

By Peter Doherty AC

A First Nations Voice to Parliament to breach the silos and strengthen Australia

The silos that bulk large in our view as we drive through country towns and rural landscapes are rigid structures made of concrete, steel or a combination of both. Their purpose is to store and protect products (eg grains, coal, carbon black, woodchips) that are degraded by weather and can even be dangerous when wet. And, apart from that strictly utilitarian function, the blank expanse of, especially, concrete silos is increasingly being used as a 'canvas' <https://www.visitvictoria.com/see-and-do/road-trips-and-itineraries/silo-art-trail-touring-route> for spectacular 'public art' that delights, even amuses, and hopefully, causes us to stop the car and take a coffee break in a country town that can use the revenue. Such silos can help us to discover a new (to us) and interesting place as they illustrate a different vision, an unfamiliar story.

Anyone who has ever worked in a large organization like a university, a globalized corporation or the public service will be all too familiar with different types of silos as hierarchical, top-down management structures (often called departments) that facilitate management and funding strategies for delivering specific outcomes and services. My personal journey has led to some familiarity with the siloed nature of university research and education with instruction in, for example, a particular discipline being the role of a defined academic department.

This reflects that, though all science works under the same ‘rules’ of hypothesis, measurement and peer reviewed publication, this infinitely complex culture is inevitably ‘siloed’ into different discipline areas that can, at times, find it difficult to communicate in the pursuit of common goals. But collaboration across a very broad front is increasingly where science is heading as we strive to solve big problems, like limiting the progression of climate change or a global pandemic.

Many universities are doing everything they can to break down these intellectual silos. ‘Complementary’ groups are often located in distant buildings, so one approach can be to bring people together in a new, physical Institute. That worked brilliantly for our new (in 2014) Institute of Infection and Immunity, which played a major part locally, nationally and globally in the COVID pandemic. Another approach is to create ‘Virtual Institutes’ that operate across a campus, or between different universities and other centres of research influence.

Basically, changing the world for the better is a lot to do with breaking down rigid silos and siloed thinking. Central to that is the necessity to improve communication. Additional to bringing diverse specialists into contact physically or virtually, when it comes to making change in the broader public that new, cross-disciplinary ‘silo of specialty’ also has to be opened-out using language and communication mechanisms that potentially speak to everyone. As anyone who has attempted public science communication understands, that isn’t easy.

And there’s so much ‘noise’ out there, so how do we ensure that any important message is heard? To begin with, the wording has to be simple, easily understood and clearly formulated. Beyond that, to be heard in our present society, it has to impact and operate at the ‘celebrity level’. When it comes to Australia’s governance, the ‘celebrity group’ is the Prime Minister and Cabinet of our Parliament in Canberra

That's how I see the value of the Uluru Statement from the Heart <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/view-the-statement/> that advances the idea of a single Voice to our National Executive and, at the same time, to the people of Australia. This 'bottom-up' Voice that seeks to find optimal solutions for issues affecting First Nations people can, I believe, be a jackhammer to break down (or at least open out) the Federal, State and Local Silos that, in my humble opinion, bedevil this area of public policy and practice.

Sure, the wording of a particular statement from 'The Voice' may not be agreed by every indigenous person. But achieving 100% consensus is impossible in any discussion or broad area of policy. The Voice will, I believe, trigger a national conversation that also allows those minority voices from indigenous people, and from any other individual or group across Australia, to speak independently, to be part of the discussion and to be heard by the powerful.

When it comes to formulating major policies that will be robust and deliver in the long-term, talking works, discussion works and throwing diverse ideas around works. What is useless is hanging out in fixed camps and throwing rocks at each other, and that's even more counter-productive if it's crystallized around perceptions of political gain.

If we want to move forward, we need broadly agreed policies and strategies. The Voice can, I believe, help us do that by ensuring that the substantial amounts of tax dollars committed to this area are used to optimal effect. In addition, as many of the problems suffered in indigenous communities are also common to other elements of our society, they can also be of broader relevance and have an overall positive effect when it comes to developing effective solutions for all Australians.

I'm just a research scientist who has no broad credentials in policy or governance, though I have lived for more than two

decades in the USA, which has followed a somewhat different emphasis in much of its social policy. Mostly, I think, we do somewhat better and act more fairly in this area, though that's not invariably true and, in any case, we can all learn from the experience in other countries. There are some pretty bad examples out there, and they are getting worse and ever more authoritarian. Who wants to live in a society where there is a massive, and increasing division between the rich and the poor?

Aiming for fairness, social harmony and inclusiveness seems a much better goal. And we are not being asked to approve anything radical. It's just a Voice. The Uluru proposal is, for example, much less intrusive on the political front than similar policies that have been implemented elsewhere.

Hearing, then discussing, a well thought out Voice from Australia's First Nations People can, I believe, only improve this country that we all love and value. Good communication is everything in our contemporary world. Discussion beats confrontation anytime. The Voice clearly has the potential to influence policy and practice in ways that improve economic and social outcomes for First Nations People, and for many other Australians.

No doubt we'll still have some silos, perhaps brilliant next-generation silos, or old silos that have been reworked and are now better decorated. Hopefully, they'll all be on public view and present stories that are positive and life-enhancing.