

I am a 76 year old white woman who spent the first 12 years of her life in two NSW country towns, both of which had substantial Indigenous communities. There was little contact between the Indigenous and white communities but it was clear, even to a child, that white attitudes to and treatment of Indigenous people were characterised by routine and reflex racism.

Australia's Indigenous peoples have suffered over 230 years appalling discrimination and deprivation, which continue to blight the lives of many. That Indigenous people are still dying in custody in great numbers thirty years after the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody, testifies to the pernicious effects of institutionalised racism in the judicial systems of both the Commonwealth and States.

What these deprivations are, is powerfully set out in The Uluru Statement from the Heart, which has now come to be one of Australia's most important documents. Succinctly, The Statement from the Heart reminds us of the millennial-old heritage of Indigenous peoples and their strong interconnection with and care of the land, which is an inspiration to us all; and most eloquently, it spells out the more recent plight of many First Nations people: deracination and the fracturing of families brought about by discriminatory legal and social systems.

It calls for constitutional reform to redress these wrongs.

The Statement From the Heart offers us a vision of the Australia that will then emerge: when Indigenous children "walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country." We who are already conscious of this cultural gift and grateful for it, hope wholeheartedly that constitutional recognition of Indigenous culture will ensure that the birthright of all indigenous children will be that bestowed by the traditions and learnings of the oldest culture on earth, not the destitution that has become commonplace in modern Australia.

Before the last Federal election the government undertook that a referendum would be held as soon as possible to enshrine a Voice to Parliament in the constitution. Serious delays are now occurring and it seems that the proposal is foundering on a spurious argument that the detail on The Voice must be fleshed out before the referendum is held.

This is sadly reminiscent of the referendum on the republic, which was still-born because it was widely believed that before Australia could agree on becoming a republic, it had to agree on machinery to determine how the head of State would be selected.

But the differences between that referendum and this one on The Voice are remarkable. In 2017 -17 I watched with admiration the careful consultations which resulted at Uluru in the first-ever Indigenous designed and led deliberative process by which our First Nations people defined what meaningful constitutional recognition is for them. I have no hesitation in supporting the conclusion of the Referendum Council that the machinery of the Voice can be safely left to the very people who want and need it, and who have already demonstrated the capacity to organise in an equitable way.

The determination of the present leaders of the Makarrata process to ensure that the participants in The Voice and future consultations will not be drawn from current Indigenous leaders and elites but will truly represent all Indigenous demographics. Such explicitly democratic principles are unusual in mature democracies.

Australia needs a constitution that enshrines the rights of Indigenous people to have an established Voice, one which cannot be repealed by legislation: one that will ensure that in future, before our parliamentarians enact legislation, they will have the benefit of advice through The Voice on the effects that their enactments will have on Indigenous society. Only Indigenous people are well placed to identify those effects; our legislative history powerfully demonstrates how discriminatory and oppressive many of our governance measures have been for our First Peoples, even if that was not the primary intention of the law. How often Australians claim not to be actively racist, but still accede, perhaps even through negligence, to appalling structural injustices.

The Parliament needs the wisdom of The Voice, in order to be properly informed before enacting legislation in the Indigenous domain.

Indigenous experience will always outweigh that of bureaucrats and the well-intentioned.

And apart from our urgent need for constitutional provisions to ensure that we find a way to render redress, justice and equity to our Indigenous peoples, we non-Indigenous Australians now wish at last to honour the immemorial culture that we hope we will also, in time, be entitled to lay claim to, with pride.