

Susan Reid


To Co-Design Body

Submission to Co-design process

I was born in Scotland and immigrated to Australia with my family in 1982, when I was 8 years old. My family all became naturalised Australian citizens in 1987. I consider myself Australian, with a Scottish background. My family and I consider ourselves lucky to be living in Australia, as it is such a wonderful country. However, from the time we first immigrated, my parents were surprised by the racism of white Australians towards Aboriginal Australians. My family settled in Salisbury, South Australia, and I have lived in the area ever since. When I was a child and young adult, my family were very much involved in the Salisbury Uniting Church, and I was in the Girls' Brigade for many years. After finishing high school, I completed a BA, majoring in English, and have worked for many years as a Legal Secretary in various law firms in South Australia.

Why do you think the Uluru Statement from the Heart is important?

There is much evidence that when the British invaded Australia, they well knew that the land was already inhabited by Indigenous people. However, the British never asked the Aboriginal people for permission to live on their land, nor did they attempt to understand the laws, customs and cultures of the Aboriginal people. If they had, perhaps the British and the First Nations people could have found a way to co-exist in Australia, without Aboriginal people suffering such devastating consequences. Since the British invaded Australia, the Government of Australia has tried to 'deal' with Aboriginal Australians, by implementing various different policies, without asking the First Nations people what they actually want and need. This has resulted in ongoing devastating effects on First Nations people. We now have the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which has been created by the First Nations people of Australia, telling us exactly what they want and need. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island elders have taken the time to go and speak to, and listen to Indigenous communities around Australia, and with careful consideration, they have put together the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which expresses the voices of the First Nations people. It is high time that the Government of Australia listened to the voices of the First Nations people. In fact, it is long overdue. It is not difficult. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island elders who have put together the Uluru Statement from the Heart, have done the hard work. It is now up to the Government of Australia to implement it.

Why do you think it's important to enshrine the Voice to Parliament in the Constitution, rather than include it only in legislation?

It is vitally important to enshrine the Voice to Parliament in the Constitution, so that it cannot easily be abolished in the future. The British invaders claimed that Australia was uninhabited, and classified the Aboriginal people as simply being a part of the 'flora and fauna' of Australia. By enshrining the Voice to Parliament in the Constitution, this egregious wrong would finally be put right.

Why is it important for Indigenous people to have a say in the matters that affect them?

The British invaded Australia in 1788. Aboriginal people did not get a vote in Australian Government elections until 1962. That means that for 174 years, First Nations people did not have a say in the running of their own country. Australia is a democracy. That should mean that all Australians should have a say in the matters that affect them. All Australian citizens are now allowed to vote. However, because First Nations people only make up a small percentage of the overall population of Australia, and because a lot of First Nations people live in remote communities, their particular needs are often overlooked. It is, unfortunately, a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'. A lot of non-Indigenous Australians do not understand how different the First Nations cultures and customs are from their own. They do not understand how strong the First Nations customs and cultures are. First Nations cultures are the oldest in the world. It is 233 years since the British invaded Australia. First Nations cultures have not been erased in those 233 years. How could over 60,000 years of First Nations cultures have been erased in a mere 233 years? However, a lot of non-Indigenous Australians cannot comprehend that, and they cannot fully comprehend the effect that colonisation has had, and still has, upon Indigenous Australians. They therefore cannot fully understand the particular needs of Indigenous people. The vast majority of Australians are not Indigenous. Therefore, when they vote, they are not usually voting with the particular needs of Aboriginal Australians in mind. That is why Indigenous Australians need a Voice enshrined in the Constitution, to ensure that their needs are always heard.

How could a Voice to Parliament improve the lives of your community?

The findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was published in 1991. Thirty years later, not much seems to have changed. Aboriginal people are still being incarcerated at a much higher rate than non-Indigenous Australians, often for minor offences, and Aboriginal people in custody are still dying at a much higher rate than non-Indigenous Australians in custody. Issues of poverty, substance abuse and domestic violence affect a disproportionately large number of Aboriginal Australians. These are all the ongoing effects of colonialism. Aboriginal Australians fall behind the rest of Australia when it comes to the level and quality of health care and education they receive. Having a Voice to Parliament could ensure that the above issues are addressed, which would vastly improve the lives of many Aboriginal Australians. Having a Voice to Parliament would also ensure that First Nations people would be heard on environmental issues. The health of the environment is a hot topic globally, as it should be. After all, we cannot survive without a healthy environment to support us. Who better to advise all of Australia on the Australian environment, than First Nations people? First Nations people have song lines dating back tens of thousands of years, which map the whole of the natural environment of Australia, and its history. They have been managing the Australian environment for tens of thousands of years. They have all of the information already. The Australian Government should be seeking their advice.

First Nations people make up only a small percentage of the overall Australian population. However, credible research shows that the vast majority of non-Indigenous Australians would support enshrining the Voice to Parliament in the Constitution. Most of my friends and family (who are non-Indigenous) certainly would.

Kind regards,
Susan Reid