

A Matter of Balance

By Tim Clarke and Stuart McKerihan

Despite being just a few days away from summer, the mercury was yet to hit double digits. Welcome to a Canberran late-spring morning. At Parliament House, a pack of journalists were gathered, waiting for the Coalition to formally announce its position on the Voice to Parliament. It was a formality more than anything. A cursory glance at the leaders of the Liberal party over the last 25 years could have given you a pretty good idea as to what was coming next: John Howard had cut funding to ATSIC and refused to acknowledge the genocide or apologise to the Stolen Generation; Tony Abbott had supported the forced closure of remote communities, describing them as a ‘lifestyle choice’; The current leader of the opposition, Peter Dutton, had walked out during the Apology in 2008 and attributed the Coalition’s recent election loss to not being right wing enough. You hardly needed a Magic 8-Ball to see where this was going.

But this time, it was slightly different. Not in the attitude or the content, but in the delivery. No longer was it an ageing white male in the vein of Howard, Dutton or Abbott. Instead, it was a young Indigenous woman.

Introducing Jacinta Nampijinpa Price.

She would go on to describe the Voice as emotional blackmail, lacking any detail. “Why,” she asked, “should I as an Indigenous Australian be governed under a separate entity than the rest of Australia because of my race?” The use of first-person voice from a first nation person landed. Her comments were as compelling as they were incorrect.

Count one: referendums are always generalised rather than specific. It allows the government to shape it to the specifics of the zeitgeist. If you make the wording too specific then you're married to something that might not work in a couple of decades time. This isn't ground-breaking stuff, though the 'No' campaign presents it as a smoking gun. Ongoing demands for details are designed to scare people into voting no when referendums are simply trying to establish public support for the basic principle of the idea.

Count two: The proposed legislation wouldn't govern anyone as a separate entity as Price claimed. It would simply enshrine an Indigenous voice being present in parliamentary discussions. It hopes to eradicate the tone-deaf eurocentrism that has characterised the last 230 years of this land. It seeks to make us a more unified people, honouring and respecting a culture that is five hundred times older than the imagined community of 'Australia' itself, thirteen times older than the pyramids of Giza. In many ways, writing in support of the voice is a difficult task because it seems so self-evidently beneficial. For a few weeks, the first draft of this essay simply read: "It's good. Vote 'yes'."

But on that chilly Canberran morning, Jacinta Price problematised the simple.

Whether or not you agree with her reasoning, allies of Indigenous people who were pro-Voice instantly felt a certain disquiet at an Indigenous person campaigning for the 'No' vote. All of a sudden, it felt like white people were telling Indigenous people what was good for them. As a people group, we've got form for this. Was this not the same paternalistic reasoning that had justified the Stolen Generation almost 150 years ago? *We know what's good for you, even if you can't see it.* And isn't that the kind of systemic injustice that the Voice was trying to work against?

Over the next few months, Price and a few other Indigenous men and women appeared everywhere, consistently sticking to their talking point about the Voice being "symbolic" with no real impact and part of a "virtue signalling agenda". It provided wind in the sails of the No voters in our lives, who could now effortlessly pivot from a general disinterest in Indigenous affairs into becoming fearless defenders of Indigenous autonomy: *Mate, heaps of Indigenous people don't even want it.*

There's only one problem with this kind of statement: It isn't true.

Price *et al* had become the other side to the public discourse surrounding the Voice debate. In presenting two positions on a topic, there is a subtle insinuation that there is balance between these two sides, that they are equal in their legitimacy. This is the result of media producers who go looking for another side to the story. If you're feeling benevolent, you might attribute this to the fourth estate ideals of enriching the public discourse with different points of view. A less optimistic perspective might see it as an opportunistic way to sensationalise an issue by introducing some conflict. A more cynical response might be that certain media outlets are ideologically driven to persuade its viewers to adopt a certain position. Whatever the reason, you end up with one *Yes* advocate and one *No* advocate. Fifty/fifty. Split down the middle.

Researchers from Northwestern University in the United States call this 'False Balance' or 'Bothsideism, where journalists strive to present two sides of an issue even if the majority of people or the most credible sources fall on one side. This has been a perennial issue in the coverage of climate change. In a world where 97% of scientists agree that a warming climate is human induced, we still fall back on media coverage with one proponent and one denier. Fifty/fifty. Split down the middle. *Mate, the science is still out on climate change!*

So, how does this relate to the Voice debate? Some of the most recent polling carried out by IPSOS, Reconciliation Australia and CT Group found that around 80 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples support a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament. Anything winning a vote with 80 percent support would be beyond a landslide victory. If it were an election, it would almost be enough to make you question the validity of the result (and unlike recent questioning of election results, you'd probably have a fair point).

