

Citation for the Award of the Degree of Doctor of the University (DUniv)

Dr Tom Calma AO

Uncle Tom Calma is an Aboriginal elder from the Kungarakan¹ tribal group and a member of the Iwaidja² tribal group. The Kungarakan traditional lands (his mother's) are around the Adelaide River, south west of Darwin and the Iwaidja (his father's) are on the Coburg Peninsula, further north. Dr Calma grew up in Darwin, but traveled to Adelaide to undertake an associate diploma in social work and community development. His realisation of the lack of tertiary-level educational opportunities in the Northern Territory spurred his involvement in lobbying that led to the setting up of an Aboriginal Task Force, of which he was head from 1981 – 1986, at the then Darwin Community College in 1980. The community college grew and changed, in combination with other organisations, eventually evolving into Charles Darwin University, a major force in both Indigenous education and the dissemination of Indigenous knowledge. This motif, of analysis of need leading to action, has been repeated throughout his chosen arenas of health, education, economic development, human rights and social justice. In education, after becoming a tenured senior lecturer in the early 1980s the recognition and respect of the academy for his approach, as much as his achievements, brought him, by 2014, to the position of Chancellor of the University of Canberra.

Dr Calma has worked in the public sector for over 40 years. He was one of the nation's first Aboriginal diplomats, representing Australia's interests in education and training in India and Vietnam. In 1995 his posting to India was to formally establish and grow education collaborations and the international student market. He has been involved in Indigenous affairs at a local, community, state, national and international levels, and is currently on a number of boards and committees focussing on rural and remote Australia, health and education.

In 2003, he was chosen by the then Minister for Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs as his Senior Ministerial Adviser on Indigenous affairs. In 2004 this led to key posts, where he was to make a profound mark as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner (2004 to 2010), as well as the national Race Discrimination Commissioner (2004 until 2009) at the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. It was in these posts that he was not only able to influence the national discourse, but also to set in train a concerted set of actions in response to identified needs. Through his 2005 Social Justice Report, he called for the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to be closed within a generation. This report laid the groundwork for, perhaps, his pivotal contribution to the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians - his role in initiating, then galvanising, the national Close the Gap campaign. Dr Calma chaired the Close the Gap Steering Committee for Indigenous Health Equality from its inception in March 2006 and has recently retired as Co-Chair of the steering committee. The Close the Gap campaign has effectively brought national attention to achieving health equality for Indigenous people by 2030. Along with a range of collaborating Indigenous organisations, his work was crucial in winning the agreement of COAG, the Council of Australian Governments, to support and fund a combined federal and state response, the Closing The Gap programme.

Dr Calma works to advance Australia as an inclusive society through participation in major initiatives that relate to social inclusion, reconciliation, suicide prevention, mental health,

¹ Pronounced: 'c oong r u cun'

² Pronounced: 'ee wad ja'

higher education and Indigenous empowerment. He was chosen by representatives of the Stolen Generations to deliver the formal response to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's national apology in the Great Hall of Parliament House on 13 February 2008. He has played a role in bringing about a new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative body, the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, as well as promoting the urgent need to reduce Indigenous incarceration rates through adopting a Justice Reinvestment approach. He is never far away from moves that, if well-conceived and well-delivered, have the traction to make real differences to Indigenous well-being. He was appointed National Coordinator, Tackling Indigenous Smoking in March 2010 to lead the fight against tobacco use in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Dr Calma has contributed significantly to the academic life of Flinders University. He was invited by the University to deliver the 2010 Chalmers Oration. His address, later reproduced as an article in the international electronic journal, *Rural and Remote Health*, posed the question: 'What's needed to Close the Gap?' His answer was succinct: "that it can only be a human rights based approach to Indigenous health."

Dr Calma's mark on this university also includes the important role he played in supporting the establishment of two Poche Centres of Indigenous Health in Adelaide and Alice Springs. Nationally, there are now four active Poche Centres. Apart from the one at the University of Sydney, two are based at Flinders University and one was recently established at the University of Western Australia. More are planned in other states. The staff and work of the two Flinders centres have grown rapidly in the last two and a half years. Dr Calma continues to support the aspirations of Flinders staff and students through his acceptance of the role of Patron of this burgeoning network of Poche Centres, along with the influence of his values, and the contributions of his wider work, in the development and embedding of the university-wide, Flinders Indigenous Engagement Framework (FIEF).

In 2007 Dr Calma was named by the *Bulletin Magazine* as the Most Influential Indigenous Person in Australia and in 2008 he was named *GQ Magazine's* 2008 Man of Inspiration for his work in Indigenous Affairs. In 2010, Dr Calma was awarded an honorary doctor of letters from Charles Darwin University in recognition of decades of public service, particularly in relation to his work in education, training and employment in Indigenous communities. Dr Calma in 2010 was named by *Australian Doctor Magazine* as one of the 50 Most Influential People in medicine in Australia. He was named as ACT Australian of the Year 2013.

In 2011, Dr Calma was awarded an honorary doctor of science from Curtin University in recognition of his work, advocacy and leadership in Indigenous health reform and Indigenous affairs. In the Queen's Birthday 2012 Honours Awards Dr Calma was awarded an Order of Australia; Officer of the General Division (AO) for distinguished service to the Indigenous community as an advocate for human rights and social justice, through contributions to government policy and reform, and to cross cultural understanding. In 2013 Dr Calma was announced as the Chancellor of the University of Canberra commencing 1 January 2014.

Uncle Tom Calma is nationally respected for his inspirational and inclusive advocacy for human rights and social justice. His life and work are testaments to his dedication to improving the lives of all Australians and particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.