Draft Transcript

UTS Zoom event
with Verity Firth and Bruce Pascoe

Friday, 29 May 2020

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VERITY FIRTH: Hello, everyone. I'm just going to wait for our webinar to fill up a bit. I can see the participants rising. We've had a wonderful response to this conversation today with Bruce Pascoe, so I'm just watching you all come in from the waiting room and we'll start in a minute or two. This is fantastic. We're reaching almost 500 people now logged on. I will wait for another minute and then we'll start our conversation so we can kick off on time.

Alright, I'm just sorting out my own picture here so I can see Bruce. Thank you, everybody. Thank you very much for joining us today for this special Reconciliation Week event. First, of course, we'd like to acknowledge that I today am here on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. This is the land that our UTS campus stands on. I want to pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging and I particularly want to recognise the Gadigal people as the traditional custodians of knowledge for the land that this university has been built on. It's land that was, is, and always will be Aboriginal land.

My name's Verity Firth. I'm the Executive Director of Social Justice here at UTS and I head up the Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion. Every year at UTS we host a Reconciliation Week event to show our respect and solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Reconciliation Australia talks about reconciliation being an ongoing journey that's based and measured on five dimensions - historical acceptance, race relations, equality and equity, institutional integrity and unity. Now these five dimensions don't exist in isolation. All of them are interrelated. Reconciliation cannot be seen as a single issue or agenda. The contemporary definition of reconciliation must weave all of these threads together. For example, greater historical acceptance of the wrongs done to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can lead to improved race relations, which in turn leads to greater equality and equity. It's all intertwined.

We are so excited to have Bruce Pascoe here with us today, mainly because he's wonderful, but also because who better to talk to us about greater historical understanding and acceptance. So I will introduce Bruce properly in a minute, but before we get started, I want to do a little bit of housekeeping.

So the first thing is that this event is being live captioned. So if you want to view the captions, you need to click on the link that is currently in the chat and you can find that at the bottom of your screen in the Zoom control panel. Once you've done that, the captions will then open in a separate window.

If you have any questions during today's event, please type them into the Q&A box, which is in your Zoom control panel. You can also upvote questions that others have asked. So please do try to keep the questions relevant to the topics we're discussing here today but I will have time in our conversation to put your questions to Bruce. We've also got a few questions that have already been asked that have started coming in so I will put them to Bruce as well.

Being an online event, there may be technical issues so please be patient if there are and we will work to resolve them quickly.

So, now to the event. It's my pleasure to welcome Bruce Pascoe to join us here today. Bruce Pascoe is the award-winning writer of 'Dark Emu' and 'Young Dark Emu', which is his version of the book for children. He has had a fantastic range of jobs including as teacher, farmer, fisherman, barman, fencing contractor, lecturer, Aboriginal language researcher, archaeological site worker and editor. He has a special relationship with UTS as Adjunct Professor for Jumbunna Institute. He's written 30 books spanning fiction, non-fiction and children's titles. 'Dark Emu' has been a revelation for many Australians providing a much truer history of Aboriginal Australians long, sophisticated occupation of this history. 'Young Dark Emu' was published last year and is for 10 and over. I particularly was thinking how important 'Young Dark Emu' is because it's at that part of the conversation where we can actually be raising our children with a proper understanding of the truth of Australia's colonisation and invasion and that's really what's going to start, hopefully, to shift attitudes.

'Dark Emu' has sold over 200,000 copies in print and digital and has won numerous awards. 'Young Dark Emu' has sold over 45,000 copies. So welcome, Bruce.

Now, as your introduction explained, you have worn many hats over the years. You've been a teacher, an archaeologist, a writer, a fisherman, tell us a little bit about what you are doing at the moment?

BRUCE PASCOE: Well, we've been farming the old Aboriginal foods I talk about in 'Dark Emu' and it wasn't my ambition to be driving a tractor again at my age. But the enthusiasm for 'Dark Emu' also brought with it a problem and that was that everybody wanted to grow the plants, everybody wanted to eat the food and what concerned me was that we would lose control once again of our

sovereign food rights and that we needed to be in the field, we needed to be growing those to prove that we were continuing that historic tradition of food growing and agriculture because we don't want to be in the situation that the Yorta Yorta were when deciding upon whether or not they would regain some of their own land, decided their culture had been washed away by the tide of history.

