

MORE THAN A VOICE

There have been many moments in my life when I've been asked to listen. As an academic, I've also often been asked to speak. Sometimes I've spoken when I should have listened. It's important to understand the difference between these activities – but many of the key institutions of settler Australia (government departments, resource, tourism and infrastructure companies, major charities and clubs) misunderstand the difference. When they 'consult' with First Nations, they report on how they have 'spoken with' communities. How many times do I hear my students say they will 'speak with' rather than 'listen to' First Nations peoples. And 'talking to' often and easily becomes 'speaking for'.

Right there we have the necessity for the Voice to Parliament anticipated in the Uluru Statement from the Heart. The colonising institutions of settler Australia need to calm down, take a deep breath and listen.

As someone who has been mentored by a great diversity of Aboriginal mentors, it is a frustration that we have had to simplify the complexity and diversity of the southern continent's First Peoples to a singular 'The Voice' or a singular 'Indigenous Australia'. There are (and always will be) many voices amongst First Nations peoples. They have been silenced and erased often and easily by those empowered, enriched and privileged by the legacies of the foundational theft, violence and pauperisation imposed by colonisation and the myths of emptiness, *terra nullius*, and superiority that the Crown and its institutions have told us are the foundation of 'Australia' for too long.

First Nations peoples already have their voices. What is too often missing is an audience. Those who should listen often don't even hear.

The Voice to Parliament will provide an audience that might learn to listen and take heed of the wisdom that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices will bring to the challenges of justice, equity and sustainability for and across the southern continent. Amidst the quarrelsome noise of parliament, we might find something worth attending to – including the dissenting voices who remind us that just speaking is never sufficient to ensure action.

Yes, First Nations peoples need Voices to the Australian Parliament; but we all share in that need. As Justices Deane and Gaudron reflected in their decision in the Mabo case, “the nation as a whole must remain diminished unless and until there is an acknowledgement of, **and retreat from**, those past injustices.” (emphasis added).

The proposed Voice to Parliament is a necessary retreat from the continuing amplification of the past injustices visited upon and experienced by First Nations people across the southern continent. It is a step towards an inclusive acknowledgement that the nation that has been diminished by past failures is willing to learn to listen.

But it is only one element of the journey towards acknowledgement. The parliamentary audience certainly needs to learn to listen to the voices that the Voice will host – we all do.

We all need to learn to listen to the truth-telling that First Nations seek. It will challenge our understanding of the nation we have been, and the nation that we might become. We all need to understand that we really are diminished as a nation – and as communities, families and a society – by not acknowledging. We need to recognise that the intergenerational trauma, the loss of place, language, families,

opportunity and possibility, experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations is a trauma that we all share. It affects us all. It must be addressed by more than just the proposed Voice to Parliament. But without the Voice to Parliament, it is unclear how those of us who need to, will learn to listen. And it is unclear how the nation might move beyond symbolic actions towards substantive changes that reimagine Australia as a more inclusive, just and sustainable society.

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