

Stronger, Smarter Together Institute

Summit – Keynote

Professor Peter Yu

Vice President -First Nations Portfolio

Australian National University

Meanjin - 7th-8th May 2026

- I'd like to pay respects to the Turrbal and Yuggera peoples of this country and to acknowledge their continuing ownership and responsibilities for their unceded territories, waters and resources, I also acknowledge and thank them for their hospitality and protection while we remain on their country. I also extend my acknowledgement and respect to all my countrymen and women attending today.
- There is probably no more important nor relevant time in our history for the ethos of this Institute to ring true – in these troubled times we must all be Stronger, Smarter and Together.
- Thank you to Chris for inviting me and affording the opportunity to say some words, and something that I really had to think hard and seriously about!
- It was suggested that I might frame the topic of the presentation with three key considerations:
 - **A grounded view of what sovereignty can mean in practice — beyond symbolism and into real-world decision-making**
 - **Fresh thinking that challenges assumptions and strengthens the national conversation about what comes next**
 - **A clarity-focused lens on progress — what it takes to build trust, integrity, and outcomes that endure**
- Chris said, “I know it might sound a little audacious... but I want to assert or reframe the notion of 'sovereignty' as a relational principle... and contemplating it moving on from being just about things like possession of land, jurisdiction, treaties or the crown”.
- *“What does it mean to be relational?”*
- *At its core, being relational means recognizing that relationships are an integral part of our emotional and psychological well-being. It involves*

the capacity to connect with others in a way that is authentic, empathetic, and understanding”.

- His instructions were important to my consideration in how I might frame this presentation – “In another way ... suggesting we could all be better if we understand this in the context of”
 - Who we are today
 - What we bring to each other
 - How we hold ourselves
 - How we honour each other

- “I really want to say to the country... I stand in who I am, and I honour who you are - now let’s do the hard work together with Respect, Integrity, Courage and Honesty (RICH) the core values of the Stronger Smarter Institute”.

- For me, as a starting principle, the right notion of sovereignty of self and community is not an abstract notion but is fundamental at giving expression of what it is that makes us uniquely different to other people and cultures.

- In other words, what it means to be *Indigenous peoples and more specifically how do we see ourselves in today’s world and how is this manifested. I need to ask a further question and that is how do we understand and own our risk as seek to situated ourselves in today’s ever rapidly evolving world?*

- In my language we frame it around three (3) fundamental philosophical and real propositions in how we manifestly enact this word relational!
 1. Mabu Liyan (emotional strength, pride and dignity comes from strong family relationships, connection to country and cultural identity)
 2. Mabu Buru (good country); and
 3. Mabu Narrunguinil (strong community)

- This has clear implication for how we argue the merits of issues going to our legal recognition and sovereignty over our cultural and traditional territories.

[PAUSE]

- The seminal 1992 case of Mabo 2 did not, beyond rejecting the repugnant fiction of Terra Nullius lie, that we were vacant country, address the question of our legal sovereignty.
- The High Court feared that any recognition of Indigenous sovereignty would fracture the legal skeleton of the Australian state.
- However, for us today we must begin to focus less on prescriptive legal definitions of 'sovereignty' and instead ask on what premise do we continue to assert and identify ourselves as Indigenous peoples.
- We know we are distinct to the rest of the broader society of Australia and the world and the particular and peculiar characteristics that define us as such, and how do we do this?
- These are important questions for Indigenous peoples the world over.
- How do we navigate the impact of globalisation, the uncertainty of the current and future geopolitical, economic circumstances, the new world order and advent of the 4th industrial revolution with AI.
- All cultures are dynamic, nothing stays static, but how do we stay on top of ensuring both philosophically and in real terms culturally, control of our own standards and abilities to develop?
- We must ensure the resilience and enduring quality of integrity inherited through the legacy of our elders and ancestors.
- We need our values, our principles in the expression of our customs and traditions secured for succession and generations to come to guide against further subjugation and assimilation.