So we're determined here that the evidence will be on the ground, that we have maintained that link with our cultural practice and we're employing the Yuin people here, and there will be other people as time goes by because we want Aboriginal people on the ground. We want Aboriginal people earning their money. We don't want them earning trainee wages, we want them earning wages. Taking that money home to their families, growing their kids up and we want our people eating our food.

We baked this loaf of bread this morning. It's made from (Language), which is our dancing grass bread. It's incredibly flavourful and aromatic and it used to be that big but the mob working here have been bandicooting while I've been working hard and that's all we've got left. But it's a beautiful bread and we will be selling this. You will be buying this. You will be baking it in your own kitchens and when you do, your house will smell like an Australian grassland.

So this is a momentous day for us. We had our own little celebration early today because that's our second loaf but it's clearly the best one we've come up with so far. There's going to be a huge future in this. There will be a lot of rich bakers running around, there will be a lot of rich restaurateurs running around, a lot of family gardens using this stuff.

If Australia had a good heart it would ensure Aboriginal people are part of this new, exciting industry, not just on the edge of the industry, but part of the industry.

We don't want training programs anymore. We don't want to do 35 certificates and still be unemployed with the worst health in the world, the worst education in the Western world. We want to earn our own money from our own culture and we want to sell it to you.

VERITY FIRTH:I think that's what I was so powerful about 'Dark Emu' because it was a book that so passionately and convincingly outlined the just racism of those early colonialists who refused to see the skill and economic prosperity or,

you know, of the people who live there and I was thinking that your final words in 'Dark Emu' where you talk about "to deny Aboriginal agricultural and spiritual achievement is the single greatest impediment to intercultural understanding and to perhaps the Australian moral and economic prosperity." So this is also a way of the economic future for Australia more broadly to actually start to understand and embrace this wisdom.

How do you feel - so just working on that a bit, do you feel that it's led to greater community acceptance to the truth of invasion and colonisation? Do you feel that it's had that impact?

BRUCE PASCOE: It’s certainly had an impact but I'm sometimes in despair of the superficiality of the Australian mind. Because if it had had a true impact, if change had actually happened, a 45,000-year-old cave of art and social and cultural and human development, importance, wouldn't have been blown up a week ago. If we were truly a mature nation with an intellectual rigour about the nation that wouldn't have happened but it didn't happen. So 'Dark Emu' hasn't changed anything.

I think it has the potential to. I think the people who read 'Dark Emu' and who gave it to their friends for Christmas, they are in the position to make change but that change hasn't occurred yet and we have to insist that our government honours our wishes. We have to vote in governments who we believe will honour our wishes in this regard.

It was very interesting for me to watch an ex-National Party member yesterday talking about the abhorrence he felt for the destruction of that cave. So we need to work with people like that.

This couldn't happen in any other place on Earth. If it had been the Taliban, there would have been outrage. People would have been marching in the street and spitting on Muslims in trams and trains but this happened in Australia. No-one got spat on. About time we spat.

VERITY FIRTH: Yes. We might talk about that again afterwards, actually, Bruce, so hold that thought because we've had some audience questions in particular around how do we, I suppose, respond in a way that has political power when those sorts of desecrations occur. So we may come back to that in the audience part of the questions.

In terms of food, because we also got a lot of questions about food. The Melbourne restaurant Attica was named by Gourmet Traveller's best restaurant last year. And when the chef accepted his award he specifically mentioned you and what you had taught him about Indigenous food and culture and how it's connected to certain ingredients. You're also quoted as saying you can't eat our food if you can't swallow our history. So can you talk a bit about that and what made you say that and also a bit about the connection between Aboriginal food and culture?

BRUCE PASCOE: When 'Dark Emu' gained the acceptance it did through sales, I became a little bit alarmed because what I was seeing was this incredible excitement about the food but there was no ancillary excitement about social justice for Aboriginal people.

Even now, of all the food classified as the bush tucker type or Aboriginal food, I don't use the word "bush tucker", I like to talk about agriculture. People condemn me for me but I like to talk about things like economy and agriculture and houses and bread. I don't talk about damper, I don't talk about hovel and hut and I don't talk about bush tucker because it demeans what was actually going on in the country.

So what worried me was that with all this enthusiasm for Aboriginal history and Aboriginal food generated out of 'Dark Emu' and other things, I mean we stand on the shoulders of giants and 'Dark Emu' is just a small bird standing on the shoulders of many, many great men and women.