But 80% support from Indigenous people probably isn't the picture you get if you were a casual consumer of media in this country. And let's call a spade a spade, if you consume Murdoch media, it definitely isn't how it was presented to you.

More broadly, support for the 'Yes' vote was as high as 63% in August of 2022. But analysis of news coverage shows that the 'No' camp received 54.2% of coverage in print, radio and television news. What happens next? Support slides, and less than a year later the 'Yes' vote is in the minority. And Jacinta Price was a mainstay in many of these articles, as a leading voice of the 'No' camp.

Here is where things get even trickier. On that cold morning in Canberra late last year, she had been a senator barely six months. Yet, there she was, fronting the Coalition's response to an upcoming referendum. To reach this level of public exposure this early, she needed to have a very specific stance on Indigenous issues: Basically, a carbon copy of the likes of Abbott, Dutton and Howard, but with the added cred that she is Indigenous. It makes her like catnip to conservatives who feel entirely legitimised because of her presence. In short, she becomes the token.

To be clear, that term has come to be used in the pejorative sense to marginalise and belittle the minority within a majority, as though they don't matter. That is not what we mean here. Instead, we are using the word in its original usage, borrowing from the work of Professor Rosabeth Kanter from the Harvard Business School. In the 1970s, she was consulting for a company that had recently integrated women into its workforce. The offices were generally made up of eight men and one woman. Unsurprisingly, they weren't doing too well, and the company speculated that they had hired too many women; The quality of candidate had been diluted. Kanter, on the other hand, concluded that the problem was that they hadn't hired *enough* women. In a male dominated room, these women were acutely aware that in order to succeed, they had to perform a certain type of femininity. In her study "Some Effects of Proportions on Group Life: Skewed Sex Ratios and Responses to Token Women ", Kanter explains that for the token woman in a 1970s workplace, the price of admission was that they had to lean into the misogyny and turn against their own gender. You can almost imagine the phrase '*She's one of the boys*' being bandied about over Friday afternoon beers. That she should need to be 'one of the boys' before being accepted

is a tragic concept, and one that has not changed as much as we would like to think. But we digress.

Let's apply this back to Jacinta Price. For an ambitious young woman, what is the price of admission to a conservative political structure? Simple. She must lean into the racism and white privilege, leveraging her unique position at the expense of her people. In doing so, she legitimises the Coalition's position like few others could. We are aware that this is potentially a spicy take, but rest assured that it isn't *our* spicy take. Ninety leaders from the Central Land Council, who represent dozens of communities in central Australia have publicly rejected Price's views on the referendum. They went as far as to say that Senator Price, "needs to stop pretending we are her people."

Price's prominence in the campaign is part of a bigger picture of the Liberal party muddying the waters, and the media allowing it to flow untreated straight into our homes. Is the media acting as the fourth estate if Peter Dutton is allowed to (unchallenged) refer to the voice as a "Canberra voice", implying that this is something dreamed up by those pesky latte sipping avocado gobbling elites of the inner city, and *not* a product from the Uluru Statement of the Heart? A loud voice is jarring. But a loud voice that is repeated over and over starts to become authoritative, simply by virtue of no one having called it out as false and boorish. "If you tell a lie big enough and you keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it"; few saw the fruit of this better than the man who coined the phrase, Hitler's chief propagandist, Joseph Goebbels. And while we are on the topic of totalitarianism, when Susan Ley describes the moment she supported the 'No' vote as a "day of yesses", it does make us want to celebrate that the chocolate rations have gone up, or that two plus two does in fact equal five.

Tired literary references aside, this much ambiguity and uncertainty introduced by false balance and 'bothsideism' casts just enough doubt for the average undecided voter. Sure, they *want* to do the right thing, but not at the expense of order and stability. The status quo seems ok for this kind of person, and so maybe we should just keep things as they are. Unlike the same sex marriage plebiscite, where most people knew someone gay, and the issue

had a human face, many of these voters don't have a meaningful relationship with a First Nations person, given that they make up barely 3% of the population. Regrettably, the issue remains theoretical and impersonal.

