

Jane Bennett

Collaroy NSW 2097

Dear Co-Design Body

Co-design process: Submission for Jane Bennett

I am Australian born in Sydney. My father served in WWII on a radar station on Wessel Island and I am still connected to the Yolngu family that adopted him back then. I visit regularly and we keep in touch by phone and consider each other family/kin. I have worked with Aboriginal Health as Director of NSW for the Australian Government Department of Health and was previously Director of Capacity Building for the Natural Resource Management Joint Team working with the Indigenous Land Management Facilitators. I have managed the First Peoples program at Caritas Australia where I was able to visit and work with a number of Aboriginal NGOs and visionaries addressing entrenched and seemingly intractable social determinants of wellbeing with faith and vigour. I am a graduate of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation and have been a Jawun secondee in the East Kimberly. I have participated in numerous intercultural negotiations and workshops both as a private citizen and through my work. I have worked as a consultant assisting Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations (including AMS Redfern) with strategic planning and governance management and recovery with Why Warriors Organisation. I have visited numerous remote communities and outstations and consider that I have listened to and learned much from Aboriginal people from many nations. Their forgiveness, patience, tolerance, warmth and love have given me much strength and helped me understand more deeply what it is to be Australian and human.

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

The Uluru Statement of the Heart is not only an eloquent and powerful message from the oldest continuing civilisation on the planet, but an expression of intent and detente from peoples who have been subject to more than two centuries of violent and devastating colonial trauma and cultural clash amounting to attempted genocide. My own forbears were early missionaries and I can read the words of my ancestor in the Mitchell Library. His attempts to rouse the anti-slavery movement to the cause of the Australian Aboriginal people contributed (with all the best intentions) to the establishment of the position of Protector of Aborigines. We cannot allow reliance on non-Aboriginal public servants to continue to impose their well-intentioned but misguided cultural assumptions and social control on Aboriginal communities any more. The damage has been and continues to be immeasurable. Until we allow for a Voice for quietly spoken, peaceful people from disparate nations whose sovereignty was never ceded, We will never be at peace with our own citizens and the ancestors of this land. Our ecological bull-in-a-china-shop practices will continue unabated and we are stealing livelihoods and wellbeing from our children and their children. We have assumed democratic principles apply to and should make sense to all human beings. This is not so and is a deeply flawed assumption. It is time to listen to the wisdom of people whose culture and knowledge has survived and adapted through ice ages of earth's changes.

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

I have a twenty year work history of being a public servant and have seen ministers and prime ministers come and go with the rapidity of a revolving door. I have also been educated by conversations with many prominent, educated (both in a Western context and traditional contexts) and insightful Aboriginal leaders and community members. I am convinced that the only way to secure integrity and autonomy (in an apolitical sense) in voice at the level required to achieve bipartisan commitment to community health and wellbeing is to have the Voice to Parliament enshrined in the constitution. Because sovereignty was never ceded and you can't easily forge an effective treaty after the fact with such disparate and diverse clan groups across this continent, a Voice to Parliament endorses a concept that can be fine tuned in years to come to allow Aboriginal people to determine their own cultural governance arrangements. We are essentially looking at a composite nation of many clans, families and communities within a larger and more powerful Western democratic system operating in a Westminster model that bears no relevance to Aboriginal peoples and communities in terms of decision-making. In order for Aboriginal people to arrive at their own solutions to the vertiginous mountains of challenges facing them, they need to have a vehicle to communicate and collaborate with each other. To learn from each other and fast-track and replicate models and approaches that are working and can be adapted to different environments and circumstances around the country. As 3% of the population with limited resources and deeply disrupted social infrastructure there are limited opportunities to even talk with each other about challenges and successes. I have seen great success with regional alliances and shared stories but because of the fierce local allegiances and the traumatic impacts of stolen generations policies in particular, the opportunities for Aboriginal people to work together are usually mediated by whitefella organisations (government, NGO and corporate). We have a rising generation of Aboriginal people with university education and business success who have benefited from positive policies and initiatives.

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

I am tired of being ashamed of my country's leaders, policies and culture. I am so ashamed that, were it not for Covid, I would be considering relocating overseas. It makes me sick at heart, at the age of 60, to see the same if not worse statistics in areas such as Aboriginal incarceration, deaths in custody and health, as well as women in parliament and positions of influence, rape and violence towards women, our lack of policy to support women in the workplace and address the gender pay gap, environmental destruction of forests and waterways, loss of habitat and threatened species, dismantling of arts funding and the list goes on with so many topics I hold dear to my heart. Our continued boys club mentality wedded to a growth economy, fossil fuels and capital works has ignored fundamental social, environmental and cultural values that I hold and I thought represented the country I was born in. I would like to feel proud of my country in holding out the hand of inclusion and peace-making to the custodians since time immemorial of this ancient land on which we live, work and play. The land that feeds and shelters us, that is full of so much beauty and grandeur, that I love so deeply. We should all feel at peace in our hearts that we are being governed with integrity and that our core values are respectful and inclusive. This is a small step to take in that direction.

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

Aboriginal people understand best their own lives. They have an oral tradition that has kept the injustices experienced by generations past alive in their families and communities. Beyond that is the knowledge of the strengths of generations past which will guide them in healing our society and economy and culture to thrive in this country in a way where we can be proud to be Australian. I am ashamed of my own political leaders. In my own lifetime I can only name two prime ministers that have really begun to understand the complexities of Aboriginal experience and have shown dignity and integrity in seeking to make amends and provide avenues for empowerment. As a public servant who tried to respond to the advice of Aboriginal stakeholders I found myself perpetually frustrated by senior career public servants and Ministers in Canberra who thought they knew better. Until we have Aboriginal leaders influencing policy and enabling regional self-determination through collaborative structures and processes the traumas will be perpetuated. A Voice to Parliament will give pride and aspiration to Aboriginal communities everywhere. We cannot expect harmony and we certainly don't role model that in our own whitefella politics but the only people who can advise on the best way for Aboriginal people to influence the direction of their own futures will be Aboriginal people. We have seen numerous examples of good news stories where this is happening and philanthropists are investing where government won't. I applaud the OCHRE policy framework concept in NSW (though it needs better funding and commitment) and its fundamental reliance on a local decision-making model.

I understand that the question of sovereignty and the Aboriginal call for self-determination raises concerns in the corridors of power. This needs to be discussed openly and managed with integrity so as not to undermine the basis of our current governance structures. I don't see the Voice to Parliament as a threat to current sovereignty arrangements but I do see it as a diplomatic solution to our internal cultural diversity challenges. We could learn a lot from New Zealand and elsewhere in the world in terms of how to respectfully work alongside our Indigenous peoples to give them (or relinquish some of our own interference, as if it is in our power to give even though this has certainly been taken from them) personal sovereignty over their own lives and social structures to flourish and live meaningful, nourishing and purposeful lives filled with love, hope and prosperity. Don't we wish that for all our citizens? I know I would feel better about being an Australian citizen if this were the way of things.

Thank you,
Jane Bennett

MERCHANDISE

OUR SUPPORT

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