- I haven't come here to with all the answers, but I have some ideas that may help expand our collective imagination on these pertinent issues.
- As a starting point I might offer some personal reflection point.
- I have been afforded the opportunity to be grounded by others who have raised and mentored me in my own community and throughout my career.
- This has given me strength against what I believe is a shared struggle at times with self-doubt and confidence in our daily lives against the backdrop of our subjugation and usurping of our cultural, legal, political and economic rights, the denial of the authority of our elders, our families and our parents particularly through the stolen generations.
- I have yet to meet a countryman or woman whose family has not been touched by this attempt to erase us from our country and culture.
- So, who am I to you?
- I refer to myself as a 3rd Generation catholic mission stolen generation person, my Mimi (grandmother) was a Bunuba Woman from the Fitzroy Valley area in the central Kimberley, her father was supposed to be a white government surveyor and was removed from her family at the turn of the last century circa 1910 when she was about 10 years old along with her other kin.
- My Jumuny (grandfather) was Yawuru Wamba and embedded in the customary law, culture and traditions of our people from the Bugarragarra and his family came from around Marrarr on Dunggu (Thangoo Station) slightly to the southeast of Rubibi (Broome).
- I'm also of Chinese descent (my father was a Chinese hard-hat pearl diver post second world war before the discovery of oil in the middle east and the advent of plastics). For several decades prior, Broome

was the pearling capital of the world, known for the size, lustre and strength of the nacre of its Pinctada Maxima or Mother of Pearl.

- Broome was unique in the social and political landscape of the country at that time due to turning a blind eye to the 'white Australia policy' due to the need for Asian indentured labour to work the harsh conditions that white divers and others couldn't handle.
- The legal and social structure was determined by the apartheid laws in Western Australia in the 1886 Aborigines Protection Act, the 1905 Aborigines Act and the 1944 Native (Citizenship Rights) Act. It was illegal for my parents to have a relationship and get married, amongst other things. Each of the colonies had the same laws.
- All of our lives have been dictated to by the experiences of institutional, social and structural racism.
- The purpose and objectives underpinning colonisation were built on a racist ideology, an imposed illegal system designed to disposess and deny us of our Country and maintained on a falsehood of the repugnant notion of our non-existence at the time of invasion.
- This was to deny and subjugate the sovereign and legal interests of our ancestors and ourselves continuing to this day.
- I was fortunate to have been provided the privilege of having done my cultural and political 'apprenticeship' under the guidance and direction of many senior cultural men and women leaders in the Kimberley and elsewhere.
- The fundamentals of our oral culture and history dictates that we look, we listen and learn. This is not an easy thing to do, as I am sure many a young and enthusiastic person with a growing awareness of our social and political circumstance would necessarily accept.
- I say and make this point as I was as keen as any of you are today to confront the inequities and injustices we face, but those old leaders

were not people to muck around with. When they gave instructions, you listened and did what you were told.

- I throw this in to illustrate what I have come to learn about ***sovereignty in practice, beyond symbolism and into real world decision making.***
- They let the white station bosses and government people think they were controlling their lives. I understand this was the material effect of the control mechanisms of statutes, policy and bureaucracy. Yet, at the same time, these old people were masters of their own destination.
- I recall this throughout my own developing growth. I'll use a couple of examples to illustrate this manifestation, first in 1975 as a young 20-year-old working as trainee site recorder for the Aboriginal Sites Department of the WA Museum as part of a 9-man site recording expedition team on the Yampi Peninsula in the Kimberley prior to that location becoming a military training base for the Australian Government.
- The three leaders from that country were Sam Woolagoodja, a highly respected Worora leader, Lenny Lennard and Kaki Stumpagee both Bardi and Mayala leaders, similarly highly respected figures and all bosses of high standing in the law.
- Navigating the high tides at 9 knots (circa 30km/hour) involved timing the turning of the tide down to the second, in some of the most treacherous currents and waters I have witnessed. Some of you may be familiar with this phenomenon of the horizontal falls, which is now a popular tourism destination in the Kimberley!
- These majestic cultural leaders knew their country like the proverbial 'back of their hand'. Even though old Sam hadn't been back for many years and was slightly senile, this journey was an awakening, like he was reborn, similarly Lenny and Kaki.

