

To whom it may concern

Co-design process: Submission for Charlotte Wood

I am a non-Indigenous writer, born of British ten-pound pom immigrant parents who came to this country in the 1950s. I am a Member of the Order of Australia and a multi-award-winning novelist involved in many areas of the arts in our country. I have a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of NSW, which focused on cognitive processes of creativity. I grew up on the Monaro in NSW, and split my time between living in inner Sydney and the Central Coast of NSW.

I think the Uluru Statement from the Heart is a crucial document - and will be shown as such - in our nation's history. For the first time, First Nations people had reason to hope they would be really listened to, about the way forward for both settler and Aboriginal people, together. It absolutely broke my heart when the government of the day refused to take this Statement to its hearts, given so freely and in such good faith from the hearts of Indigenous Australians.

You know all the figures and facts about the disadvantage First Nations people face in this country. As just one marker, new deaths this week bringing the total of deaths in custody to 475 is a national shame, a terrible, terrible disgrace. We all bear responsibility for this. It's time for Australia to begin to heal - truly heal - the bleeding, seeping wound of injustice for our First Nations people. It hurts Indigenous Australians most, but this wound also hurts all of us, deeply. And now white Australia is ready to take on the task of healing. I believe this now, as I have never believed it before.

I see it in my own field, literature. White Australian readers are eagerly seeking out and hearing the voices of First Nations writers in our literature, loudly and triumphantly and in many subtle variations, for the first time in our history. Following their forbears like Oodgeroo Noonuccal and David Unaipon, who courageously worked in relative isolation, we now have Melissa Lucashenko, Alexis Wright, Kim Scott, Tara June Winch, Tony Birch, Ellen van Neerven, Anita Heiss, Evelyn Araluen and their many other colleagues, using their pens to elucidate and explore the experience of Indigenous Australia. And readers across our country are hungry for that perspective.

In superficial terms Australia will always be just a little bit behind, a little bit hampered, a little bit stymied by the nagging shame of our dreadful relationships with Aboriginal people. But at a deep, core, community and spiritual level as a nation, we are desperately hurting from the moral injury of this unaddressed injustice.

I am excited and hopeful about the creative, imaginative, economically productive, morally, psychologically and physically healthy and wealthy nation we can become once we welcome First Nations people into our Constitution in this way. We cannot consider ourselves a modern, civilised country if our Constitution does not recognise the right of this country's First People to representation that actually means something. We have all had enough of lip service and evasion. We need Indigenous people to have representation that signifies their primacy in relationship to this land and its waters, and their right to help lead this nation forward.

We must do this; we have no choice. We need a referendum and I believe that Australians will overwhelmingly support the Voice to Parliament in that referendum. The community is always ahead of politicians in Australia. I don't know why, but I believe it to be so. We have seen it time and time again, most recently in the marriage equality debate and vote. If the government won't lead on this, please, please, PLEASE let Australians lead ourselves. We know this is right, and we know it's time.

I cannot express this any better than the Statement does, itself:

“In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.”

Let us accept this invitation, now.

Kind regards,

Dr Charlotte Wood, AM

Writer