

Thank you for the opportunity to present a submission to on the proposed and important “Indigenous Voice”.

Please understand that my opinions in this submission are subjective, born of my Australian background and of an Anglo-Irish heritage. Some readers of this submission may therefore discount what I present, which would be a pity, for I think there are very many in the Australian community who would agree with many of the points I make.

Since my first visit to Oenpelli (it was then a “Mission Settlement” back in 1959), with its school classes, assistance with equipment and provision of some food and employment, I have been quite conscious and sympathetic to the fortunes and successes of Australia’s indigenous people. Indeed, my father served as a country parson in Wilcannia in the early 1930s, and one of the treasured glass slides I have from that time is one of a group of local people sitting down with Mum and Dad, who also spoke warmly of the people to whom they ministered. (There is little value now to point out that those models were essentially paternal – of course they were, but they were genuine attempts of the time to provide some help, overlaid of course by the Christian drive to “convert the heathen”!)

You may well imagine my wondering many times over the last sixty years, as media reports flowed and continue to flow of so many social challenges and outcomes, of so many genuine attempts by government and non-government agencies to help, whether we would ever see enduring change for the better. So much talk, so much money apparently thrown at the problems, the emerging corruption under the ATSI arrangements . . . No, it has not been all bad, and outstanding indigenous leaders so often give us heart though what they say, what they do, and the stories they tell of community success as much as of disappointments.

Arguments for constitutional recognition, indeed for a separate body sitting alongside government, making decisions for indigenous people almost independent of government . . . what, are we a single nation, or two nations? None of this makes much sense to me; the former is symbolic only, doing absolutely nothing at the coalface. The latter is utterly divisive, intensifying rather than reducing tensions and problems.

So my reaction to the Voice? What, more talk, more symbolism? Then I read that local and regional voices would not administer programs or funding. That made me sit up. And I like what I have read on the Voice website. The even harder yards lie ahead: getting local and regional voices to be established and work well. That won’t happen overnight, a point well understood by the working parties of the Voice. The amalgamation of geographically separated communities, some quite isolated, the identification of legitimate indigenous local and regional representatives, the prevention of corruption, the real acceptance of responsibility, these are a few of the challenges. Frankly, some have talked glibly of our “first nations”, promoting a lie. There were many indigenous communities, with defined territories, with conflict and cooperation; but there never has been an indigenous nation. Let’s be hypothetical here: suppose we consider building the Voice in an Australia pre-1788. The Voice would be about nation-building, and what a marvellous initiative that would have been. So, nations are not built

overnight, but with today's current and new social structures and technology, this can be done within a decade, rather than over centuries.

Some comment on a few specific details:

- Implementing a local and regional voice –
 - The option of using existing arrangements, or creating new ones; no doubt the working parties have in mind that they would have selected advisers discussing possible arrangements with communities, helping establish “transitional groups”, teasing out the issues, identifying present or potential problems. I think this is where much hard work lies, for these local voices must really work well, or the whole initiative becomes yet another talk-fest.
 - Always a challenge, getting the quiet voices to be heard, especially from the women.
 - Perhaps secret ballots for representatives will be required. This approach underpins all successful democracies.
- Minimum expectations –
 - My thoughts flow from my points immediately above; I would be wary of joint assessment (if that implies the claimant local voice is one half of that joint committee – too much self-assessment there). No, I think it needs to be independent assessment, seeking to apply some consistency across the whole Voice.
- The national Voice itself –
 - Perhaps adopt two stages: first, structural representation, giving time for arrangements to be settled down, for representatives to prove themselves. I don't think to go to direct election at the outset is wise.

A final comment on a thorny issue, but one that in due course we will have at address. It is about remote communities, where no real and sustained employment exists. Why on earth do we continue to think that the present model of health and welfare support is ever going to work, where there is no employment, no incentive, no future for the local residents, only substance dependency and all the problems that brings? It is not only the indigenous people who can form a strong bond with the country which they have known all their lives; it is true for all people the world over. We promote this bond “to country” to the detriment to so many in isolated communities. When will we face up to this, and do something differently?

Thank you for the opportunity to offer this submission. No-one has ever asked me before. I hope you receive many good and constructive suggestions, as has been my intention with this one. I shall watch the progress of the Voice with great interest.