Of the 100% of sales of food in Australia that is classified as Aboriginal food, 1% of that is sold by Aboriginal people. 1%. They call it bush tucker, whatever they like to call it. 1%. This is a disgrace. And so for those people who are, you know, saying that they're totally in support of the concepts of 'Dark Emu', for instance, to allow this to happen means that we have no political will. It means we're slumbering babies. We're living in a warm and cosy world and we don't raise our hand, we don't raise our voice in support of Aboriginal people, really. We'll raise our voice when Cathy Freeman wins a gold medal. We'll raise our voice when Warwick Thornton makes a film, or Rachel Perkins creates a great new series. We'll nod in agreement. But we can't bring ourselves to employ Aboriginal people.

Easiest thing in the world is to employ Aboriginal people by giving them jobs. I don't want to sound like an old curmudgeon, I can drop into that quickly, because I'm an optimistic person.

VERITY FIRTH: Throughout dark emu, you can see your optimism. I don't want to interrupt.

BRUCE PASCOE:I don't want optimism to distract Australia from its responsibilities. I'm supported by my local community and can see the future. I'm optimistic. I've got four grandchildren and my responsibility is to make a future for them.

But the Australians who like their tucker and like to have, you know, bush tomato and lemon myrtle and all those things and extol it, where are you buying it from? Who is selling that to you? And the women, mainly women who gather these things for you, they are paid a bloody pittance. If it was a sweatshop in Bangladesh it would be front page news. But because it's a bush community in Western Australia or the Northern Territory or Queensland, it doesn't get any traction at all.

Warm and cosy Australia, pull your finger out.

VERITY FIRTH: Yeah. It's not unlike our multicultural days, it's all about food then, too. It's like this obsession with the surface but not about where the power lies.

BRUCE PASCOE: Look, I believe in the power of food and the power of community and the power of breaking bread to get. I think that's really important and I'm optimistic because I've actually seen it work here on the farm. People come here every day, you know, and it's a bit of a distraction. Yesterday we hardly got a fence post in. We're trying to repair a fence that got burnt in the fires. We hardly got a fence post in because we were all tied up with telling the story, you know. Aboriginal people telling non-Aboriginal Australia the story again. But we're going to have to wear that because the only way for us to succeed is for people to understand what we're trying to do and what we're trying to repair and what we can offer, what we can offer the country.

To have that bread today, I can't tell you what it meant to us. I can't tell you what it meant to have a local Aboriginal man driving our harvester to harvest

that grass three weeks ago. At the end of the day I was completely emotionally overwhelmed by the thought that my brother had been able to do what his great, great-grandmother and grandfather had done 250 years later. And this loaf of bread is the first loaf of bread made from that particular grain in 250 years.

VERITY FIRTH: Yeah.

BRUCE PASCOE:A sobering thought that it's taken that long.

VERITY FIRTH: You write in your book, is it Mitchell who you quote as talking about the cake that he's offered to eat and you feel that's the bread, isn't it? Is that what you think he's referring to when he talking about the cake he was offered?

BRUCE PASCOE: He was eating a bread made from panicum, a native Millet, but it is very aromatic and it is very flavourful, as is this bread. Kangaroo grass is more aromatic and flavourful than both of them. But Sturt also talked about this bread and it was a different grain again. But once again, Sturt and Mitchell, unbeknownst to each other, talk about this bread as being the lightest and sweetest cake they had ever eaten. It's gluten free, all of those grains I mentioned are gluten free, all aromatic, all flavourful, all make beautiful bread and Englishman, and we know they can't cook but put that aside for one moment, two of them, without reference to each other, say it's the lightest and sweetest cake they'd ever eaten.

They not only admired the production, the labour, the devotion of labour to this enterprise, they also talk about the civil society. Australia, I think next time you think about having an intervention to solve the problems of Aboriginal community, think back to what Sturt observed about the sobriety and the warmth and love that he witnessed in that camp where his life was saved and that of his horses and that of his fellow men by Aboriginal people who gave them roast duck and cake, gave them a house, gave them water, and gave them supper at a time when they were almost dead. They all had scurvy, some had died on previous expeditions from the same problem, and yet they were saved by Aboriginal people who were living a life that he admired so much, he talked about the whirring of the grain mills at night, the production of the flour and the bread, the singing of - as people cooked their meals, the laughter of children, the barking of dogs, and at 10:00 everyone went to sleep and the town was quite. He talks about the town. None of this is known to Australians.