- Later in the early eighties, following the 1968 Pastoral Award decision by the Arbitration Commission granting equal pay to Aboriginal pastoral workers, I was involved in the homeland movement in the late seventies and throughout the eighties, taking people back to their country after they had become refugees on their own lands.
- I had the occasion to take two old very senior men into the Tanami desert other side of Mulan (Lake Gregory Station). While English was their third or fourth language there was no misunderstanding their desire and instruction to be returned to Country.
- I will never forget lying under the blanket of billions of stars on a crisp cold winter's night, witnessing these two magnificent men build their hollow sand beds prepared with coals from a fire and layered with sand, with fires either side to keep them warm and ward off predators during the night.
- It is something I can never forget as a totality of who they were as the owners and keepers of their law, customs and traditions. This was absolute sovereignty, both legal and self.
- I recall having been asked by families and communities to provide a number of eulogies for cultural leaders of the same ilk. A core and critical piece I always refer to is this matter of sovereignty.
- These leaders knew their country, they were true to their law, their people and their responsibilities to custom and tradition in complete confidence. Regardless of the whitefulla's designs or intentions or thoughts to subjugate those very same matters.
- Yes, it was hard and it was materially challenging and difficult. But their confidence in and knowledge of their law was, and continues to be, unbending.
- We have survived because we have embraced change, even if sometime that has been to our detriment. There is an argument that

perhaps at times we adapt too easily. While that might seem a contradiction, it is another reality we have to face.

[PAUSE]

- ***‘The genesis and genius of culture is its dynamism, its ability to adapt to circumstances as we must do as human beings both individually and collectively, the challenges are how we understand what is it that makes us unique in the peculiar characteristics of that design and our abilities to adapt using our intellectual capabilities and means to sustain the core principles that underpin our cultural and customary values and traditions and to do this with integrity and purpose, however we decide, while at the same time embracing modernity’.***
- This throws up a significant challenge in the growing complexity of identity politics in this ever rapidly evolving universe, with no boundaries and ever-increasing interference to be persuaded to one view or multiple others. In a world where ‘uncertainty is the only certainty’, AI of course adds further complexity.
- While AI has been around for some time now, we have also seen and been subjected to the various platforms on social media, where in my view it predominantly focuses on identity politics and the question of individual desire for acknowledgement and relevance today.
- I appreciate the broader complexities. However, as a native Indigenous person and the things that are important to me and that of my community, I am driven to understand by way of reason and logic. With limited viewing and exposure from family members and my wider community in Broome, I have cause for considerable concern of how little we understand how the inappropriate use of AI can cause serious harm to our individual and collective trauma and advancement.
- I supposed it’s a classic double-edged sword scenario, exposing the worst aspects of our post-and-continuing colonial experiences,

hanging out the 'dirty laundry' for the world to see to reinforce ideological and racist stereotypes, to coming close to exposing culturally sensitive material, to witnessing assimilated views on current mainstream political events.

