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## The indigenous woman who put Hanson to shame

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THERE were two consecutive speeches given in the Senate on Wednesday, the second of which began with these words: "Yuwu bajinda nya-wirdi kulu kirna-balirra yinda nyawirdi nyuwu-ja barrawu ..." This passage made more sense than much of the preceding speech, which contained one of the accidentally funniest lines delivered in our Parliament: "I'm back." The first speaker was, of course, former Lower House MP Pauline Hanson, whose maiden Senate speech enjoyed a level of coverage similar to the moon landing.

The second speaker was the new senator for the Northern Territory, Malarndirri McCarthy, whose maiden speech was, by my count, the subject of two brief news reports.

To our discredit in the media, everyone packed up their cameras and put their notepads away when Ms Hanson sat down and Ms McCarthy stood up.

You can understand the news judgment. There was always going to be more public interest in what the resurgent Hanson was going to say on her return to Canberra as one of the happy beneficiaries of Malcolm Turnbull's laughably unsuccessful "clean-out" of the Senate circus.

Setting this freak show aspect aside, it is a great pity that Ms McCarthy's speech was delivered amid the chirp of crickets and sank without trace. This is because her speech did a much better job of encapsulating what ordinary Australians are really like than anything Ms Hanson had to say.

Side by side, the two speeches provide a comparative study in humility versus vanity, with Ms McCarthy telling the Senate how humbled she felt to have been elected by the people, and Ms Hanson telling the people how lucky they were to have her back.

They also provide a telling contrast in Ms McCarthy's curiosity and pride about her colourful pedigree, and Ms Hanson's all-consuming insecurity about anything of the non-Anglo persuasion. Ms McCarthy talked about all the things Australia could do, while Ms Hanson fretted about the things we had to stop doing.

As a journalist of 20 years with the National Indigenous Television Network, Ms McCarthy found herself in the novel position of telling her own story rather than other people's.

This is where all those unusual words at the start of her speech came in; incomprehensible to us white folks, but full of meaning in Yanyuwu, the language of her mother's people in the Gulf of Carpentaria. By using those unique words, Ms McCarthy showed that hers is a living culture, not some historic footnote washed away by European settlement.

The modern-day account of her family was frank and contained the stories of success and tragedy that define any family.

Her son, a uni student in Texas, getting a shout-out at the start; his proud Mum knowing he would be watching her maiden speech online.

A dignified nod to her brother, who can't find a way to fit in modern society and lives as a long-grasser in Darwin. And to her cousin, a lesbian, who took her own life after failing to find acceptance within her traditional Aboriginal community.

I HAD just started working in the Canberra Press Gallery when Ms Hanson gave her first maiden speech in 1996.

Its most famous line, that Australia risked being "swamped by Asians", was reworked in Wednesday's speech.

Her doggedness in sticking by that line struck me as bizarre, as it is without a doubt the silliest part of her first hit-out as a parliamentary speaker. The idea of sticking to everything you have ever uttered suggests a mind that either fails or chooses not to evolve.

The "swamped by Asians" thing is a stellar example of devotion to your own dumbness.

When you consider the ease with which Asians have integrated in this country, their work ethic, and the extraordinary economic imbalance tilted our way via free trade, it is unintelligent that someone could stand by a statement.

After 25 continuous years of economic growth, and with Australia exporting \$80 billion in goods and services to China, we are blessed to find ourselves a major player in this region, rather than looking to decaying Europe. The idea that we have lost our patrimony to the yellow hordes was borne out two weeks ago with those official figures showing minuscule Chinese ownership of farm land, with those inscrutable Poms being the real offenders when it comes to buying up the bush.

Ms McCarthy's life story offers a neat parable for how this to-and-fro between Australia and its neighbours has made us what we are, culturally and economically: "As my McCarthy ancestor sailed his way across the seas to Australia, my Yanyuw ancestors sailed their way across the northern seas from the gulf country, to the land of the Macassan, Sulawesi, to the Torres Strait through to Papua New Guinea.

"In the eyes of first nations people, cultural exchange both among clan groups within Australia and with people outside Australia was a natural part of life well before Captain Cook arrived in 1788. There was already a thriving economic foreign trade between Australia and countries to our north.

"It is Aboriginal people who were the diplomats with foreign countries, the trading partners who shared knowledge and exchanged agriculture and marine sources of food and tools in the form of harpoons for hunting and knowledge of carving canoes to set sail in the unpredictable wet season seas." It was an interesting and thoughtful speech.

It was certainly more interesting and thoughtful than the two-word sentence from Ms Hanson: "I'm back." She is, of course, free to do and say what she likes.

I like that Ms McCarthy listened to Ms Hanson. I like that Ms Hanson stayed to listen to Ms McCarthy. I like that they hugged at the end.

Most of all I like the fact that Ms McCarthy blew Ms Hanson out of the Senate chamber for intellect, decency and effort.