

By Corrie Perkin

The Voice to Parliament referendum has the capacity to change lives. It will prompt inquiry and enhance understanding of the rich, centuries-old cultures that underpin our nation's history. It will heal wounds and build bridges of understand. It will create a greater empathy between all Australians.

It will make Australia a better place.

It is not a referendum to fear. And yet some prominent Australians – including a number of Conservative politicians – are reanimating that old propagandists' view that voter confusion can easily be turned into fear and fear, in turn, can be a political advantage.

The “where's the detail, Prime Minister?” chant by anti-Voice advocates creates doubt about the referendum's purpose. It creates doubt about the capacity of pro-Voice Indigenous leaders to deliver a clear campaign. And it creates doubt whether the Albanese Government can oversee a successful “yes” vote that changes the Constitution and formerly acknowledges the role of First Nations people in our past, present and future Australia.

The Government's draft referendum question – “Do you support an alteration to the Constitution that establishes an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice?” is straightforward. Yet in recent weeks the muttering grows louder: who is “the Voice”? What is the full scope of its input? Might “the Voice” seize opportunities or make a grab for power?

This jab-jab-jab creates befuddlement. People become unsettled. And so, the opposing forces keep jabbing away.

“On the Voice, the enemy is confusion,” David Crowe, chief political correspondent for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, wrote last September.

“Support can disintegrate when the details are subjected to intense dispute. The wording put forward by Albanese does not create a “third chamber” of parliament, but the scare campaign on this could wreak havoc with the “yes” campaign.”

Only a few days ago, Nationals MP Barnaby Joyce declared: “The Voice is going to go down, and it’s going to be one of the most divisive things to happen in Australia for a long time. But not because of the people who put it down but because of the people who put it up.”

The challenge for Voice to Parliament advocates is to stay calm, focused, and to trust the draft wording. We must also trust the wording of the magnificent Uluru Statement from the Heart – an inclusive and mighty piece of writing that invites all Australians to walk together.

Whenever I read this document, I am filled with hope. If First Nations people can forgive and unite with respect and understanding, why can’t my fellow countrymen with their 200 years (or fewer) of connection with this continent just stop – stop their chatter and their noise – and listen?

If we are old enough to vote, we all have skin in the game. This year, we will stand at the ballot box to articulate our view. Isn’t the responsibility on us, therefore, to learn and read and listen? For one moment, let’s put the confusion and the rhetoric to one side. For one moment – or maybe several moments – let’s click on fromtheheart.com.au and have a read. Because words matter. And this is a pretty compelling collection of words.

“Constitutional recognition through a Voice to Parliament is a body enshrined in the Constitution that would enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to provide advice to the Parliament on policies and projects that impact their lives.” After 200 years of being left out of the conversation, this is a worthy and uncomplicated expectation.

When you read *From The Heart*, you will see, there is no intention to become a “third chamber of Parliament”. It is not about decision-making, but agreement-making. The Voice will not have the power to veto legislation; it will, however, enhance legislation that involved First Nations people.

In this week’s AFR, Arrernte and Kalkadoon woman, film director and member of the board of Australians for Indigenous Constitutional Recognition Rachel Perkins wrote in the *Australian Financial Review*: “a Voice is a simple proposition that ensures the people who will be subject to those laws and policies can make representations about them”.

As the 2017 Uluru Statement From the Heart articulates, First Nations communities “seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny, our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.”

The Edward H Nabb Seseearch Centre at Salisbury University in the US has an online exhibition titled “Decoding Political Propoganda”. The curators argue “one of the most powerful propaganda techniques focuses on fear. By playing on the audience’s deepest, and at times irrational, fears, propagan-dists can sway opinion and promote action.”

In 2015 The Academy of Ideas, which started in Canada, wrote: “The reality is that most of us are not in a position to single-handedly change the world, but we can at least try to rid ourselves of the unnecessary fears which are the fuel for so much hate and destruction in the world”.

Here at writing.org.au on another page, author, academic and former politician Barry Jones makes clear his views on the current obfuscation surround the Voice To Parliament referendum. “Peter Dutton has explained his reluctance to support the Referendum on inserting ‘A Voice to Parliament’ in the Constitution ... is that far more detail must be provided because the proposed ‘Voice’ might cripple how Government works,” Barry Jones writes.

“The charges are wrong, hypocritical and dishonest.

“In Australian Referenda, the question posed is almost always very simple, sometimes even obscure, leaving detail to be worked out by the Parliament in legislation if it is passed. The questions **expand** the role of Parliament – they never contract it.”

Barry Jones’s “time to act” is a simple message. “... the Voice to Parliament, however constructed, has the potential to stimulate informed debate, set priorities and lead to practical outcomes,” he writes.

“Is it symbolic? You bet. Don’t underrate the significance of symbols. But we must act now. Timing is, if not everything, always a central element in whether taking action will work.”

Symbols matter. And words matter. They matter a great deal in times of referendum debates and potential constitutional change. We thank our democracy which encourages us to listen to all sides and partake in debate. But there should be no air time for untruths and mistruths. This moment is too important.

As Rachel Perkins says, “there are many Australian citizens yet to be convinced or who might never agree. But it is our belief that the great majority of Australians want to be part of this generation’s moment to make a profound statement about who we want to be as a nation.”

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