- The one constant throughout all of this has been the hard and soft racism, the ongoing xenophobia and prejudice. This is an unfortunate reality embedded in our lives. As it has been said, the problem today in life and politics is that 'everyone has a microphone and platform'!
- I also understand and acknowledge the very positive messaging and vocal assertion of the good things that need to be aired from our perspective. However, I remain sceptical given the enormous weight of ongoing ignorance and lack of empathy to our plight from the wider society. The reality being that society is distracted by self-preservation rather than the plight of Indigenous peoples and other minorities.
- **So, what does it mean for us today?**
- To answer this question, we need to be cognisant and conscious of the position we occupy today as first peoples in our own country, as Indigenous peoples, and our collective standing in the world.
- Part of that is understanding and acknowledging that the world has changed dramatically over the last several decades in a manner that challenges our existence and our quest for greater equity and justice.
- Global geopolitical and economic circumstances are such that experienced social and political commentators say that the 'only certainty today is uncertainty'. In political terms, since the defeat of the 2023 Referendum, we find ourselves caught between a rock and a hard place, or absent in plain sight.
- There clearly is not an appetite for an Indigenous rights-based agenda in this country. The world has moved on. We cannot look at this as a 'right or left' position of the political spectrum, as ex-Senator Patrick Dodson recently said, 'both left and right arteries have hardened'.

- The world is in ‘poly-crisis’ mode with the upheaval of the world order as we know it, with wars, climate disruption and unpredictability, economic uncertainty, growing ideological division and societal fragmentation which seems more than likely to be with us for some time. But one thing for certain we all know is: it will never be the same.
- All of this has a direct micro impact on us and our families.
- How do we respond, or can we? Is it too late? How do we organise, contemplate and get prepared when our concerns and challenges have to be seen within the environment as described? Ironically, we may have had some limited currency in our arguments for the recognition of our cultural, social, political and economic rights but mainly as the cause celebres, but never and not seriously without high court victories.
- The heightened and exaggerated example of this is of course the disruptive discourse created by Trump around the proposed annexation of Greenland.
- The first people of Greenland are the [Inuit](#), primarily known as [Kalaallit](#), who make up around 90% of the population, representing the majority. History has shown like all indigenous populations they have also suffered the consequences of colonisation by Denmark are not without their own issues.
- Greenland is an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark. It has extensive self-governance over domestic affairs, while Denmark manages defence, foreign policy, and currency, with the 2009 Self-Government Act recognising Greenlanders as a people with rights to sovereignty. Independence, however remains under discussion amidst colonial legacy issues and potential resource wealth.
- Greenlanders technically are Danish citizens and have representation in the Danish Parliament. But the evolving relationship balances

Greenland's desire for greater autonomy or independence with continued Danish support and shared strategic interests.

- Perhaps, ironically this relationship might be the saving grace for the Kalaallit in their opposition to Trump, as I can't imagine clause **Articles 3 and 4** of UNDRIP on Indigenous self-determination as a fundamental right would be of much help!
- I have raised this as a fundamental way to demonstrate the real change and challenges we face as first peoples.
- The Albanese government's political and statutory response to the antisemitism response to the Bondi tragedy through the establishment of the Royal Commission is further illustration of our current and growing vulnerabilities. Even after Bondi, the government is not considering amending the Cwlth Racial Discrimination Act 1975 to make racial vilification a criminal offence. This is something I have always believed needs to happen. But it buffers up against the whitefullas unaccountable view of 'freedom of speech', which is to be protected just as long it's not them being denigrated and vilified!
- For the record there have been four (4) Federal Royal Commissions into Aboriginal Affairs and three State sponsored Royal Commissions. Interestingly the first ever was in Victoria in 1877 and the most recent 2021-2025 Yoorook Justice Commission, with a couple of relevant National Inquiries in 1997 the Bringing them Home Report and 2018 Australian Law Reform Commission - Pathways to Justice report on the ongoing high incarceration rates.
- What I am trying to illustrate is that none of this in my view has made a real difference to the proper recognition of our inherent rights and ownership of this continent. Nor has it led to just settlement of our material needs because of the illegal dispossession, trauma and subsequent multiplication of negative impacts on our people.

