

Indigenous Voice Submission

30 April 2021

My name is Nadeane. I'm a female approaching my 47th birthday. I was brought up as a white Australian, in a white Australian family. People would sometimes ask me if my Mum was Aboriginal and I would say, "No, she just has olive skin". My best friend always thought otherwise, as did a few other people in my time, however it didn't occur to me that I could be anything other than a white Aussie girl.

As a young girl I used to hate Mum sun-baking as 'people would think she was black'... until of course it was cool to have dark skin, and I would date black guys and envy anyone who had coloured skin over my white freckly skin.

We weren't a racist family by any means. One of my best friend's in primary school was Korean, and in high school I was close mates with an Aboriginal girl who my brother dated for a while (who I'm still friends with today). In my late twenties I bought a unit in Redfern. I remember feeling scared and telling myself I couldn't go out after a certain hour because of the 'Aboriginals'. You just had to watch the news to see how terrifying they were. Why I wonder did I buy a unit in such a dangerous area?!

I then got to experience first hand that they were people who were in need of being seen as human, just like everyone of us that have the privilege of being born, and no less worthy to enjoy full expression of who they are as people. I would sit and talk to the 'down and out', offer water when it was clear the alcohol had taken its toll, and get involved in community meetings in an attempt to understand the problem. Sure there were some troubled and undesirable characters, however, in my eyes this wasn't down to skin colour. I wanted to help, had lots of ideas, but was at a loss as to how to go about creating change.

In 2017 my Mum passed away suddenly and unexpectedly in the courtyard of my cafe from a brain aneurism. Last year at the age of 45, I had a phone call at the cafe from my half sister (my Mum's daughter - different father and before my parents met). My Mum told me twenty or so years ago about having a (half) sister. I'd not met or spoken to her before, yet was only thinking about her two days prior wondering where she was... I didn't even know her name.

When she spoke I could tell she was Aboriginal. I asked her if Mum was Aboriginal and she replied "Yeah, of course she's black". This was the beginning of a new chapter in my life and it became so clear to me that all the chapters that had come before led to this... I was so ready to embrace my heritage and it caused me to further question life as I knew it, and not just mine.

My sister, Karen and I now have a very close relationship and although she is my older sister by ten years, I feel like I often guide her like a parent would, only she never had. She is one of the Stolen Generation. Her life in and out of welfare as a baby, then placed into foster and abusive adoptive care has resulted in all forms of trauma. At 55 years of age she is only just learning what it is like to have a family member that loves her, accepts her and guides her towards her own healing journey.

Thanks to Link Up NSW, we have since been on a family reunion as well as a Healing Weekend in which I met other Stolen Generation survivors and learnt from their incredible stories of trauma and resilience. I have traced my family tree through Ancestry (my mob is Gamilaroi - from Coonabarabran) and have made connections that help me to seek a deeper truth and to 'come home'. I also gained an understanding into why my Aboriginality remained a secret.

This new discovery inspired me to undertake my first Uni course, an Undergrad Cert 'Working with Indigenous Communities in Health Context', which gratefully has a global context to remind me that racism is a global issue and that the subjugation of First Nations people is not unique to Australia.

The course content has been eye-opening to say the least, yet I find it both disturbing and sad to know that so many of us have no idea what really happened to our First Nations people, and how the social determinants of health continue to impact every aspect of their life and personhood through unresolved trauma, continued mistreatment and misrepresentation, yet they remain to be seen as the cause of their own problems.

To learn that the problem is not in their DNA (i.e. Aboriginal people are not the problem), that many of their issues are a result of unresolved historical, intergenerational and collective trauma, and that these combined with external conditions forced upon them have been scientifically proven to cause epigenetic modification, causes me like many others to question government's resistance towards achieving absolute equality and equity for Indigenous Australians.

I talked to some young people undertaking Aboriginal studies at Uni who shared of their disgust to find out that the school they attended was next to a mission yet they were never told about it. Furthermore, their school curriculum involved a couple of days to a week (maximum) teaching Aboriginal studies and that the predominant educational tool was watching 'Rabbit Proof Fence'. Sad, but true. It was promising however to witness future generations taking an interest in learning 'another way' and seeking the truth. I could feel their hunger for change-making and this, I believe, is exciting.

The journey since meeting my sister and finding out about my heritage has given me enormous amounts of knowledge, yet it is juxtaposed by even more questions. Why does racism exist globally? How did the British Empire (and others) become so powerful? Why do governments even exist and what are the real agendas? Why have we been brainwashed to think that 'white way' is the better way? How would life be different if colonisers didn't colonise... rather they asked to be welcomed and accepted onto Indigenous occupied lands and worked in partnership with the occupiers to live fruitfully and harmoniously together? The bible says, "though shall not steal" yet stealing was just the starting point of many sins to follow.

I attended the inaugural Indigenous Voice Consultations in the Wesley Conference Centre and naively thought that it was a great initiative and of course everyone would be as excited as I was. Wow, was I wrong! No doubt the Panel is well aware of the outcome of that session so I won't elaborate here, but that session for me was like shining a light on every single soul that have in some way, shape or form, been effected by the ongoing impacts of colonisation, oppression, racism, inequity, inequality, discrimination, injustice, shame, blame and the continuing subjugation of our First Nations people; now My people. It also shone a light, a very incandescent light, on the perpetrators.

