

Saying 'Yes' to the Voice will herald a better future for us all

Patty Fawkner SGS, March 2023

Tanya Plibersek, my local federal member, recently invited her constituents to a Community Forum to discuss the Voice to Parliament. I was keen to attend as I needed to get a better understanding of the issues regarding the Voice and I wanted to listen to First Nations people directly, rather than to mediated voices.

I looked forward to hearing from Linda Burney, Minister for Indigenous Australians, and Professor Tom Calma, Chancellor of the University of Canberra and this year's Senior Australian of the Year. I was not disappointed.

I am aware that the logistics of how the Voice to Parliament will work is still to be developed, but I came away from the Community Forum with four key convictions, or understandings, which will inform how I vote in this year's Referendum.

Linda and Tom reminded me that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is the world's oldest living culture.

My first conviction is of the utter uniqueness and preciousness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander civilisation, lore, spirituality, and connection to country.

I came away from the Forum with a deeper appreciation of the gift of Indigenous culture to Australia rather than the deficit narrative we are constantly fed.

To have walked this land continuously for 65,000 years is testament to an inherent resilience, adaptability and wisdom – 65,000 years! All Australians should be immensely proud of this gob-smacking, amazing history.

There is a plethora of learning and wisdom to imbibe from Indigenous culture for those of us who have arrived within a mere 235 years. If my Maths is correct, in a comparable 24-hour day, non-Indigenous Australians began arriving 5.2 seconds before midnight.

Because my ancestors settled here along with all non-Indigenous Australians within the relative recent past, this 65 millennia story is now the story of all of us who call Australia home. Linda Burney said: "This is not just First Nations peoples' story; it is our story." This is my second conviction.

Because Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizens share this story, the outcome of the Referendum to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Constitution through an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice will be significant for all Australians.

The Referendum is about us – all of us.

This puts paid to the utterly skewed history once sung in our *National Anthem* proclaiming we were "young" and free. Thankfully, we now sing of our desire to be one and free.

However, the tragedy is that in the space of a few hundred years, the freedom, agency and flourishing of the first inhabitants of our continent have been diminished, devastatingly so. Proud possession has become tragic dispossession and our First Nations people, rather than being free, are now the most incarcerated people on the planet.

My third takeaway conviction is the indisputable democratic principle and tenet of good governance: that those affected by a decision should be part in making the decision.

The Voice will ensure that Indigenous people are formally consulted about laws, policies and programs being developed *about* them in Parliament.

Importantly, it will ensure that government can no longer abolish a national Indigenous representative Voice, which occurred too often in the past.

“We seek constitutional power over our destiny,” Linda explained. Tom reminded us that yes, in the Referendum of 1967 Indigenous people were counted in reckoning the population, and “now we wish to be heard”. “We cannot be voiceless in our own land,” he said. “Policies were made for us, but not with us.” True representation and self-determination, rather than tokenism, is the goal.

Tom noted that governments, in the face of recent natural disasters such as bushfires, drought and floods, have demonstrated the necessity of consulting locals about how to move forward, about how and where to rebuild. Shouldn’t this also be the case for Indigenous Australians, he asked.

There are those within and beyond the Indigenous community who dismiss the Voice because they see it as merely symbolic and having no practical outcomes. Linda said that this was a misrepresentation. The Voice will be crucial in enabling First Nations people to tell governments what would make a difference in their lives in regard to health and well-being, education and housing, clean water, criminal justice and incarceration.

Indigenous people want a seat at the table; they want to make a difference in their own lives, and ardently desire to close the gap.

No one at the Forum said that the Voice to Parliament would be a magic bullet. There will still be much to do in regard to treaty-making and truth-telling. Linda Burney said that as a country we needed to be mature enough to talk truthfully about the past, so much of which is ugly and dark.

Truth-telling is essential. We cannot fall into the racist trap of dismissing authenticated stories of the past as a ‘black armband’ view of history, that pejorative label cynically employed by former prime minister John Howard.

Treaty-making and truth-telling is essential but, Linda insisted, the Voice will be a necessary start. Both she and Tom reminded the nearly 250 Community Forum participants that the Referendum can be boiled down to two fundamental issues: recognition and consultation.

My fourth and final conviction is that we cannot, we must not, let this opportunity pass. “History is calling us to say yes to a better future for all of us,” Linda said. I was moved by her

belief that saying yes to the Voice will help us to become a country that can walk taller. “We will be a different country the morning after the Referendum,” she said. If we say yes, all of us, all Australians, will be irrevocably changed. She invited all attending the Community Forum to be part of the generation that makes “us” a reality.

For me, the generosity of spirit of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, and the gracious Welcome to Country with which we so often engage, is testament to the desire of Australia’s First Nations people to be an “us” with all Australians. A vote for Yes in the Referendum will be an opportunity for all Australians to reciprocate.

During this Community Forum it occurred to me that I cannot but vote Yes. I was reminded that Indigenous civilisation is a gift to Australia, that all Australians are now inextricably part of this millennia-long story, that those impacted by decisions should have a say in those decisions, that the Voice is asking us to say yes to a better future for all of us, and that the time is now.