- The referendum has left us in a political void. While there might be individual or specific cause issues or agendas taken up individually or by a specific interest group, unfortunately by default we are left with the Coalition of Peaks (COP) attempting to provide some form of agency by virtue of their National Closing the Gap Agreement with the Commonwealth. They do not represent the political guardianship nor policy aspirations of our community outside of the specific mandate through their agreement.
- No matter what the circumstances of change have been over the millennia and recent decades, those same old people I speak of continued to assert their 'sovereignty', throughout their entire lives, notwithstanding the challenges they faced.
- They spoke their language, knew their country and obligations to law and kin. Sovereignty is not given or taken nor determined by external interests. It is determined and defined by the laws and rules that have shaped our custom and traditions. The governance that frames consequential manifestation of that dictates the understanding and adherence of our relationship and commitment to each other.
- What is the nature of this legacy to us today in how we identify and hold true to those same values? I find this very interesting to contemplate against the continuing political and social turmoil we navigate.
- In this continuing and ongoing political vacuum, how do we respond to the challenges we face with the evolution of time and circumstance? How do we say we are the same peoples and avoid the risk of oversimplification with rhetorical motherhood statements as to how we see ourselves today?
- As I see the world this is the 'tripod-trilateral' challenge before us: to understand, initiate and assert our presence to own our risk and to take what is rightfully ours but also keep the legacy we have inherited.

- **First** is knowing and understanding ourselves and to speak the truth of our identity as we have been schooled and taught by our senior people. Honour their stories and knowledge. We don't need to take on falsehoods. To continue to be aware and vigilant of assimilationist tendencies, this means being honest with ourselves and holding our own people accountable. Be transparent. Check and verify stories. Don't use rhetoric for rhetoric's sake. Do the hard work. If you don't know or understand, find out.

- **Second**, understand and strive for the power of wealth and its rightful place to lift us out of our social impoverishment, our marginalised political and legal position. We need a culture of wealth creation and transfer instead of trauma transfer. It's ok for people to earn a decent wage and accumulate wealth to look after their families, but don't forget who you are, give back and provide to those of our family and people who need a leg up. This is a core part of our culture, reciprocity for the common good. We can't fulfill our obligations and survive unless we see the nature of our beginnings and the truth of the challenges before us.

- **Thirdly**, challenge the current legal status quo of the continuing nonrecognition of our individual and collective rights, including compensation and reparation. Seek clarity with purpose about our standing in this country. This requires upholding our laws, customs and traditions, not at an esoteric level but at a personal level with our kinship system, how we relate to each other as family as a community, the mores and traits that make us who we are.

- The importance of this is, that any further exploration of the common law position through case law to define our legal and other status will require evidence of our ongoing communication and adherence to day-to-day practices as it demonstrates our 'relational' manifestation.

- Just settlement also includes compensation and reparation. This is an entitlement that is rightfully ours to pursue.

- There of course will be examination of the higher legal order. However, it is important that who we say we are and can demonstrate that we continue to be is distinctively us!
- I'd like to finish off with a little poem I came across recently from Savannah Victor a young Nyul Nyul and Balangarra woman from the Kimberley.

*“Bringing my kids back to Balangarra Country, back to where my grandmother comes from
was something my soul has been holding for a long time.*

*It might not be her exact Country,
but it's as close as I can get right now.*

And somehow... that was enough.

*Before everything ahead opens up,
I needed to come back here
to anchor into who I am,
to remember where I come from.*

*There's a feeling that comes over you when you return.
No performance. No rush.*

Just an instant remembering.

*Like your nervous system finally exhales.
Like your spirit can rest.*

I felt her with us.

*In the wind moving through the trees.
In the birds calling overhead.
In the warmth of the ground beneath my feet
connecting straight back to my heart,
where she has always stayed.*

*There was a softness in my chest I've never felt before
like something long held was finally laid down.*

*I felt myself as a granddaughter, a daughter, and as a mother, at the
same time.*

*No matter how far you go.
No matter how long you're away.*

Country always knows you.

*And standing here
with my children beside me
felt like closing a quiet loop in my heart.*

Some things don't need to be explained.

They're meant to be felt."

Galiya