

YES!



Bubbles in the rainbow water at djarimi, representing knowledge bubbling up and coming out of the land

In 1967 in a national referendum Aboriginal Australians were acknowledged to exist! Only from the 1970s, after nearly 200 years of colonisation, has some semblance of Aboriginal rights been acknowledged, after so much damage had been done. In the marrow of the nation we call Australia, the constitution, the life force of Aboriginals still does not exist in any real or meaningful way. But in 2023, Australians who are eligible to vote, can make a significant step forward for our first peoples and ourselves by voting yes to create an Aboriginal Voice, an elected body, enshrined in the Constitution that would enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to work with the Federal Parliament. It would be the greatest step forward for Aboriginal people in our national history because beyond “existence” it would give Aboriginal people a role as a living force in our national civil society.

In so many ways it is easier to just ignore all this. To just carry on. However at some juncture of life and history it is not possible to just carry on. What deep down is the

basis of our well being? What is our deep moral duty? That is our cross roads and in many ways our continuing dilemma as a nation. Do we want to continue to ignore the truth about our history and the very foundation of our national prosperity?

The debt to Aboriginal Australia can never be properly reconciled. The dead cannot be brought back, nor can the past be remade. But part of the reason to vote yes for an Aboriginal voice to the Federal Parliament is because every land improvement, every national betterment, every element of our national prosperity is carried on the shoulders of our ancestors and the original peoples of this land. In 2023 we can empower, for the first time, the Aboriginal people who have survived against all odds. and give voice to their knowledge, wisdom and power in our collective future as well as develop a new capacity and say for Aboriginal people in government.

In every single part of Australia non-Aboriginal people inherited a continent of extraordinary gifts. The flat plains that stretched from Melbourne to the great Murray/Dungala were viewed as the greatest pastoral plains on earth in the 1840s. The Sydney Harbour is known as one of the greatest in the world. There are so many more jewels in every state and region. My own home, Kangaroo Valley, was a place of abundance and tranquility that many now enjoy as a heaven on earth. We could go on and on. This is not to mention the wealth of minerals that have been traded with the world.

Australia was truly God's country, the garden of Eden in the antipodes, except God's country was managed, farmed and nurtured by Aboriginal people for tens of thousands of years and it is only the beginning of understanding the statement: Aboriginal people 'are the land'. All of this, and the lands and waters in all their abundance, was simply appropriated and given to colonists and non-Aboriginal ancestors.

If we were truly a just society there would be an Aboriginal landlord, business owner/ partner for every single property and enterprise in the country. Every profit would be shared. Every decision would be made jointly. Maybe even this though is just tokenism that does not acknowledge the difference of Aboriginal ways, of their communality and spirituality. That is again reason for a Voice of Aboriginal people recognised by our highest levels of government. In the 2023 referendum we vote to create a place in national politics where Aboriginal people can exercise their voices and air their ideas and opinions with authority, recognition and purpose.

'Radical' Aboriginal leaders are quite correct to say that Aboriginal people do not

need non-Aboriginal government. They are also quite correct to be sceptical about the idea of a voice to the Federal Parliament in the context of a thousand 'job offs' of Aboriginal rights since 1788. This is not a time for Aboriginal Australians to thank non-Aboriginal people or to say "oh ok we can just forget everything that has happened because now it will all be put right!" No. There is still much to do in every region and in every community to understand what has happened and how truths can out and reconciliation and amends be made. But, for the first time, and the 1967 referendum acknowledging that Aboriginal people actually existed was only a lead up, this 2023 referendum is real and important and big and potentially earth shattering for the third of Aboriginal people who live in remote areas, the third who live in regional Australia and the third who live in our cities. It is one thing to acknowledge that Aboriginal people exist! It is another to provide a means of power and authority. Denied recognition because of our majority popular electoral system, in a nation where they are a minority of the population, an Aboriginal Voice to the Federal Parliament, will be individual Aboriginal people's chance to have a say that goes direct to the heart of the most powerful government in the country.