Given that the 'Yes' vote needs a majority of voters in a majority of states, the success lives or dies on the way these people fall. While the 'Yes' campaign has split its resources equally across all states, the 'No' camp has more cynically distributed funds unequally, targeting the swing states of Queensland and South Australia. New South Wales and Victoria have received a quarter of the funding of these other states despite having two and a half times the population. But at the end of the day, a state only accounts for one vote each. Are they really seeking to get a fair result of what Australia actually thinks? Or do they just want *their* result, by hook or by crook? It's reminiscent of the gerrymandering of US politics that can see a president elected despite losing the popular vote. Linda Burney, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs certainly sees the similarity. "At its heart is a post-truth approach to politics," she told a Committee for Economic Development of Australia event in Canberra. "Its aim is to polarise people. And its weapon of choice is misinformation."

At this point, you might feel as though we haven't addressed why the Voice is important and why it benefits Australia. Trust us, we are heading there. But whatever benefits it offers to us, all are null and void if it fails to pass into legislation. And that risk is genuine if the disingenuous tactics of the Coalition and the false equivocations of media coverage are not overtly addressed.

But now that we've weeded the garden, let us start planting the seeds towards something more productive.

One of Australia's most under-recognised poets is a Noongar man named Jack Davis. In his poem *Integration*, he writes that '*The door between us is not locked / just ajar*'. To lean into his metaphor, the Voice becomes a way for us to pry that door open even further. Of course, it doesn't open the door entirely, welding the hinges fully extended. But it makes some headway. One

of the criticisms of the voice is that it is purely a symbolic gesture. But this misses the deeply evocative power of the symbol on the human psyche. Consider the symbolic power of Simpson and his donkey to depict the ANZAC spirit of compassion and mateship. Consider the symbolic power of Martin Luther King declaring 'I have a dream', overlooking the Lincoln Memorial, the culmination of a long march for civil rights. Consider the power of Gough pouring dust into the waiting hand of Vincent Lingari to demonstrate Indigenous ownership of the land. Yes, there is something symbolic in having an Indigenous voice to Parliament. But far from rendering it toothless, it bestows longevity, power, the capacity to stir hearts and minds. All of the best moments in history are loaded with symbolic power. The Voice is a powerful symbol of national inclusion, a perfect starting point in the journey towards true reconciliation. It will go down in history as a moment when Australia was able to stand up and be counted. Nothing will change overnight, but symbolically, we will have made our voices clear in what and who matters to us. Some of the criticism is that it is *only* symbolic, and that the Voice doesn't go far enough. But in objecting on these grounds, we are letting perfect become the enemy of good. Let's consider some of the ways that the Voice is a common good for Australia.

It is categorically beneficial to give marginalised people groups autonomy and a seat at the table of power. The Voice may not be a magic bullet to redress every act of racial prejudice since 1788. In that vein, it is worth asking what could be sufficient recompense for genocide and dispossession of land? If the answer that springs to mind is "nothing" that doesn't mean that you should do nothing. Instead, you do what you can, and the Voice will give Indigenous people a chance to have their say on issues that pertain to them.

In 2018, we were travelling through Italy with a group of mates and we met an Indigenous woman called Naomi at a bus stop near Positano. We chatted for an hour or so as we waited (Italian buses come when they like) and she explained the beauty of Indigenous autonomy. "When you let us deal with ourselves in our way, our lore, our customs," she explained, "it just works. We can sort ourselves out." Anecdotally, she was rich with

examples of how this approach has reduced criminal offence for Indigenous youths, and lifted school attendance. We were momentarily surprised by this, until we remembered that our primary school years took place during Howard's culture wars, where colonisation was presented thusly: *What ho, old boy! Here's some sugar. Thanks for the land.* But Naomi's personal experiences are also broadly supported quantitatively: During the pandemic, there were six times fewer cases of COVID-19 in Indigenous communities compared to non-Indigenous communities. Why? Well, the public health of these communities was specifically managed by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO). Or, consider the success that Aboriginal doulas have had in improving outcomes for Indigenous mothers and babies, approaching birth in a way that is consistent with their culture and customs. It's almost as if Naomi was right: Indigenous people know and understand their own culture well enough to enrich their own lives. Scale that up to a Voice to Parliament, and who knows where this ends up in the decades to come. Rather than closing the gap via the white saviour trope, give Indigenous people agency and they will close it themselves. They are the longest surviving culture in the world, and this kind of longevity isn't the result of helplessness or passivity. It is won through strength, determination and a fierce resilience which White Australia has done its best to quench. Ultimately, a Yes vote is the starting point at giving Indigenous people the agency that they lost at the hands of our forefathers.