One of the first things that struck me when commencing my studies was the overwhelming plethora of Indigenous-related organisations, departments, policies, reports, research articles etc. (including international work involving Australia) that either once existed, do exist, or are 'in the pipeline' such as the Indigenous Voice proposal. I questioned the return on investment when it seems that efforts have not equated to desired outcomes; we are still discussing the same issues decades on, and to make it even more ludicrous, additional targets are being added when the original ones failed to even get a look-in.

I also questioned the real intentions behind them. I came to the conclusion sadly that much of it was strategic and tokenistic in that it allows government to run an economy and employ people while appearing to be doing something about the 'Aboriginal problem' that is clearly not going away. Rather than fix the problem it appears that the strategy of 'delay, blame and circumvent' seems to be the preference.

Much of the money spent on Indigenous affairs does not affect real change. One reason I believe is that Indigenous people are not involved or engaged in the process, decisions and outcomes that are supposedly intended to benefit them - let's call this an absence of Self Determination, rephrased as White Oppression. It's a case of black problems being solved with white thinking and it simply doesn't work, it never has and it never will.

Also, there are too many fingers in the pie (governments, organisations, individuals) directing much needed funds away from the supposed beneficiaries. By executing this strategy however, it perpetuates the negative view held by many non-indigenous Australians that Indigenous people are the problem because they continue to get 'benefits' and "look at them... [you fill in the gaps here]".

The Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHO) are a proven success model for meeting the holistic needs of Indigenous Australians. For example, the ACCHOs identified COVID as a pandemic prior to the World Health Organisation and their campaign was a huge success as it targeted the needs of their audience. Yet they struggle in their need to compete against other community services (including non-Indigenous) providers for limited and much needed funding.

Conversely, I was on my way to Uni recently and noticed a sign promoting a road upgrade to the value of \$178M. I then researched the Federal infrastructure budget... \$110B over 10 years (it had just been increase by \$10B!). I tried searching for the 'Indigenous' budget but it was not clear to me. I did however learn of the compensation and reparation monies paid to victims of fire, international terrorism, abuse within church groups (the list goes on...) and wondered why it is that our First Nations people appear to always be at the bottom of the barrel? Why does their struggle continue?

I often wonder what Indigenous people think of white folk. Possibly something on the lines of, "Stupid white men screwing up community, country and spirit... all for greed and short term gain". Prior to colonisation, Indigenous Australians lived and thrived with self determination, cultural expression, strong kinship networks and a relationship to land that was reciprocal and regenerative. They knew nothing of substance abuse or issues relating to health, welfare, housing, education, justice. I'm not saying we need to return to pre-colonised living. What I am saying is that Indigenous people have a necessary contribution to make and it has become urgent that not just their voices be heard, but they have multiple seats at the head of the table.

It has been two and a half years since the recommendation was made to come up with a proposal as to how an Indigenous Voice can be heard in parliament, and at this rate it will probably be another two and half years before the proposal is finalised. If history continues to repeat itself it is likely that this proposal will soon be scrapped for whatever reason the government of the day wants to give and added to the mountainous pile of failed-but-well-intentioned government initiatives.

Tax payers fund this work. They fund politicians (public servants) to 'serve the public'. It is time for accountability, integrity, compassion, truth telling, fessing up and fixing, and listening from the heart rather than ego or the purse strings (in all areas of government). I challenge the Australian Government to step up and be recognised as a leader in a new way of operating, that works with their First Nations people rather than against. We don't need a multi-year program for working out how Indigenous voices can be heard. We need governments to start listening and commit to action that makes a difference.

I believe that the focus of the Indigenous Voice proposal needs to be turned on its head. It shouldn't be about Indigenous Australians having a voice - they've been speaking loud and clear since colonisation. This is about Australians opening their minds, hearts and ears to hearing the Indigenous Voice and embracing our First Nations cultures through a truth telling process that takes us back to our roots, where we vulnerably and whole-heartedly walk their journey, their footsteps, and move forward as a nation towards a sustainable and equitable future, not just for people but for the planet.

We urgently need an Indigenous voice to survive as a human race on planet Earth. The very fact that the search is on to find life on another planet while this one is being depleted and destroyed, is hard for me to fathom. As Albert Einstein said, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." We need to walk alongside each other while accepting and learning from our differences.

The Indigenous Voice proposal itself is extremely detailed and well considered, for that I congratulate the panel. I would sincerely love to see this process achieve the outcomes that many Australians (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) want, however, like many others, something isn't sitting right.

For me I personally believe we are not addressing the elephant in the room. I believe we need to stop pointing the finger at Indigenous Australians... as the saying goes when you point your finger at someone else there are three fingers pointing back at you. Perhaps if the resources were instead invested in understanding the barriers to government collaborating with Indigenous people, culture, beliefs and practices we may begin to see some real change.

Thank you!