The voice of Aboriginal Australians will not be watered down by a popular constituency. Aboriginal Australians will not be able to be divided and conquered by the government of the day electing only those Aboriginal people who agree with them. By its sheer existence, the Voice will bring change for the better for every Aboriginal Australian. It will hopefully test us, make us better and provide a meaningful forum of wisdom for all.

The referendum on the creation of an Aboriginal voice to Federal Parliament represents a moment when this generation of Australians can do something to bring Aboriginal people into non-Aboriginal power structures and in 2023 be given a place at the table of national decision making. If the referendum vote is yes it will record, in a way recognised by our Constitution, the prior and ongoing Aboriginal stewardship of this great land. I say stewardship because there was not what we call ownership of land, sea and fresh water. The people were the land and the land is and was the people. This is our chance to bring the knowledge and wisdom of Aboriginal people to our national decisions. It is also non-Aboriginal Australians' time to go on a journey and be advised of deeper meanings of land and culture.

We would be mugs to miss this opportunity. There is everything to gain and nothing to fear. Yet we live in an extremely pessimistic and sceptical age. We are worried about the future. Truth is stretched in many different directions. People can make

black out of white and white out of black. The 'radical' Aboriginal leader Gary Foley said he thought the national referendum could not succeed after Hansen, Trump .."buckleys and none", he said. But there is something that Foley has not considered deeply enough, and that is this, in 2023 there are a majority of non-Aboriginal Australians in a majority of states who want to be for Aboriginal Australians not against them, and will not be dissuaded by the most evil of propaganda campaigns or wolf whistles. This majority is what we have to work with to enable this referendum to succeed. There are more supporters of Aboriginal Australia in the non-Aboriginal community than at any time in our history as a nation. They listen as much to Gary Foley as they do to Noel Pearson or Marcia Langton, most of all, whatever their persuasion, they want to be part of a better future together.

I favour going to the heart of darkness and appealing to the most conservative racist elements of our society and not just seeking those who are most likely to agree to vote yes. Let us hear the admonitions of Warren Mundine and Jacinta Nampijinpa Price as much as we listen to the admonitions of radicals of the Left with respect. We must welcome the honest National Party dissent, the predictable moves of conservatives of the Liberal Party who would never in a million years recognise that their prosperity is built on Aboriginal foundations. Let us see this as an opportunity to educate people and to listen. Peter Dutton says he is concerned at the lack of rights of people in the Alice Springs townships, at the growing wealth gap between the traditional land holders and the non-Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory that is well and good. Many of us gave Tony Abbott the benefit of the doubt when he said he wanted to be a Prime Minister for Aboriginal Australians. He mouthed similar platitudes and then went on and wiped out many grass roots Aboriginal organisations in favour of centralised service delivery through the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. John Howard's intervention into the Northern Territory Aboriginal communities set back Aboriginal affairs for a generation. Law and order crack downs put more Aboriginal youth into an endless cycle of horrors in juvenile detention and jail. The conservatives have no credibility on these issues because in the end it is the voices of Aboriginal elders and families that matter in coming up with solutions and if we are to provide solutions they must be multi-faceted. An elected voice to the National Parliament means that no party, Labor or Liberal can mouth platitudes. It must be answerable to Aboriginal people through their representatives. It means we will see more sophisticated and nuanced policy on Aboriginal affairs. It will mean that there will be challenges to legislation and dumb

feel good ideas as they affect Aboriginal people. But this will not be an all Aboriginal affair. The parliament including those who are sceptical will have their say about the make up and role of the Voice.

