

**By Hilary McPhee**

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**‘Here we are on the last leg of a long journey’** says Noel Pearson at the start of his remarkable five Boyer lectures.

The Uluru Statement of the Heart is the most generous offer by our First Peoples to build a constitutional bridge, to close the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, and to dismantle the silences with truth-telling about the frontier history of this country.

As Noel puts it ‘We have the opportunity to unite at long last the First Peoples of this country with our British institutional heritage and our multi-cultural achievement, under the Constitution. A bridge to join all Australian in common cause.

‘Australia doesn’t make sense without recognition. Until the First Peoples are afforded our rightful place, we are a nation missing its most vital heart.

‘Constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians is not a project of identity politics, it is Australia’s longest standing and unresolved project for justice, unity and inclusion.’

The change to the Constitution, fully explained by Tom Calma and Marcia Langton in the **Indigenous voice co-design process final report** presented to the former Coalition government in 2021, lays out in detail how a national voice model would operate and how it would link to local and regional voice groups.

This website, **Writing for the Voice**, will bring together writing from all those wanting to proclaim the great opportunity we have this year to repair the colonial wrong which wounds us as a nation.

We must speak out against the misinformation and negativity which - like old drums in the distance - are already attempting to tear the referendum apart.

We must not let this happen.

Our Constitution is robust. The amendment to enshrine an Indigenous Voice to Parliament so that matters relating to Indigenous peoples can be over-seen by them and dealt with by them is the opportunity that must be grasped in both hands and welcomed.

Over the past 8 years, 52 Australians, mostly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, have been working on this process. They have looked at how an Indigenous Voice might work, and how local voices can be heard on what is important and what is needed for local communities. They have developed proposals for an Indigenous Voice that has two complementary parts, Local and Regional Voices and a National Voice.

The **Local and Regional Voice** would use a flexible principles-based framework that allows local people and communities to decide governance structures that work best for them. The arrangements would enhance decision making, bringing different levels of government to sit down and work together with local and regional representatives to determine the best way for programs and services to be delivered in local communities. Through Local and Regional Voices, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would be able to work in a partnership with governments to achieve their aspirations and improve daily lives in local communities.

A **National Voice** would be a small national body of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members providing advice to the Australian Parliament and Government. A National Voice would provide the mechanism to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a direct say on legislation and policies that affect them.

We call on people of goodwill to support this and inform themselves so they can combat the fear-mongering and outright lies already being pedalled so that our Constitution can truly reflect our First Peoples and become a bridge to unite all Australians in common cause.

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Thirty years ago, on 10 December 1993, Prime Minister Paul Keating, gave a speech in Redfern Park to a noisy crowd who were only half-listening.

‘It was we who brought the diseases and the alcohol. It was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We who committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practiced discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice and our failure to imagine these things being done to us.’

A few months later the government changed and the decades of PM John Howard’s white blindfold and black armband began. In came the IPA and the Murdoch press with accusations of land grabs after *Mabo* had delivered land rights to those Indigenous people who still had land. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was abolished. Not until February 2008 was the long overdue National Apology to the Stolen Generations given. PM Kevin Rudd in the Parliament apologized for ‘the profound grief, suffering and loss inflicted on ...our fellow Australians’.

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In Noel Pearson's words: 'Constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians is Australia's longest standing and unsolved project for justice, unity and inclusion.'

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