What a great thing for a national education body to tell that story to our little 5 and 6-year-olds about the civil society of Aboriginal Australia.

VERITY FIRTH: That's right, and the capacity for human beings to cooperate, you know, to actually cooperate, live together - don't get me started.

BRUCE PASCOE: Clans hundreds of kilometres apart, communicating with each other so that they could safely burn sections of grassland and forest so that they needed to communicate so they weren't interfering with each other's prosperity. What a great example for a farming community when we've just seen those big cotton farms north of Brewarrina and around Brewarrina stealing the water from their fellow farmers downstream, not to mention stealing it from the marshes, stilling it from the fish, stealing it from Aboriginal people, stealing it from their fellow Australians. What kind of economic system is that?

VERITY FIRTH: In fact, that struck me in particular reading in 'Dark Emu' about the Brewarrina fish traps and how even - so the fact they didn't know, personally know the people downstream, of course, yet there was no sense that you would do anything that would stop the fish being able to continue on down the stream to be plentiful for the people who live downstream from you. And the exact opposite when you watch the fighting over the Murray-Darling Basin and the incapacity for those communities now to actually be able to all come together for mutual benefit.

BRUCE PASCOE: On that Murray-Darling board, I'd like to see Brendan Kennedy on it. Someone with an intimate knowledge of the waterways would be a boon for them. I'd like to see some of the men and women from Brewarrina on those boards as well. They have quite an opinion on what should happen to the Murray-Darling Basin as they live in it and it is their ancestor's land and the trauma that they have felt watching this desecration of Australian land, the Australian common wealth. What those people are spending is the Australian common wealth. They're not treating it like a common wealth, they're treating it like personal wealth and they're dumb, they're stupid. They're not doing it well. If they were doing it well, you know, there would be an argument let them continue but they're doing it badly.

And the fish kills on the Murray-Darling system are indications that we are failing. If you want to know - if you want an indication of your success, have a

look at what you've done to your other farmers, what you've done to the environment. It's appalling. Australia has a lot to learn.

But I'm certain we're capable of doing it. We can come together as a people, as one nation, and it's about time we really did it and instead of talking about coming together and actually separating ourselves into cliques.

VERITY FIRTH: So on that point, the bushfire royal commission has begun hearings this week and in part it's looking to understand ways "the traditional land and fire management practices of Indigenous Australians could improve Australia's resilience to natural disasters."

Two questions here. First, is this encouraging news? But secondly, is this going to be another point? What about the issue of appropriating Aboriginal knowledge without recognition or compensation? Are you fearful of that in this process?

BRUCE PASCOE: Yeah, I really am. You know, we're engaged in cultural burning now across our communities. It's become flavour of the month. But we need really good culture and science behind it and we don't always have that. But also people use that as a tick-the-box Aboriginal inclusion thing. So Forestry, for instance, will employ us to talk to foresters and whatever and immediately go and do exactly what they did the year before. But they've ticked the box of Aboriginal inclusion and consultation and then they just go and do what they were doing.

Prior to the fires, four days before the fires in East Gippsland, when we knew they were coming, I was travelling through the forestry on the border of NSW and Victoria and it was just so alarming to look at that forest and how flammable it was because for years, all the trash in that forest that was the result of the forestry practice was on the floor of that forest. The trees were cheek by jowl. They were only so big in their girth, they're perfect for wood pulp, they're all the same species and the canopies of those trees touched each other. Some of the branches touched the trunk of the other trees. This was a recipe for an explosion and yet it's called forestry.

It's not forestry, it's called absolute craven economic banditry because we harvest all those little trees and we send them off to Japan, through the Great Barrier Reef, and then we buy them back as hamburger wrapper from Japan, through the Great Barrier Reef, and then we grow the same forest again in the

same place and expect that the growth that we saw the year before to be the same and, of course, it's not because we're growing trees that deplete the soil.

We're not building soil on those sites. We are spending the common wealth of Australian soil. I knew that forest was going to explode. My daughter was staying with me on the farm, she'd just been kicked out of Cape Conran because of the fires. She came to me and we were swimming in the river and I could hear the kids' voices singing and arguing over who got the canoe, all that sort of Christmas stuff. I heard their voices and I turned around to my daughter and I said, "Mate, we've got to go. I can't bear this. This is going to blow up."

