

Dr A D McLachlan

Submission for Recognition for a Voice in our Constitution

I am a senior citizen who has had the experience of interacting with First Nations' people initially in school and later as a retired volunteer engaging in literacy tutoring in remote indigenous communities in NT. My school life began in Daintree where my best mate at school was indigenous. Sadly the interaction was only at school. Following tertiary qualification, my career was in the Dept of Defence as a research scientist, eventually in a policy/managerial role in a Senior Executive Officer Band 2 position. Since retirement in 2001, I have participated in a volunteer literacy program in remote communities, supported by the NT education department, called "READ"- a one on one program with children which helps to facilitate literacy improvement. The program involves living in the community for a month, interacting, experiencing the deprivations in the communities and also the joys. We have experienced their sense of injustice in their present circumstances.

Our First Nations' people have, been subject to neglect, removal of their ability to sustain themselves. With developments in western societies since 1788, it is inevitable that the traditional way of life for First Nations would change. But the change has resulted in their disempowerment. They suffer a lack of recognition, their history has been suppressed, their languages/culture destroyed. We see significant inequality in all parameters and is recognized by all governments – hence the "Close the Gap" programs, which have had limited success.

The Uluru statement is a way forward to a future when all peoples in Australia are recognised. I was disappointed that it was rejected in what seemed to be the intrusion of political views which rode roughshod over its noble goals statements and the effort it took to achieve consensus.

I support the enshrinement of a Voice in the Constitution. As such it must be independent from government and parliament. Whichever Voice model is chosen, I expect the government to honour its election commitment to a referendum. I expect that discussions and political leadership displayed before the referendum would be fully supported by all parliamentary leaders. It must pass – and will only do so with their full support. It is important the Voice is enshrined in the Constitution - devoid of political or legislative changes. We have a history of our indigenous people not being consulted on their needs. Rather, we paternalistically decide what we think is best for them. The Voice will withstand the changes of short-term electoral cycles and policy and ensure the certainty and continuity required to bring about real, long-term change.

Constitutional recognition will finally give our First Nations the rightful place in our history as our first peoples who cared for and flourished in Australia for 60,000+ years. We should be proud of their history. The First Nations' people have an innate and legitimate right to a Voice in this country's Constitution and future. I urge this co-design body to devise a mechanism to achieve this as expeditiously as possible.

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