

I was born in New Zealand. I became an Australian citizen by descent yesterday, on 24 March 2021, through my extraordinary Mother, Mary Exel. Mary was born on the goldfields in Kalgoorlie before WW II. This submission is made jointly – by Mary Exel, a proud, senior Australian and by me, Audette Exel, Mary's daughter - a brand new Australian.

This is my first formal act as a new citizen of Australia.

Mary and I believe that the Government must honour its election commitment to hold a referendum, once a model for a Voice to Parliament has been settled. We further believe that a properly constituted Voice will enhance the lives not only of First Nations people, but of all the people who call this ancient land, Australia, home.

I grew up in New Zealand, surrounded by friends who came from around the world – including Maori, Pakeha and Pasifika people. We learnt Te Reo (Maori language) at school, and I studied Maori language in my first year in University. Street signs and TV shows in New Zealand are in Maori and English. The history we were taught was rich with stories of our Maori ancestors and the fierce and inspiring ways that they had shaped the land and Aotearoa. Even though I am not a mad rugby fan, when the All Blacks come onto a field to play and begin with a haka, even now I shed a tear. I was raised to have a deep pride in, and understanding of, Maori heritage and contribution to my country.

Mary's life growing up in Australia was profoundly different. Her family were not connected to First Nations people – and the stories and culture she grew up with were not enhanced with their knowledge. She did not learn of the 60,000 years of people walking the land before her. She did not know about the way they had looked after their country, or the history of horror since white man arrived. In that respect, our childhoods were profoundly different.

When I first came to Australia, I was horrified by the torrid history of subjugation, disrespect and pain for First Nations people. And I felt a sense of great sorrow for other residents and citizens of this country – that they did not have the kind of connection to their First Nations people which had been such a wonderful part of my early life. They did not know the language, or culture, or humour, or wisdom, of these incredible people who have survived here for millennia. I was astonished at the vile commentary that met Adam Goodes when he performed that spear dance in an indigenous AFL round – we Kiwis would have loved that. What a huge loss has resulted from this terrible divide - for everyone in Australia.

Many years ago, I was lucky enough to form a friendship with the Lead Singer of the rock band, Yothu Yindi, and his bandmates, and was welcomed onto their country, Yolngu Country, a number of times. I remember the wonderful moment when one of the band members, Witiyana Marika, saw that Mary had joined me on a visit to the Garma festival – he picked her up with glee and spun her around to welcome her as my Mum! It was a joyous moment of connection across culture, age, and land.

Roll forward a few years and I was catching up with the band as they were honoured in Sydney for the ARIA awards. They needed to catch a taxi to the airport – but as they stood out on the streets to flag a cab, empty taxi after empty taxi drove past them – until one of the balanda (white guys) went and stood beside them. A taxi drew up. I was so ashamed.

I have also been lucky enough to be welcomed onto Bardi Country and to meet some of the Wiggan mob – who opened their hearts, their laughter and their lives to a strange Kiwi girl, simply because I was a friend of one of their extended family members.

The welcome and the friendship accorded to Mary and me by First Nations people at every turn stands in such stark contrast to the treatment of First Nations people in their own country to this day.

It is long past time for Australia to begin the process of healing.

The co-design work done on the Voice and the Uluru Statement from the heart represent an act of grace from all those involved – and an invitation to walk beside the original inhabitants of this land.

Mary and I believe that it is long past time for a Voice to parliament be enshrined in the constitution, once a model has been settled through the co-design process. We believe that a Voice will be a powerful step towards Makarrata.

The lives of every resident of this country – no matter where they were born, will be vastly enhanced by an embrace of the culture, the caring and the knowledge of First Nations people.

Audette Exel AO and Mary Exel



25 March 2021