The sky changed colour, so I had to argue long and hard to get them out of there because they'd already been evacuated once. Here we are, half a day into our summer holiday and I'm evacuating them again. We got up to Eden and I said, "Mate, it's too dangerous here, too." I evacuated them again to go to Canberra and then I started driving back home to the farm and I drove through the same forest where I'd counted 300 trees three days before and it was like snow had fallen. There were no trees and there was just snow, ash, on the ground.

To create white ash like that you need an incredible temperature. That temperature had been created by Australian forestry. You don't need to be a greeny to argue that this just doesn't make sense. But Australia clings to this idea of economic prosperity coming over absolutely everything. It comes before culture, comes before the environment, comes before people and what the result is is that all that profit goes into a very few pockets. This is not an industry model that any decent economist could say is sustainable.

Selfishness and it's absolute bastardry for the environment. Australians have to have a voice in this and they have to stop being warm and cosy babies and start becoming adult about looking after their country. Talking about national sentiment about Australia fair, you know, let's get going.

VERITY FIRTH: Before we started to broadcast, you were telling me about how you are restoring the forest on your property to as it would have been before white invasion. Can you tell us about that and particularly about the density of the trees?

BRUCE PASCOE:As a result of that experience that I had, driving down through the fires and seeing the white ash and knowing that that's what I was going to see because of what I'd seen the four days before, as soon as I got back home and as soon as we stopped fighting fires, and that took five weeks here, I said to the brothers who were working here and the sisters as well, I said - we were building a building. I said we were going to take all the trees for this building out of this forest here, this forest which is about four acres, and we're going to keep on doing it in this forest until we've got ten trees to the acre.

Now that job is not going to be complete in my lifetime. It will take 40 years to do it but that's what we need to do. We need to render our bush safe. We need to value every tree we cut down, which is what we try and do. We use the tree, we use the canopy, and we use the bark, everything in whatever we're doing on the farm.

But we need to go back to that Aboriginal practice. We also need to value the timber like we've never valued it before. Entire Australian forests went to build sleepers for the Indian railway in the 1880s and 1900s. Clearly unsustainable. The best timber in the world is now being run over by trains.

Australia doesn't make furniture anymore but we've got trees in this forest here that are perfect for it, will make the best furniture you've ever seen. We're going to need to pay more for it but I think the COVID virus has exposed the folly of depending on other countries for everything. We couldn't even get sanitary masks during the COVID thing because we'd stopped making stuff.

This is not a call for nationalism, it's a call for rationality, economic rationality. I'm an absolute economic rationalist, and we need to make stuff and we need to value our country and value our forest, love our forest.

The forest we're looking at now, it's not a wilderness, it's not pristine in any way, it's a bastard forest and it's been designed like that by people, very, very few people, stripping our common wealth for their own gain.

We need to take control of our forests, we need to put more value back in it and employ more people in the forest. The ones running it now where I was doing bird surveys in the 1970s with maybe 20 people working in the forest, now there's two and they don't want to talk to you because they've been told they can't by their employer and they're using these massive machines. The wheels are as high as the ceiling in this room and every turn of that wheel is

dragging up gravel from below the surface of the soil and destroying the forest floor.

That's not industry. That's despoliation of our common wealth and we need to object to it. You know, if someone wants to call you a greeny or a heart-a-sleeve black armband person, say "No, mate, I'm an economic rationalist. I love my grandchildren. I want my grandchildren to be prosperous and I want them to be healthy. I love my grandchildren. Do you hate yours? You want them to inherit a baron Earth?"

VERITY FIRTH: I’m going to move to some audience questions now because I feel like I've hogged you too much. Both Preston Peachly and Gerard Walston sent questions before hand and they're about different issues but their question is essentially the same. Preston is talking about the news of Rio Tinto destroying the sites in the Pilbara this week. He asks how do we prevent this and seek justice for the devaluation of our sacred sites and Gerard talks about the summer bushfires. He asks how do you see us steering out of this car crash situation and what part can the broader community play. So really, how do we start, I suppose, to seize some power in this equation? What do you think this, Bruce?

