Patricia Karvelas: The removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville led to violent protests earlier this month, and exposed an ugly side of the US. These protests have reignited debate about Australia’s colonial-era monuments and how they reflect – or not – our history. Some, including Opposition leader Bill Shorten – are calling for statues of people like Captain James Cook to be updated.

[Excerpt]

Bill Shorten: Our history is one which is 65,000 years old. Our history didn't start when Captain Cook sailed into sight of Australia in 1770. This country works best when we work together, so an additional plaque on Captain Cook’s statue is fine by me.

[End of excerpt]

Patricia Karvelas: Ken Wyatt is the Minister for Aged Care and Indigenous Health. He was the first Indigenous Australian to be a frontbencher. Welcome to the program.

Ken Wyatt: It’s good to be with you.

Patricia Karvelas: What’s your view on this history debate? The history wars, as they’re being described. Do we need to update our statue plaques to be more reflective of our history?

Ken Wyatt: It depends on how far you want to go on this issue, because if I take that whole construct of the discovery of Australia, then we’d have to go back to the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Indonesians, the Chinese who visited the shores of this continent long before Captain Cook. So, the debate’s interesting, but I think sometimes we’ve got to acknowledge there was a point in history in which there was a reflection of people like Captain Cook that didn’t reflect, say, the Indigenous history, and on that basis I would rather we move on and deal with the contemporary issues, but identify where we’ve got great opportunities.
Patricia Karvelas: But this statue in question; it’s not correct, is it? Because Captain Cook did not discover that territory, as it’s described.

Ken Wyatt: No, he didn’t. What he did discover was a patch of New South Wales in which he raised the ensign, and on that basis, it was more a proclamation of taking Australia on the premise that it was *terra nullius*, when he knew that it wasn’t based on his own diaries, and the first four entries referred to the smoke that he could see.

Patricia Karvelas: Wouldn’t updating a plaque or adding a new plaque to reflect Indigenous history show respect and truth-telling to the Indigenous community? That’s the way it’s been described by some people, that it would be a mark of respect and truth-telling.

Ken Wyatt: I wouldn’t put it on the same statue. I would rather have a plaque that talked about who Cook met, and then this particular cultural group, and people, if we know who they were, who was there and reflect that. That would be a better form of history than to have something where we put another plaque on the other side, because all you’re doing is just adding to a monument that’s there. Why not have something that’s in addition to, that sits parallel? Because Australia’s history is parallel; it’s not only these people living on the continent, it’s also ultimately living alongside the British who came here.

Patricia Karvelas: The Prime Minister has called Bill Shorten’s comments – where he’s said that he wants to update the plaque – as thoroughly Stalinist, absurd and totalitarian, but some Indigenous people support the removal of these statues. Does that make it Stalinist or absurd?

Ken Wyatt: But I think it takes us to that point of you remove the statue, what does it really alter? It doesn’t alter history. What it does reflect is that there was an acknowledgement at a point of time of Cook. I would rather see the parallel of history and the truth of the nation be told than for us to tear down a part of it and not recognise that it was a reality in that sense. The strength of a parallel monument is really having something that is a very poignant statement about the traditional owners who lived there prior to British settlement and their continuity with the area.

Patricia Karvelas: Now, of course, this is a City of Sydney issue, this specific statue we talk of, but you talk about a parallel monument; something else that’s added to the landscape. Is that something that the Federal Government should be involved with to show its commitment to reconciliation or dealing with this history conversation we’re having, where clearly many Indigenous people – and you’d know this from talking to them – feel pretty aggrieved?

Ken Wyatt: Yeah they do, and I think this is an important part of the truth of our nation, is that there are many events that occurred in every state and territory, and we need to be aware of them, because it is a reflection of not so much the Forgotten People, but the people who at the early days of settlement were an inconvenient truth, and this whole context means that we’re going to have to deal with issues in different ways. There’s certainly an obligation of local governments to play a role, because they do commission, often, statues or pieces or works of art that
reflect a community or a point of history, but state governments have a role, and on occasion federal governments have a significant role in, particularly with war memorials, and our acknowledgement of the history of our servicemen and women in the fields of battle, and we see that reflected in Canberra and every small country town where we put monuments up to commemorate all Australians, including Indigenous Australians who fought in the World Wars.

**Patricia Karvelas:** Should, then, the Turnbull Government erect statues to commemorate those Aboriginal people who fought and died as a result of European colonisation? Is that telling the whole story?

**Ken Wyatt:** Well, we’re starting to see a reflection of the history books talking about some of the Frontier Wars, and some of the people who led them; Bennelong, Pemulwuy. So there are people that played significant roles. Now, whether you have a statue is up to a particular community from which that person came. From our Noongar country for example, we have a statue to Yagan, and that’s well and truly acknowledged, and that was an effort by a number of people to put that up to recognise that Yagan was a Noongar warrior who, in the early days of the settlement, befriended the British, but at the same time was betrayed by him and ultimately shot and beheaded.

**Patricia Karvelas:** On RN, I’m joined by the Minister for Aged Care and the Minister for Indigenous Health Ken Wyatt, and our number here is 0418226576. I want to play you something. This is the head of the Department of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University, Bronwyn Carlson. She was on RN Breakfast this morning, and had this to say about the statues of Macquarie.

**Bronwyn Carlson:** Well, if we think about it, if there’s a statue of Governor Macquarie, would changing the plaque to say: okay, he is not a kind gentleman, or whatever the verse is on his plaque, would people be satisfied to say this here stands a mass murderer who ordered the genocide of Indigenous people? Do you really think that people would like to see that? I don’t. Do we need to keep statues of people who commit mass murder and genocide? I don’t think so.

