

By Louise Sylvan

To me, ensuring that we have a clearly designated pathway for our First Peoples to speak to the Australian Parliament is such a great idea, I am surprised we haven't done it previously!

First and foremost, a Voice will acknowledge that Australia had a whole range of cultures, operating vibrantly and successfully, when the British arrived to 'claim' the continent for the Crown. These cultures had a different way of 'owning' the land – in fact, one might argue that the principle was almost that the land owned the people. But irrespective, there were people here with prior rights to the territory they occupied. We have spent most of the past 250 years trying to pretend that this was not so, with *terra nullius* providing a legal framework and fiction that enabled this denial to proceed.

When the High Court ruled that *terra nullius* no longer held as a rule of law, and that it was to be replaced by native title, we could finally as Australians begin fully the process of reconciliation. The Voice is one crucial part of that. It provides not only an acknowledgement that Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are a special group in our community but also that they have a special right to be heard as the original owners. Will that diminish the rights and responsibilities of other Australians? Not in any way except to enhance our understanding of a set of cultures that are well worth learning about. The Voice will still be only one of the voices that contribute to Australia's rich democracy as the body has no legislative or executive power; but that voice,

which has been denied for so long, deserves to be brought forward and emphasised as part of the complex tapestry of our evolving Australian fabric. That we have First Peoples in our country, and that we want to listen to them, can only enrich our overall development.

Second, the Voice will help us all to show the respect that a living 60,000-year-old culture deserves. We don't just have rock paintings and ancient artefacts, we actually have the living, breathing culture, handed down through oral traditions, to work with and understand and appreciate. It's an opportunity no other country in the world really has. Many of the native peoples of North America and elsewhere have also preserved much of their culture and traditions, but cannot lay claim to the unbroken longevity of our Indigenous groups. That reason alone is enough to ensure that a Voice exists.

Third, the health and economic outcomes for Indigenous people are not a matter of which Australians can be proud. Even with the best intentions, we have failed to alter the trajectory for health and wealth for most. That is, at least in part, a matter of the marginalisation of a conquered people; this is hardly an unusual history for a country that has undergone colonisation, but one we have an opportunity to redress successfully. Creating change for people, and not just Indigenous people, requires much listening so as not to get it wrong. Our governments have been pretty good at getting it wrong, and the outcomes we see are strong evidence of this (quite apart from appalling interventions such as separating children from their families). The Voice provides a real sounding board and a proactive advisory group with which to create successful changes to these outcomes. Doing this with Indigenous people is the only way we will succeed in lifting our performance.

Lastly, in creating the Voice, we are acknowledging that there are other wisdoms than the ones our varied immigrant populations have brought to this land. Watching Indigenous folk doing a burn in the bush – applying all facets of their law

for how to do this – was a revelation to me. They danced the fire over the landscape! What a comparison to our excessive, often untimely, burning of country. This is not the only area we have to learn about, and it is such an exciting prospect to think that there is much that can be learnt from peoples who have successfully lived with their lands, using trial and error and their own approach to validating the outcomes, for tens of thousands of years. It will be useful for a ‘western-ised’ people, with a particular and narrow approach to how science is carried out, to marry this with the approach of a very different culture, and a deep synergy may well emerge in our thinking as a result. It’s not often that we can stay at home and have such a great adventure!

Some have said that we need a lot of detail – much more apparently than already exists – in order to support a Voice. I don’t agree. Supporting this means all of the above to me, and I am happy to trust my elected officials to create a viable entity to do this job well. I trust them (sometimes very reluctantly) on many other important matters, so why should I distrust them in this case? Having our elected parliament able to evolve and change this body over time – hopefully to improve it – is also important as society changes and people’s social mores evolve.

But there is no such thing as ‘one’ Voice some say – and can never be: Indigenous people disagree about a lot of stuff. Indeed, they do. But since when did we require unanimity in order to formulate policy? We never have unanimity on any issue I can think of, and nor should we try to impose it in this case either. If we had required unanimity, we would not have an Australia! And we certainly would not have any policy emanating from either the Liberal or Labor parties. So, we will need to be sensible. Whenever people come together to discuss complex matters, there will be differing views, but we can find ways to move forward justly. That’s what good societies do.

So, let’s get on with getting a Voice for our First Peoples. It is long overdue.