BRUCE PASCOE: We have to learn our history and accept it because without that acceptance, every time there's a problem in an Aboriginal community we'll have an intervention because we have no respect for Aboriginal people or their history, or the economy or the culture, anything to do with Aboriginal people is not respected in this country.

There's sometimes a warm and cosy feeling and we walk across a few bridges and we celebrate ourselves in champagne that Aboriginal people can't afford. There's no future in that. That's just a momentary surge of warmth, almost like you'd wet the bed. Pardon the expression, but it's very frustrating to be continuing revisiting these attitudes.

We have to learn history, we have to accept the fact that - of what happened in the war on Australian soil for possession of the land.

I tell you, it can be a really wonderful experience.

I had a person sitting in my lounge room yesterday and the last time I saw her was on the bank of the river and we'd been taken there by Uncle Max Harrison

because that's where all but one of his family was massacred in the 1840s. We'd be looking for that site for ten years and one of the people who helped us find that site was a white farmer. We were so grateful for that person.

But Uncle Max said it's not just about us, it's about those families as well, those white families, who jumped on their horses and rode down to the river and massacred those men, women and children. He said we need to invite those people, as well, and he did, and they came, and they spoke. And one of those women was in my lounge room yesterday talking about grain and how we can use it.

So I don't believe in reconciliation. I do believe in conciliation. I learnt that from that old man, Uncle Max. I think there is a future but we have to stop this mealy-mouthed acceptance of the reality of Australian history.

To talk about Aboriginal achievement is not to where the black armband, it's to talk about economic rationality. People who last for 120,000 years on a continent using sustainable agriculture and forestry, are to be admired, not treated like poor innocents who didn't know any better but to be admired for their iron-willed economic rationality.

Of course it's backed by spirituality and of course it's backed by a superb culture but there's an economic rationality to it as well. Until we accept our history, until we accept the fact that the social experiment that happened in Australia 120,000 years ago was the high point of human development, then we're allowing the nay-sayers in our community to prevent us utilising a chance to embrace a better future for the human family.

I really think that's what we had here in Australia. I think we can have it again. It's based on principles that we don't accept these days. They're anathema to Australian principles and practice.

VERITY FIRTH: This is related, really. It's from Talia Anthony and she's asking is it possible to have environmental protection and the thriving of first nation cultures in a capitalist society or are Aboriginal and capitalist societies, economies and cultures, antithetical?

BRUCE PASCOE: No, it's not. This experiment here, we call ourselves the company of fools because we dream too much, but we all work too hard. They're all eating my lunch now, the mongrels, because we work really hard

here and there's mostly Aboriginal people here but some non-Aboriginal people here and everybody earns their money. At the end of the working week they go home and have the weekend with their family. Most of them go home every night, pick up their kids from school, buy their tucker in the supermarket and go home and cook it with their family. Doing that now out of Aboriginal enterprise, Aboriginal labour, Aboriginal cultural foods, and what we're trying to replicate is a model based on the old people's work where people can live dignified, prosperous lives based on culture and our culture's not just boomerang and spear and face paint and dance, it's food, it's agriculture, it's labour. It's the devotion of labour over generations to a common goal.

I might be deluding myself. I don't think I am. This model is transferrable to other communities and other communities are already doing it. I've been to WA and I've seen people ten years ago on the brink of doing just this very thing. I've seen it in South Australia. I've seen it in New South Wales and other places, in Victoria, and I think it's a movement that's going to keep on expanding and this is a gift most of us want to give you. We want to give you that gift. We want nothing back except your knowledge and acceptance of Australian history.

The Uluru statement asked for nothing from Australia. Asked for nothing. All we were doing was giving you stuff. That Uluru statement, I don't know who wrote it, beautifully written, but the generosity of spirit was enormous and by lunchtime on the day it was delivered, Scott Morrison had rejected it. It was Malcolm Turnbull, wasn't it, Malcolm Turnbull. Our great white hope had rejected it. Half a day.

And yet, it hadn't asked for anything and it wasn't talking about a third chamber or anything like that. It was talking about a statement from the heart.

VERITY FIRTH: So that's Robert Evans has asked a question, which is always a difficult one when you're in the public eye. He says as a writer who tackles controversial topics, how did you prepare yourself for conflict with those that try to discredit you and your work?