**Patricia Karvelas:** What’s your response to that?

**Ken Wyatt:** She has a valid point in that he did do those. Again, in the context of our history, people have made a decision to put recognition of a state governor. Now, we could tear it down, but what does it achieve? What does it change? I would rather see a reflection- for that to be a reminder of a period in which decisions were made to hang people openly, and to have a position that clearly showed that there was a contempt for Indigenous Australians. Sometimes monuments or statues, sometimes are there to remind of a past that was horrific, and where there were individuals who, for reasons only known to themselves in many senses, as to why would you do what he did? And I want things like that be a reminder that we should never, ever transgress back that way, and that’s why I admire what the Germans have done in terms of the concentration camps. They
could have flattened them, just to wipe out history. They didn’t. They leave them as a reminder of the past that was cruel, of a past that was not the right way of dealing with people.

Patricia Karvelas: You’re right, Ken, but I’ve been to Auschwitz, for instance, and when you go to Auschwitz, it’s quite clear that this is a terrible place, that this is a place of great misery. When we look at some of these statues that we’re talking about- the plaque on Macquarie statue, for instance, says he was a perfect gentleman and a Christian. It also says he was a guardian angel for New South Wales, and that’s very different to what you find out when you go to Auschwitz.

Ken Wyatt: I agree with you there, but sometimes- that’s why I’m saying sometimes – and I saw this in Rome – there was some parallel information that sat alongside of a particular event that occurred that covered the more truthful version, as opposed to the sanitised version. Because if he was a devout Christian, and if he was as they describe, then why would you slaughter people needlessly? You wouldn’t do it. That goes against the whole tenet of Christianity, so it’s not a brilliant reflection.

Patricia Karvelas: If I could just move to another issue, which is, you know, very squarely in your portfolio as Indigenous Health. Medical experts say a national taskforce is needed to address kidney health in Indigenous communities. The Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion referred to it during Garma as a tsunami waiting to happen, that this is clearly a health crisis that Australia has to deal with. Do you support a national taskforce, a national approach, an injection of a very serious taskforce and funding to try and deal with this to turn this around?

Ken Wyatt: Well, what I’ve currently got is I had a long talk with Alan Cass, Professor Alan Cass who’s at the Menzies CRC in Darwin, and I’ve sent my chief of staff up there this week to work with him and his team to pull together the relevant information in a framework that links not only renal disease but the precursors; the skin diseases that you have as a child so I can start to look at how we tackle that nationally; renal- not renal failure, diabetes; chronic diseases; and also what other conditions do I need to consider in the context of blood pressure and its impact on kidneys. So, Sue’s doing that work at the moment with Alan Cass and his team, and she’ll be back and we’ll have that discussion on Friday, because I want to look at the framework that I can then work through, and then I do want to bring together a group of people that I have the conversation with as to how best we tackle this, and how do we influence COAG health ministers to make a concerted effort to ensure that we don’t have a tsunami.

Patricia Karvelas: Well, Ken Wyatt, before I let you go, we were meant to be having a national vote on a very different issue this year, and that is effectively reconciliation, Indigenous recognition in the Constitution. We’ve ended up with a different vote, as you know, on marriage equality, and I wonder, are you a yes or a no person?

Ken Wyatt: Look, I have an electorate who’s got an older population, and their representations to me are moving heavily towards the no, although I know polling that’s being done shows otherwise, and I’m continuing to have ongoing discussions with them. I have family members who are in same-sex relationships, so
they often talk to me about them. My mind is still open. I’m not committed either way, and certainly, over the next few weeks I’ll continue to engage with my electorate, as I did on Friday when I ran a series of coffee shops in my electorate where people came and expressed their views.

**Patricia Karvelas:** So what does that mean? You’re going to be guided by the vote in your electorate or the national vote? And when you get your ballot paper – because you’re going to get one, just as an individual – what are you going to do with it?

**Ken Wyatt:** I’m ambivalent to be truthful, at the moment, Patricia. It’s not an issue that doesn’t cause me to lose sleep. I really do appreciate and get where those in same-sex relationships are coming from in terms of partnerships, but I’ve also had a number of people in same-sex relationships who’ve said to me: I don’t want marriage. I don’t know what the issue is and why we’re fighting as hard as we do. I’m just going to play it by ear. I haven’t made up my mind, and as I said, I do have an open mind, and I indicated when I met with a group recently, one of my challenges is we made a commitment to a plebiscite, and I don’t want to give my electorate a sense that I’m prepared to break my integrity on an issue when I go to election and I made a commitment to them. When we have a plebiscite and the answer is overwhelmingly yes, then I’ve got to consider that in all seriousness.

**Patricia Karvelas:** Ken Wyatt, thank you so much for your time.

**Ken Wyatt:** Thank you very much, Patricia, and it’s good to be with you.

**Patricia Karvelas:** That’s Ken Wyatt. He’s the Minister for Aged Care and the Minister for Indigenous Health. Some interesting things out of that interview. Firstly, Ken Wyatt’s unconvinced on gay marriage, so if you are running a same-sex marriage campaign either yes or no, this is somebody’s vote that you can still influence it seems, and the other part of that interview which I thought was absolutely intriguing was on something that you wouldn’t really think about very often, it doesn’t get the coverage it should, but that’s on Indigenous health, and Ken Wyatt basically asking his chief of staff to work on a national plan on this kidney health issue. A tsunami ready to happen is how the Indigenous Affairs Minister described it.

**ENDS**