But this is only half the story. Yes, the Voice is the altruistic option, but it actually benefits every single Australian, irrespective of culture, colour or creed. This aspect has been wildly undersold, perhaps on the misplaced belief that altruism alone would win the day. However, at time of writing, support for the voice has dipped below 50% nationally for the first time. If support among First Nation peoples is sitting at 80%, it doesn't take long to realise that the true value of the Voice hasn't been sold to middle Australia. This is where you come in.

Consider this: The Voice provides us as a nation with a chance to begin reckoning with the darkness of our history. A country that grapples with its past has the opportunity to heal and

move beyond it. Take Germany, for example: Within the lifetime of our grandparents, the Nazi party committed one of the largest scale genocides in human history. In being forced to grapple with the darkness of the twentieth century, Germany has rewritten their national narrative, accepting 25% of all asylum seekers applying to the European Union. That is as much as the second and third countries combined. Obviously, we are not intending to minimise the holocaust or suggest that it is possible to 'make up for it' after the fact. But a new generation of Germans are determined to whatever they can to be known for something better. That opportunity is in front of us now. And all it takes is ticking a box. The alternative is to ignore our shared past and repeat our failures into the future. Australia's engagement with the people indigenous to the land is among the worst in the world, and thus far, we have done very little about it. We've apologised for some of the atrocities and left most others unacknowledged. Practically speaking, we haven't offered anything productive or forward thinking. A 'Yes' vote is a way of demonstrating that we want to move forward in partnership with our Indigenous brothers and sisters. But it is only the first step. Every single time the Voice can pivot policy in such a way that benefits Indigenous people, that gap gets reduced ever so slightly. In the decades to come, we might see a closer integration of Indigenous culture with mainstream Australian culture which can only be a good thing. Maybe our kids or grandkids will grow up with words native to this land native in their mouths. We can only hope. Noel Pearson captures this concept beautifully when he speaks of the rich tapestry of Australia's intermingled narratives: "The ancient Indigenous heritage which is its foundation, the British institutions built upon it, and the adorning gift of multicultural migration."

Perhaps that is still too idealistic. There is a lowest common denominator: finance. A Voice to Parliament would make initiatives aiming to close the gap significantly more effective than they otherwise might be with a white man calling the shots. Let us never forget that Tony Abbott was named special envoy to Indigenous people in 2018. It hardly inspires confidence that the government had a finger on the Indigenous pulse if they thought "Uncle Tony" was going to be a roaring success just three years after he closed down traditional communities in the Northern

Territory. It makes you worry just how that money was being spent! Imagine now that these decisions are made with close consultation with a group of Indigenous elders, each of whom has decades of experience in the customs and lore of their people. Their culturally sensitive ideas will be much more likely to set up initiatives that actually work: Lift life expectancy, high school graduation and literacy rates; Lower infant mortality, incarceration rates and substance abuse. In short, a Voice to Parliament gives you more bang for your buck, and if there's one thing middle Australia loves, it is a government that isn't wasting away their tax dollars. In the end, this referendum benefits every single Australian, regardless of whether you've been here for days, decades or since the dreaming.

But make no mistake, a 'No' vote isn't a net neutral result. It won't maintain the status quo because either way, this referendum sends a message about who we are and what we value. 'No' sends a statement that, though we don't want to admit it, many Australians are nostalgic for the days of colonisation when the white man was infallible and the black man was inhuman; for the days when there was a pub for blacks and a pub for whites, and never the twain shall meet; for the days when Indigenous children were snatched from the breasts of their mothers, given white names, white words and white flags. It shows that NAIDOC week, Indigenous sporting rounds and acknowledgment of country are all things we smile through, but actually don't care for. It shows our hypocrisy.

The Voice actually seems like an incredibly modest proposal with all of this in mind. But if we reject even this, then - borrowing Jack Davis' metaphor - the door may no longer be considered ajar. It will have been slammed shut and we will have locked ourselves into a small room of our pettiness and stunted national character. We don't come back from that overnight. The republic referendum was 24 years ago, and there has been little momentum in that time to reignite the debate. It may well be a decade or two before there is movement at the station once more. As two men approaching forty, it is a frightening concept to us that we might not live to see Australia get a second chance at redemption. Noel Pearson captured the gravity of the situation; "a whole

generation of Indigenous leadership will have failed because we will have advocated coming together in partnership with government and we would have made an invitation to the Australian people that was repudiated.” There is a permanence to this. For better or for worse.

Let us end with the words of Jack Davis, whose words from thirty years ago paint an image of what Australia might look like if we do manage to find the best of ourselves in the coming months:

The past is done.

Let us stand together,

Wide and tall

And God will smile upon us each

And all

And everyone.