

Dany Adone

Interview with Anne Pattel-Gray on the Referendum

Dany Adone: Yes. Good morning, Professor Anne Pattel-Gray. We are very pleased to have you here in Cologne as the first Indigenous professor visiting us. Could you please give us some of your views on what happened recently in Australia in terms of the Referendum?

Anne Pattel-Gray: Dany, thank you for the kind invite and the opportunity to share with you today. Look, the referendum in Australia, for those that don't know any of its background, was our elders, our old people met at Uluru and together they wrote a Statement from the Heart, which is referred to as Uluru's Statement from the Heart. And in this statement, it was extended to the nation, to our government, and to all of the citizens of Australia, that we Aboriginal people wanted to be recognized as the first peoples in the Constitution, the Australian Constitution. But also, we wanted to have a voice to parliament in regards to legislation that were created, put in place, in regards to our lives. And we wanted to be able to have a voice because successive governments in Australia have failed to close the gap, and our people are confined to a life of fourth-world poverty in Australia and poor access to health services, education; we're highly incarcerated and our old people wrote, talking about we as Indigenous peoples of this country, we have never ceded our sovereignty and yet we're not recognized as sovereign people of Australia. So, we wanted to have that recognition and also to be heard. Our government decided, the Labor government, prime Minister Albanese ran on a campaign or promised to us that if he got elected, he would hold a referendum for the nation to vote on this Statement of the Heart. The Statement of the Heart is a gracious extension of hand and friendship to the nation. When you know our history, you got to shake your head and say, how do these people extend the grace of God to a nation who have done such horrible things to them? And yet that's who we are as a people. We're not vengeful people, we're not people to want, how would you say, a tit for tat. We're a people who just want to be recognized and want to be embraced into the fabric of Australian society rather than be marginalized.

So, we had the referendum on the 14th October. Leading up to the referendum, there was the yes-campaign supporting the referendum and there was the no-campaign against the referendum. The no-campaign was led by the opposition leader, Peter Dutton, and also a couple of Aboriginal people, a part of the Liberal government. And it was horrific. The campaign was so racist, so derogative. It told so many lies and just drew on people's fears. It fed people's fears and was able to do this because Australia is a pretty ignorant country to its own history. The majority of people don't even know our shared history of what took place

as a part of the colonization, invasion, and everything else. So, you know, it was really sad. And of course, the Murdoch media and press and everybody really rallied with the no-campaign because they didn't want to see it happen either.

So sadly, on the 14th October, the nation in all states voted 'no'. Overwhelmingly. Over 69 per cent voted no, rejecting the Uluru Statement, which was devastating for our people. We had young adults just weeping. They were hysterical at the rejection because they'd never experienced such hatred of a nation towards us, never knew that more than half of the country couldn't find empathy and couldn't extend God's grace to even give us that little, to give us recognition and a voice. That's all. It had no implication on any individual in the country, except it meant everything to us because it would give us an opportunity to perhaps not be confined to the oppression, and poverty, and ill health, and poor education that we find ourselves in. And it was devastating. Our leaders called for a week of mourning and silence. We were so traumatized by the outcome, and now we're slowly coming out and speaking out about it and holding different people accountable for the lies that were told. But I don't know how we go forward now. The biggest question for me is, reconciliation as it exists in Australia is dead in the water. How can you reconcile with a nation that rejects you and your humanity?

So that's dead in the water. So we've got to talk about, okay, what's the next strategy? What's the new process that we need to put in place? My process is going to be: when I return from here, I've got a series of community gatherings that are being set up in my absence where I'm bringing those people who did vote yes together and saying, okay, how do we go forward? What does this mean for us? And how do we get this government to educate its citizens? Because that's the biggest problem. If we had educated our citizens, we wouldn't have ended up with a 'no' vote. Successive governments have failed to educate Australians. We have no First Nation education in the schools, no shared history of colonization in our education curriculum. We need to have this in our curriculum as core mandatory subjects from primary school, secondary, university, TAFE [Technical and Further Education], in every core educational discipline. We need to educate our citizens about our shared history, and the sad dilemma is that it's a horrible history. And nobody wants to talk about it except us Aboriginal people. We want truth-telling. We want to be able to reconcile this history to our identity as a nation because Australia needs to be held accountable for the atrocities that were done by their forbearers. They have benefitted from their forbearers' theft of land, the disenfranchisement of Aboriginal people from their economic base. They have gained wealth, status, and power and taken that all from Aboriginal people. And they continue to benefit. They have systems in Australia and institutions that are set to only benefit them and no one else. So that's how systemic the racism is in Australia. And they need to be aware and conscientious. We also need to look at how to dismantle these systems. And we also have to figure out how to have a clean slate going forward, that allows all peoples to prosper in this wonderful country that we call Australia? It is so important that we look at how we do that.

What is interesting is that I've always been fascinated by how interested Europe is in our politics at home. Most citizens here (in Europe) probably know more about our politics and our situation than the citizens of Australia, which is saying a lot. But Europe needs to somehow, in its dealings with Australia, hold them accountable for this indictment. Because they always present themselves as humanitarians, the global humanitarian. You know, if you're suffering, you come to us, and we'll take care of you. But here they have First Nations people that they've robbed and taken everything from and refused to give them recognition or to share in the wealth and benefits that that country has to offer to migrants and refugees. So, there's a lot that needs to be done but I admire the courage of Albanese, Prime Minister, to do what he did, because many politicians have lost their seat by supporting First Nations' agendas and this has been a whack to him. But this speaks for his integrity and his commitment to a just society. However, history is written, it's from our perspective as Indigenous people, he (Prime Minister Albanese) will be revered and admired for his courageous and prophetic stance that he took to even support the agenda and he needs to be acknowledged for that.

Dany Adone: Thank you very much.