The detail of the Voice, quite correctly, will be determined by all of us, primarily through our elected representatives in the national parliament. What could be more lamentable than a politician who asks the Prime Minister or the bureaucracy or even the national Aboriginal leadership to come up with “the detail” that in the future will be their own responsibility to envision and work towards in consultation with their own electorate and with Aboriginal communities? It is a total abrogation of political, moral and human responsibilities. It is a wolf whistle of the worst kind. It is to sit on the fence at the vital hour. Not only that, it is to dishonour the role of parliament in gradually moving towards a good model of how this new body can work.

Voting yes means that parliament must continue to work to get things right, it cannot just abolish an Aboriginal voice in the National Parliament because party leaders decide it is a bad idea, or because, as in the case of ATSIC, a few significant people make mistakes and act dishonourably. This time politicians, in their wisdom, cannot throw out the baby with the bathwater. Everything, cost, functionality, appropriate representation will be discussed and determined together, and debated in the parliament, not by bureaucrats but by our elected representatives. This potentially great national institution or body will be born, will evolve and will be disciplined, framed and nurtured by all of us.

When we vote yes at the 2023 referendum we will be exercising, for the first time in our nation’s history, a moral duty to include, the Aboriginal people, who looked after this land before us, and who have been fundamental to our national and personal prosperity and goodness, in the key decisions that are made by the nation. But no matter what, an Aboriginal voice, will not have the power to overturn legislation or policy unless it can muster a majority of support in both houses of parliament. Presumably though in Aboriginal affairs it will have an important and respected role of development and consultation.

Aboriginal communities around the country travel at their own speeds and have their own ways of doing things. A Voice to the National Parliament should enhance this diversity of capacity not hinder it. But make no mistake, this will be difficult for Aboriginal communities and people in many different ways. Some will feel their own local structures are more advanced than anything a Voice may deliver and some

may not want to join our Federal parliamentary decision making structures. Who could blame them? Not all of us want to be politicians. Some may even vote against this momentous moment for the nation. But it is beyond reason that our Aboriginal brothers and sisters should vote yes and join us in our national deliberations about the future of this country no matter what difficulties or contradictions. All in all, the Voice is about forging a consultative pathway for the first time that has to stick and has to succeed. It cannot be at the whim of Prime Ministers or politics, it must stand as a representative body that is as good as we can make it. It will write large what delegations of Aboriginal activists have called for since the first colony at Sydney Cove, a place, an involvement and a say in how things are done.

This is one of those times when much humbug can be made and when we have to look carefully at what people are saying and why. I can hear people saying this will be just another “white elephant”. The truth is it will be as good as our national parliament and we as a national people can make it. It will grow with us and mature as we mature. Non-Aboriginal Australians need the voice of Aboriginal Australians in the National Parliament, perhaps more than Aboriginal Australians do, after 60,000 continuous years of occupation of this continent, and 200 plus years of colonialism, no matter what happens in 2023 and even if the Voice is rejected, Aboriginal people will still survive and thrive, but there is no doubt there would be terrible consequences all round.

If there is a no vote: can Australia itself ‘as a project’ justify itself, talk in international forums about human rights, present ourselves as a just nation? Surely it would mean we would go back to be a nation that the world shuns. If the negative vote wins, as is the customary tendency of Australians in referendums, the real tragedy will be for Aboriginal Australians themselves. There will be a feeling of hopelessness and insecurity of not belonging and of being a part of some separate future.

“Yes” means that Australia becomes something more than just a colony. It means a new projection. We will be a nation governed with, finally, the source core of voice and understanding of this land and all it is. A yes vote means we undertake that the voice will be heard. A majority of Australians in a majority of States give our pledge to make things better and to work in our lives to support and understand the Aboriginal people living alongside us as neighbours and friends, brothers and sisters and to listen to their voices.

Aboriginal Australians are not just “multi-cultural” they are our foundation, our

breath and our life and they deserve a special role in our parliaments and in our decision making. They are us and we are them, for the first time, officially recognised in 2023. How good it will be to hear their voices on the national stage! We cannot under estimate how much a yes vote would improve the prosperity, good will and ethos of Australia!

Comments and contrary views welcome:

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