

Thursday 12th October 2017

On 20th Anniversary of first Sea of Hands installation, ANTaR calls for First Peoples to be heard by Government

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights advocacy organisation ANTaR is today marking the 20th Anniversary of the first iconic Sea of Hands installation held out the front Parliament House in Canberra.

National Director Andrew Meehan said the Sea of Hands came on the back of a Citizen's Statement on Native Title, which was a petition circulated by ANTaR to mobilise non-Indigenous support for native title and reconciliation.

"The installation involved hundreds of volunteers planting 50,000 hands planted in the colours of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags directly in front of the nation's parliament. It was a powerful statement of support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people," he said.

Occurring at a time when the Federal Government was moving to restrict Native Title rights and not genuinely supporting reconciliation, Mr Meehan said that the Sea of Hands was always about the broader community standing in solidarity with First Peoples.

"The Sea of Hands was the birth of ANTaR, which 20 years later, still holds to that same approach of working with First Peoples for justice, rights and respect."

Mr Meehan noted that the work of ANTaR is more relevant than ever, with government approaches still failing to properly engage with, and listen to, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on addressing the issues impacting on their lives.

"We've seen incarceration rates increase from seven times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians to 13 times since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody more than 25 years ago. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can still expect to die on average 10 years earlier than other Australians, and one in three have experienced racial abuse in the last 6 months.

"ANTaR is about working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations to try to make these issues national priorities for government, rather than cut funding for services and pay little heed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices," Mr Meehan said.

While the nation is failing on these fundamental issues, Mr Meehan also noted that there has been some positive progress over the past 20 years, particularly in terms of awareness and support for First Peoples.

"More than 300,000 Australians have participated in the Sea of Hands movement, over 200,000 have signed the Close the Gap Campaign pledge, and over 600 corporate, community and government organisations have developed a Reconciliation Action Plan."

“There are more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than ever graduating in a range of fields at university, more businesses employing them, more businesses springing up that are owned and run by First Peoples, and of course more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in parliaments around the country.”

“There is still an enormous amount to do, but it’s important not to lose sight of these positive changes and to build on them,” he said.

Mr Meehan said that ANTaR will continue to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for as long as it takes to achieve justice, rights and respect and realise the ambitions set down in the final Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Report, Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the Bringing them Home Report and countless other landmark reports mapping out our nation’s path towards reconciliation.

ANTaR is the only non-Indigenous organisation dedicated solely to supporting the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and working to educate the wider community, shape public opinion, and speak up for justice, rights and respect for Australia’s First Peoples.