and pay respects to the Kulin Nations, Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land on which we are meeting today.

I would like to thank the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor: I am deeply honoured to receive this beautiful gift, an honorary Doctorate of Laws from this distinguished University.

I acknowledge the contribution made by eminent scholars Professors Marcia Langton and Ian Anderson who, as a part of this university, have made great contributions to the life of the nation.

I would also like to thank Professor Shaun Ewen, Indigenous Pro-Vice Chancellor for his support.

To begin, I would to share a little of my story with you.

I grew up in the 1950s on Parap Camp in Darwin.

At that time, Parap Camp was home to many families rejected by the mainstream Darwin population: Chinese, Japanese, Malays, Filipinos, Italian, Greeks and of course Aboriginal families and a few Torres Strait Islander families.

Many of those families had a Stolen Generations heritage.

My mother who was one of them, taken by force from her family in Central Australia as a young girl sometime in the early 1920s

My father was a Swedish merchant seaman who had ended up in the Northern Territory.

In those post-War years, conditions on Parap Camp were harsh: outside toilets, open drains and very basic services.

So, what improbable chain of events led me from Parap Camp in the 1950s to being with you here today?

Most important, I had a stable family life and caring parents – that was key.

And, I was lucky, of course.

And then two things were central: education and the struggle for social justice for our people.

Now, my mother was never taught to read or write.

This was the public policy of the day.

The system that removed her from her family, supposedly so she could 'better herself', denied her that opportunity.

But both she and my father were determined that their daughters would get an education.

So, despite the hardships, my sisters and I went to school, rain, shine or storm, every day, without fail. And the path that this education opened up eventually lead me out of Darwin.

It led me around the world and eventually back to Australia.

It led me to a career – if that is the right word – in the Aboriginal movement for health and self-determination.

It was my education that made this possible.

So when people talk about the importance of education, it is easy to dismiss it as another platitude.

But I can speak from my own experience about how profoundly important it is.

And I would say that education is even more essential today, given the great challenges facing this country and indeed the whole planet, challenges that require informed and educated citizens that can hold those in power to account.

I would not like you to think, though, that education by itself solved all the issues our people faced.

As I was growing up, we were still denied many of our human rights.

The path of my life has been deeply intertwined with the struggle to realise those rights, as it has been for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of my generation.

A key marker was, of course the 1967 Referendum.

Over 90% of Australians voted 'yes' to change the constitution to ensure, amongst other things, that we were to be counted as Australians for the first time.

This event is rightly looked on with pride as one of the high points in the relationship between our First Nations and non-Indigenous Australia.

Today, we are focused on a new movement for Constitutional Recognition.

This is expressed in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, adopted at the National Constitutional Convention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in May 2017.

The Uluru Statement sums up where we see ourselves now, and what we believe needs to be done to move forward for social justice.

We now have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to put in place the foundations for a fair and respectful relationship between this country's First Nations and all those who came after.

So, for those of you graduating today, I have two favours to ask.

First: value your education.

Use it.

Build upon it.

Formal education is the important first step – use it to develop an attitude of learning and compassion throughout your life.

Linked to this is my second request of you: make social justice a part of your life.

Since the 1960s, in many ways the struggle for social justice has defined my life.

But it doesn't have to define your life, as long as it is part of your life.

Ask yourself: what kind of country do I want to live in?

Think critically for yourself.

Question those dominant, loud voices telling you that change isn't necessary, or isn't desirable, or isn't possible.

Because, whatever those voices say, the journey to ensure a fair and respectful relationship between this country's First Nations and those who came after, continues.

I have been privileged to be part of that journey.

But now, the next steps will be taken by your generation, not mine.

I invite you to be part of that journey, to shape the future of this country as a just and equal nation.

This is your challenge.

Thank you.

Citation for the Award of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*

Alyawarre woman, Pat Anderson, is a prominent leader and tireless advocate dedicated to advancing self-determination and the health and education of Australia's First Nations people. Her work spans Indigenous health and education, recognition, and the welfare of children, with a strong focus on the need for consultative leadership and strategies that address power imbalances.

*Pat was Co-Chair of the Northern Territory Government's Inquiry into Child Abuse and Neglect. She consulted closely on the harm being done to children within communities and the ensuing landmark report, *Little Children are Sacred*, outlining recommendations to protect Aboriginal children from sexual abuse. She remained stalwart in the face of government inaction and the subsequent intervention and continues to note the great disconnect between what was recommended and the actions taken.*

Pat Anderson's leadership, as Chair of the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, and now of the Lowitja Institute, Aboriginal organisations, academic institutions, and government agencies have come together to produce collaborative, evidence-based research. Her commitment to ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are engaged with health research as active participants has developed research capacity, improved ethical guidelines and built a cohort of Indigenous researchers who are now leading Indigenous health research.

*As Co-Chair of the Referendum Council, Pat oversaw First Nation Regional Dialogues held across the country to reach broad agreement on how to address the exclusion of Indigenous Australians in the Australian Constitution. These Dialogues informed the First Nations Convention at Uluru in 2017 where over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders produced the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, calling for a First Nations Voice to Parliament to be enshrined in the Constitution. The Statement represents First Nations consensus and has broad public approval. Pat continues to call passionately for this substantive change, as an advocate for Indigenous Australians' right to self-determination. Pat Anderson was named as one of 100 Women of Influence by Westpac and the Australian Financial Review. She also received a Human Rights Medal from the Australian Human Rights Commission, a NAIDOC Lifetime Achievement Award and appointment as an Officer of the Order of Australia.*

*Pat Anderson is recommended for the award of the Doctor of Laws (*honoris causa*) in recognition of her exemplary leadership, her forthright advocacy and her highly distinguished contributions to health research that benefit not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples but the nation at large.*