




Dear Co-Design Body

Co-design process: Submission 

I am not mob. I grew up in suburban Melbourne, in an area considered truly multi-cultural. I grew up among almost every culture on the planet, except for our very own First Nations culture. It was not only that there were no traditional owners at my school, or in my suburb. It was also that my formal education showed more interest in the Russian Royal family, or Renaissance England than even the vaguest acknowledgement of the very long history that predated European settlement. Since then, for most of my adult life, I have worked in regional areas and come to meet, work with and become friends with first nations people. Most recently I have taken a major career turn and work for a traditional owner land management board. Why? I have come to appreciate the connection that traditional owners have with land and water. They understand that our spirit and very being is connected through land and water. Western culture tends to separate land, water, environment, energy and other resources and treat them as competing parts with no vision of the whole. Traditional Owners on the other hand (in common with indigenous cultures the world over) know that all these things are connected and we are part of that connection, not separate or outside of our environment. Western culture could benefit enormously by understanding and learning from this holistic approach.

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

As I was growing up, I used to hear the statement "why can't Aborigines just fit in, assimilate, be thankful for what we have brought them". I have listened and learned over many years precisely why this question is so offensive and ignorant and a perpetuation of paternalistic arrogance. Firstly, this land was stolen from them. It was never ceded, there was never a treaty, They certainly did not surrender. European settlers brought a rather arrogant attitude with them. Rather than seeing the wealth of knowledge, history and civilization that was already here, settlers assumed they were superior and were bringing civilization to an uncivilized world. From Terra Nullius to Stolen Generations to deaths in custody, we have spent the last 200 years attempting to assert our superiority. Where the law didn't work, violence stepped in. How different would our nation be now if those early settlers instead chose to listen and learn and integrate themselves into the existing culture. How much more sustainable would our way of living be. How much more holistic would our view of the world be. How much stronger would we be as a nation. Our view of land ownership is quite different. Title over land gives the holder almost exclusive rights over the land, certainly as to who can enter it, and within some limits what can be done with the land. It can also be gifted from one generation to the next. Traditional Owners on the other hand see themselves as custodians, from one generation to the next. There is no ownership in our sense of the meaning, it belongs to community, who is entrusted to pass it to the next generation in as good a condition as it was passed to them. The Uluru statement acknowledges all of this. It calls out the brutal history of western attempts to integrate traditional culture. It highlights the differences in our cultures. It asserts the rights of our traditional owners to live by their culture, to celebrate their culture, to enjoy the benefits of their land and resources and, the most basic right, to have a future.

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

So much healing is needed. Healing of culture, healing of country and healing of people.

Healing starts with acknowledgement of the past, hearing the impact we have had and owning what western settlement has done to traditional culture. That is a start, however is tokenistic if it does not lead create the path to a future that is different to where we are now. I have not met a Traditional Owner who wants to born down our western culture or to pretend that things can go back by over 200 years. However, recognizing in a very real sense that we are upon their land, using their resources for our development, is of vital importance. We insist on the notion of title over land, with the ability to lease and sell on that title within our own culture, but refuse to acknowledge that the land was already owned when we arrived, and a debt is owned the people who owned it. Likewise with the natural resources that we exploit, it was theirs when we arrived, surely we owe our traditional owners reparation for our spoils, and a say in future exploitation of the land.

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

What we do owe traditional owners is acknowledgement that this land was settled when Europeans arrived, that it was never ceded, and that their culture is alive and vibrant, and that a sophisticated civilization existed where land management, trade, and law all not only existed, but were based on tens of thousands of years of evolution. Giving a voice to our first nations peoples allows them to re-establish some of this culture, to allow them to live by traditional lore on their land, their way. There is no threat to western culture in this, as some would have us believe. If anything it makes us stronger as a nation, two cultures learning from and growing with each other. As long as one culture seeks to assert itself as superior, we will never mature as a nation.

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

So, the question is not why don't Aboriginal people integrate into our ways and be grateful for what we have brought. It is very much the other way around, and this is our once in a lifetime opportunity to achieve this. Our opportunity to recognise and enshrine forever recognition of our traditional owners and their rights over the land and water that was taken from them. Again, this is not an existential threat to the western way of life. We will not lose a single thing in this recognition. What we will gain however is a richer culture, steeped in history and knowledge, that can heal country and maybe, hopefully, improve the health and life of the people who looked after this land long before we even knew it existed.

Recognising this through legislation alone is not enough. Legislation can be changed too easily based on the pollical fashion of the time. A voice in the constitution is enduring, which is most appropriate considering this is the voice of the people who occupied this land for such a long time. Legislation is appropriate for orderly management of our daily affairs, not for enshrining the rights of our First Nations peoples into the fabric and heart of our nation.

This is not about black versus white, or giving anything up. There is no tension in another voice in the constitution, this is a chance for two cultures to really unite and grow together. It is as nation building a moment as anything that has gone before, if we are mature enough to do it.

Yours sincerely,

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