

## By Dororthy Hoddinott AO

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The other day, my dentist asked me how I was going to vote in the Voice to Parliament Referendum. His question came as a surprise, not only because at the time I was lying flat on my back, but because I know that he grew up in apartheid-era South Africa. He saw as a child what happens when people are denied a voice in their own land.

I told him why I was voting Yes: that it is a way to give formal recognition in our Constitution to the Indigenous peoples of Australia for the first time in our nation's history; that it will allow their voices to be heard by our Parliament within an agreed, formal framework on matters that affect them; and, most importantly, it will give Indigenous people agency in their own destiny, again for the first time.

The Voice to Parliament is advice to the Parliament, no more, no less. What happens to that advice will be up to the Parliament, which we all elect. In the end, it is Parliament that has the final say. It can take on board advice from the Voice or not. What the Voice will do and will do so powerfully both for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is give recognition to the unique identity of Indigenous peoples as the very heart of our diverse Australian community. We cannot reconcile the mistreatment of the past until we deal with this.

I can't change the past nor am I responsible for what my forebears did or did not do but I am responsible for what I do now. The Voice is not about restitution for past wrongs. It is not about compensation for past injustice. It is about what happens now, and in the future. It is about an Australia that

is inclusive of all its peoples, and an Australia that recognises the special place that its First Nations people occupy in our polity. It is about what it means to be Australian, about having a fuller sense of what that is, including our connection to 65,000 years of continuous Indigenous culture, how we make meaning of that connection, and our taking pride in its role in our national identity. It is about bringing us together in a fairer Australia. It really is time to do this. I don't know why it hasn't happened already.

For Australians of my vintage, growing up in the 1950s, Aboriginal people were completely invisible, unless you lived in a country town, where they were fringe dwellers, in our own version of apartheid. Aborigines had few rights, they weren't citizens, they weren't counted in the census. They were segregated and protected by law, largely on reservations, where they were forbidden to use their own languages or follow customary practices, in the earnest hope that they would simply die out. When that didn't happen, the policies were changed to assimilation. The Government controlled every aspect of Aboriginal lives: where they could live, who could visit them or live with them, where they could go, where they could work and the sort of work they could do, even what they could do with their wages. Children were taken from their parents and families split in a deliberate dismantling of family and culture and language.

The consequences of those callous policies continue to the present: Aboriginal people are the most disadvantaged people in Australia today, despite gains made in health and education in the last few decades. We talk about the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, but it is more like a chasm, with poorer outcomes generally for Indigenous Australians in health, education, housing and employment. Life expectancy lags the rest of the community by more than ten years and child mortality rates are in stark contrast to those of non-Indigenous Australia. Aboriginal people are more likely to get sick, die young, drop out of school, be unemployed, and find themselves in gaol than the rest of us. They are also more likely to be poor.

The Voice won't change any of that overnight, there will still be poverty and disadvantage and despair, those things take a long time to go away, but it will make a great difference for the future. For the first time, Indigenous people will have a say in what happens to them, rather than our telling them. That means they can start to hope for the future, that things will be better for their children, that the gap will close, and close forever.

For the rest of us, it is not only about the good that the Voice will engender in bringing us closer together in a fairer and more equitable society, but whether we can start to come to terms with what has happened to Indigenous Australians over the last 235 years and find a way forward together. We can no longer turn our backs on Indigenous Australia. It is a moral issue, as it was in 1967, when over 90% of Australians voted for the inclusion of Indigenous people in the census, because that was the right thing to do.

Voting Yes is an important step in reconciling the past and moving forward for everyone. It is the right thing to do, and it is time. That is why I will be voting Yes on October 14.

***Dorothy Hoddinott AO*** is an Ambassador for the Refugee Advice & Casework Service (RACS), a former principal of Holroyd High School for 23 years and was the Australian Human Rights Medallist in 2014 for her work with disadvantaged and refugee children. She is among more than 1500 leaders supporting the #DirectorsfortheVoice campaign