

## Australia's Path to Reconciliation

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Josh Burns

Australia's history since 1788 is a complex story of light and darkness. It's a nation that welcomed millions of immigrants, including refugees, providing them with new homes and opportunities. As the grandson of a refugee from Europe, my family have been direct beneficiaries of this generosity.

However, at the heart of our story lies a grievous injustice—the forcible dispossession of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who have lived on this continent for over 60,000 years. The intergenerational trauma that still symptomises through life expectancy, incarceration rates, education performance and many other indicators highlighted by the closing the gap report.

The reckoning with this dark chapter of history has been long overdue, and now, with the proposed establishment of a First Nations Voice to Parliament, we have the opportunity to take a significant step towards reconciliation.

We have an opportunity to begin the healing.

The Constitution of Australia, crafted in the 1890s, shamefully omitted any acknowledgment of the Indigenous peoples who inhabited this land for millennia. Only two references existed, both limiting their rights and representation. It took until 1967 for these references to be removed, but nothing was put in their place.

Australia's Constitution is not just a practical document but the foundation of our nation's identity. It is disheartening that it fails to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The request from our First Nations people is simple—recognition and consultation. It is a modest yet profound request, and it would be unjust to deny it.

The proposed constitutional amendment calls for the establishment of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice, a body that can make representations to the parliament and executive government on matters concerning Indigenous people.

Two prominent objections to the Voice to Parliament have been raised. The first argues that it gives Indigenous people a unique status and more rights than other Australians. In my capacity as the Chair of the Human Rights Committee, we conducted a thorough examination of this claim, consulting with human rights experts and legal professionals. Our findings unequivocally dispel any notion that the Voice would disadvantage or discriminate against any group within our society. The committee's investigations revealed that the establishment of a Voice to Parliament would, in fact, reinforce and promote the fundamental rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples without weakening anyone else's rights in Australia.

The second objection questions the lack of detail about the Voice to Parliament. This objection appears to be a diversionary tactic, as the Constitution traditionally grants broad powers, with the specifics left to be determined by parliament. The proposed amendment makes it clear that parliament will have the authority to define the Voice's composition, functions, powers, and procedures—a standard practice in Australian constitutional law.

This referendum mirrors the 1967 referendum, marking a milestone in Australia's journey toward reconciliation.

Recognising the Voice is long overdue, and it is time to begin the healing process and work towards a more inclusive future.

The significance of this referendum goes beyond its legal and political implications; it speaks to how Australians perceive themselves and their country. Rejecting the referendum would send a disheartening message to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike, especially the youth who hold the future of our nation. Saying “no” would be a step backward, while saying “yes” would signify a commitment to reconciliation and respect for Indigenous cultures.

If Australia says “yes,” it opens doors for those who need it, while taking nothing away from anyone else.

It merely reflects a desire for justice, recognition, and inclusivity. It is a step toward acknowledging and respecting the cultures that have thrived on this land for thousands of years.

The idea of a Voice to Parliament is not new; it has been a long-standing request from Indigenous communities. It aligns with the fundamental principle of respect—recognising that the best way to shape the future for Indigenous people is to allow them a say in decisions that affect their lives.

This request for a Voice is a way of honouring those like William Cooper, who was one of the first advocates for Aboriginal Voices in the Parliament. Remarkably, William Cooper fought for justice not only for his own people but for all who faced discrimination.

Cooper’s advocacy extended to a four-year-old Jewish girl fleeing Nazi Germany, who was on her way to being a part of Australia’s story.

In 1938, Cooper famously marched from the Australian Aborigines League in Melbourne to the German High Consul to protest the treatment of Jewish people in Nazi Germany.

It was one of the only private protests against the discrimination at the hands of the Nazi regime.

That four-year-old girl was one of the people William Cooper stood up for when he wasn't even given the right to vote in Australia.

That four-year-old girl was my grandmother.

For me, recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through a Voice is a way of repaying the debt of gratitude to those who advocated for justice, equality, and inclusivity despite facing their own discrimination.

Australia stands at a crossroads, with an opportunity to right historical wrongs and pave the way for a brighter, more inclusive future.

We have an opportunity to make history.

I will be writing Yes; I hope you do as well.