BRUCE PASCOE:I was completely unprepared. I suppose in the back of my mind I knew that there were, you know, there were people who were going to attack a pale-skinned Aboriginal person who didn't really find out about their family until he was 17 and did nothing about it until he was 32.

You know, of course Australians have the right to question that person. But in a civil society we ask a civil question. Nobody asked me those questions. Everybody made an assumption. Everybody who was up in arms was being baited by a few right-wing trolls and falling like trout for the lure.

Social media is a wonderful thing. My kids rang me with support. I had elders who know my family, came out of the blue and offered me support, rang me, met me in the street, urged me on. So from a pretty deep despair I was picked up again by my own people and then the fires came and I couldn't think about anything else but fire and smoke for five weeks. Then COVID came along and it was like a bloody holiday because we were stuck here on the farm and our employees, some of them live on the farm, some come from close by, I can't tell you how they get here, but we're a little community here and we sit down at lunchtime and we talk culture, we share books, we share family stories, we share family histories, we help search out family histories for each other and some people at work who don't know much about the family, I know exactly.

And because of my search for my family and the other knowledge held by people who work here, we're able to help people who don't have that knowledge and we engage with the non-Aboriginal here in that search. This is what happened to my grandmother, have a look at this. This is an Australian story. Listen to this one.

And we're all involved in it, all Australians in this one, tiny lounge room in this rickety old house.

For me, this last five weeks has been wonderful because the trauma of the fires has still not played out properly. We're still fixing fences here and I can't look at them without remember walking past them in another situation. But we're having a go now and we're able to do it together.

I think there's hope, there's hope on this farm and I hope that other communities can experience hope and do stuff to support each other. Don't wait for government. We didn't wait for government here. We just went and did it and we were fortunate that the sales of 'Dark Emu' doubled after December last year.

Everybody working here is being paid out of that pool of money that was generated by nastiness.

VERITY FIRTH:I love that story.

BRUCE PASCOE:A great Australian nastiness was going on. It doubled the sales of the book which just shows you the heart of Australian people. Book sellers told me people were buying ten copies at a time as a protest. And there's people working here now, eating my lunch, they're being paid by that pool of money created by an Australian protest. So that's got to fill you with confidence.

We've just got to continue. We can't let it rest there, we can't feel satisfied because nothing has happened. Our incarceration rates are the same. Our childbirth weights are basically the same. Our educational attainments are basically the same. So nothing's happened yet. So don't become excited and warmed by a feeling that is temporary. We have to make it permanent. We may need to make it constitutional, I don't know. I'm not a lawyer. I don't want to be a lawyer.

But, you know, whatever that change is, whether it's treaty or constitution or whether it's just a statement like the Uluru statement, I don't care what it is, I'll never be involved in it because I abhor politics and legal discussions are the only way I get to sleep at night because I'm so bored by them. But we need good people, we need young Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who are true to the law and following the law for the sake of our common wealth.

I'll leave it to them. I don't want to be involved in that discussion. I don't care what the outcome is as long as it's honest. As long as it's based on statements from the heart and not from the pocket.

VERITY FIRTH: Well, a big part of change, at least I hope, is around the next generation of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and Kieran Kevin asks a lovely question which is, and a pertinent one, Bruce, how and when can we get more Aboriginal history pre and post-invasion enshrined permanently into the primary and high school education curriculum?

BRUCE PASCOE: We have to turn up at the parents' meetings at our local school and ask why it hasn't been done and you will have to - you know, you will have to go out on a July night, 7:30, walk away from your own fire, with a half digested dinner and turn up at a very boring meeting. A school council meeting is a shocking thing to behold. But we're going to have to do it.

You're going to have to dedicate yourselves to that. You are going to have to be exposed to the wrath and disdain of your fellow Australians but if you keep on doing that, you will turn that school council around because the wonderful thing about Australian history and Australian culture is that it is wonderful. And eventually everybody will see it as wonderful and they will see it as an example to the rest of the world how people can live in peace together and grow food together and consider each other's needs.

This is a wonderful moment in human development and it can be a moment where we embrace a way of being human which doesn't descend into war and selfishness. Aboriginal people were human so they woke up grumpy in the morning, woke up jealous of each other in the morning, went to bed with wrath in their hearts for their neighbour and never went to war for land. This is a world first.

