By Peter O'Keeffe

The Voice would be an extraordinary achievement that would turn defeat into triumph for all Australians

In all the worthy propositions in support of the Voice, a vital, atavistic, element has been missed. The First Nations Peoples of Australia were, and remain to this day, a defeated people in their own land.

Their "country", the very ground of their physical being and spiritual beliefs for millennia, was invaded and, in defending it, their warriors were routed, their women raped or taken into domestic slavery and concubinage, their languages extirpated, their sacred sites desecrated, their children, eventually stolen from them, their inheritance denied, their culture erased.

And then, on the threshold of their most determined, most soul-searched, most inspiring, most generous, most humble offer of reconciliation in the form of a mere Voice, empowered with nothing more than a right to be, these Peoples see some of their own brightest and best use their voices against the communal, indigenous Voice.

There have been, in the history of the New World, analogues of this kind of catastrophe for native peoples, but none so grievous in its effects, so malign in its intent, and so persistent in its duration.

It is perhaps only since the writings of the great WEH Stanner in the 1960s that there has begun to awaken in Australia a deeper, more civilised consciousness of the

generational damage and grief that unrequited invasion, defeat, subjugation, and colonisation have done to the proud First Nations Peoples.

These were Peoples who, in the remotest of lands, without wheels, metal or script, themselves conquered a gargantuan continent whose hidden capacity to sustain an enriched physical and spiritual life required imagination as wide as the continent and as lofty as the heavens.

Surely this is the stuff of Greek epic tragedy. Surely only a Homer, Virgil or Euripides could do justice to the haunting travesty visited upon them in the longest of physical, social and psychological wars, and proclaim it down the ages.

When in the past 150 years have we had the insight and generosity to see the First Nations people as the subjects and the victims of an epic tragedy, in which many of our own white forebears had a hand, a whip or a shackle, and after, the gift of amnesia?

When in our history have we, a colonising people, had the grace to see the Frontier Wars as events as profound and reverberant for First Nations Peoples as the Trojan Wars were for Troy?

At what time do we move from seeing these Peoples as other than the authors of their own misfortune and our discomfort, people who we wish would fade away, or, if not, who should become, essentially, white “like us”?

The remarkable text of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, more than any other document in Australia’s history, invites us to see our First Nations Peoples as actors in a profound and dramatic tragedy as great, as sad, and as horrifying as any that the classical writers witnessed or imagined.

In sorrow and hope rather than anger and despair, its authors invite us to take the profound, overdue, and, for the

sake of our dulled conscience, morally obligatory, step of erasing the shame of their defeat; and to do it through willing acceptance of their unassuming Voice into our own founding document within earshot of our highest parliamentary counsels.

The Voice will be the first effective emollient of a defeat whose effects will never vanish until that defeat is requited in an act of generosity as large and trusting as the offer embodied in the Uluru Statement.

There is in the modern world, only one example of an unrequited defeat as deep and profound as that of Australia's First Peoples.

Over 100 years ago, the Treaty of Versailles failed to recognise the profound psychological concatenations of national defeat on the German people, and instead of the hand of forgiveness and support offered further punishment, further impoverishment. Within the time a child would became an adult, this inanity found its outlet in a revenge of the most destructive war in human history.

That such a miscalculation was possible is hard to credit when the victorious leaders of the day had the example of the positive, albeit limited, effects of Reconstruction in the USA after the Confederate defeat in the Civil War.

At the end of the Second World War, the mistake was not repeated, defeated enemies were supported and restored to the beginnings, and then the flowering, of national dignity and thence to unbreakable alliances between the most bitter of enemies.

And yet, 235 years after the start of the long war, Australia has been incapable of enacting a formal recognition and proclamation that the defeat of our First Nations Peoples is erased and their Voice will at last reverberate from the

sounding board of the Constitution into the Chambers of the Parliament.

For Australia to deny our First Nations Peoples this pearl-sized new deal, this small but bright gem of a new start, is to deny ourselves as Australians the beginning of a new era of Enlightenment.

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