

## By Graeme Davison AO

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The Voice is a long overdue response to ‘The Great Australian Silence’. Anyone born before 1960, and who recalls how seldom the voices of the First Australians were heard in the public discourse of our country in those years, must now reflect on the forces in the society, and in us, which silenced them. As well as I can recall, it was something halfway between a consensus and a conspiracy; a symptom of our deafness and of the pervasive, colonialist assumption that the white fella knew best. Whatever its origins – and they go very deep in our culture – it was a blot on our national life.

For two hundred years Australians have been doing things to and for Aboriginal people, sometimes with good intentions, sometimes bad. But even when their intentions were good, the governors seldom actually listened to our Indigenous fellow citizens. Many people look back with pride on the moment in 1967 when, they believe, Aboriginal people were given the vote and admitted to citizenship. But that’s not what the famous referendum actually accomplished: all it did was transfer the power of the state governments to make ‘special laws’ for members of the ‘Aboriginal race’ to the Commonwealth, and include Aboriginal people in the census.<sup>1</sup> Supporters of the referendum believed that the Commonwealth would exercise those powers for the good of the Aboriginal people. They did not foresee the possibility

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1 See Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The 1967 Referendum, or When Aborigines Didn’t Get the Vote*, AIAS 1997.

that they might one day be used to intervene in a way that overrode the civil rights of Aboriginal people, without seeking their voice or consent.

Had the 'Great Australian Silence' not been so prolonged and so deafening, the call to incorporate an Aboriginal Voice in the Australian Constitution would seem a very modest proposal. It asks for nothing more than the right to be recognised and heard. Only the engrained assumption that others know what's best for Aboriginal people makes it seem radical.

Some conservative opponents of the Voice object to the idea that the Voice divides Australians along racial lines. Aboriginal people should not be treated differently from other Australians, they say. But the point, surely, is that for the whole of our recorded history they *have* been treated differently. What's more, they still *are*. Not so long ago, some of those who now oppose the Voice on the ground that it gives special rights to Aboriginal people supported the Northern Territory Intervention, perhaps the most coercive application of the Commonwealth's powers in peacetime.

Others argue that because the Voice will not solve all the manifold and indubitable afflictions of disease, alcoholism, child abuse, crime, unemployment, and demoralization that now bedevil the lives of Aboriginal people in places like Alice Springs it should not be established. No sensible person believes that the Voice alone can solve such deep-seated problems. That's not the right way to pose the question. What we should ask is: Can we hope to address those problems *without* listening to the voices of the First Peoples? The human costs of doing otherwise are everywhere apparent. The Voice is not a panacea but it is a new beginning.

The Voice is sometimes presented as a concession to Aboriginal people. But giving Aboriginal people a voice is only half of what the referendum requires. Everywhere one looks in contemporary Australia we can now see Aboriginal faces and

hear their voices. In art, music, sport, literature, politics, the contribution of Aboriginal people to our common life is vastly greater than their numbers would lead us to expect. What is in question is not the ability of Aboriginal people to give voice but the will and imagination of the rest of us to listen. Passing the referendum will count for nothing unless we are prepared to open our ears, minds and hearts. It calls for as much generosity of spirit among non-Indigenous Australians as the First Australians have extended to us. God help us if we can't say yes.