I know there are people who are going to contest it. You show me the war for land in Australia. You read through all the history, you tell me where that war for land is. This is a unique moment in human history that occurred here and it occurred because of the wisdom and the tenacity of those old heroes, those old intellectual philosophers, men and women, who devised a system where people were responsible for the land, not her responsible for them. Each of those people acknowledged the responsibility they had to the land and they were forbidden from going to war to gain more.

This is not an argument about capitalism and communism. Capitalism has destroyed the Murray-Darling Basin. That is not a fine example of human development but the Brewarrina fish traps where people designed a system where people upstream of them, who spoke a different language and whom they would probably never meet, the system was designed so that they would get fish. People they never knew. I think that's - those people knew what they were doing, they knew they were delivering fish, nutrition and life to people they didn't know and that's a great moment.

VERITY FIRTH: Quite remarkable.

BRUCE PASCOE: It’s about sharing and care, about love. You get ridiculed for talking about love to an economic arguer. It should be one of the basic principles.

VERITY FIRTH: So we're getting very close to the end time. I'm just going to ask one more question. So we've got four minutes to go. The last question's from Sarah Graham. She says thank you so much for this, Mr Pascoe. I would love and pay any price for food grown and prepared in the way that you describe. Are there businesses you recommend that we can support by ordering online if they're far away? Thank you.

BRUCE PASCOE: Not yet but it's within six months, 12 months that you will be able to do this. We thought we'd be selling yam by now but we're still 12 months from there. The fire knocked us rotten so we lost 12 months' growth for some of our plants.

But we'll get there. We were talking airily, while we were eating that bread this morning, in the height of our excitement, we were talking about buying a bakery run by Aboriginal people selling Aboriginal bread.

In the last few years in Eden, the closest town to here, three bakeries have closed down because of the economic climate on the South Coast. We thought what if we'd had the money to buy one of those bakeries and start it up again, selling our food.

My experience of the enthusiasm for these food products around the country means that we wouldn't be able to get enough bakers or enough oven space to bake the bread we would need. I think we will be knocked over in the rush. But this is, you know, there are bakers around with that capacity and with that skill and they will bake this bread anyway.

But the challenge for us is not to bake the bread, the challenge is that Aboriginal person grows the grain and sells the bread, bakes the bread, wraps the bread, delivers the bread. That's the challenge for Australia. Because that little simple task, that simple economic formula has been beyond Australia right up to this point.

So simplistic that we should be ashamed that it hasn't been tried. I've got brothers in Eden and they show me their work-ready documents. They've got a folder full of 30 or 40 training schemes, they're unemployed. This is ridiculous. Stop training us. Start employing us.

Right here today, we've got a young man who was disdained by his previous employer, who was getting money to employ him as an Aboriginal person,

Aboriginal trainee, getting that money, never gave him responsibility for any job. He's just finished building me a veranda. Give that person the responsibility, give them the support, and tell you what, anything is possible.

I'm constantly excited here watching my own people succeed. After this session, I'm going to go up to that back boundary, I keep looking over my shoulder because I can see where the tractor is, I want to see that fence that Aboriginal people have built with their own intelligence and labour. This is not bloody rocket science.

Josh Frydenberg or whoever our economic guru is at the moment, this is not rocket science, mate. This can be done easily. Stop training us and start employing us.

VERITY FIRTH: That's a great place to end. So I just want to say, Bruce, thank you so much for coming on and sharing with us today. It's just been - for me, it's been an incredible pleasure to meet you even if it is a virtual meeting. The work you do is truly inspirational. Very excited.

BRUCE PASCOE: I'm showing you the remnants of my lunch with our own bread. So this is the first time I've eaten our bread for lunch.

VERITY FIRTH: We feel great we're here. We almost feel part of your virtual lunch. So thank you, again, for a great conversation. Thank you to everybody who tuned in. It was by far the most popular event we've ever hosted.

BRUCE PASCOE: I've forgotten about a book that is being produced by the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences called 'Success and Failure' because a lot of the stuff we talk about today is in that book and it was released last week. Sorry that I forgot to mention it until now.

VERITY FIRTH: Everyone, go and buy 'Success and Failure' and if you haven't already buy 'Dark Emu'. Thanks, again, everyone. We'll call it to an end. Thank you, again, Bruce. And, again, for coming and being part of our Reconciliation Week event, thank you.

BRUCE PASCOE: Good on you.

VERITY FIRTH: Cheers.