

Yes or No? A Personal Statement

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This referendum is best seen in the long context of Australian history. It is one small but essential step in the journey to being 'one people' in this land. Reconciliation between first and second peoples in Australia is required because of the unhealed wound of colonial settlement and the dispossession of Aboriginal nations from their land. This dispossession was, until recently, undergirded by the doctrine of 'terra nullius', the idea that the land belonged to no-one (so that any kind of treaty or negotiation was not required). We no longer accept the doctrine of 'terra nullius' in Australian law, so we are now in search of fresh arrangements that deal with the injustices of the past which have continuing impact today.

We took an important step in 2015, when Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull (with the bipartisan support of Opposition Leader Bill Shorten) appointed a sixteen member referendum council to advise the government on a pathway to constitutional recognition of First Nations peoples. What followed is probably the most significant process of consultation involving Aboriginal people in Australian history. The 'Statement from the Heart', formulated at the Uluru National Constitutional Convention in May, 2017, provides the requested advice. This advice was by consensus of those there (noting that there were some who walked out of this gathering), representing indigenous communities and people from all over Australia. The advice is, interestingly, not provided primarily to government, but is directed quite deliberately to the Australian people. The process envisaged is one of voice, truth telling and treaty. The advice seems to me to be clear and plausible; indeed, it seems overwhelmingly generous, but also achievable.

I will be voting 'Yes' to affirm my support for this process and for the view that 'terra nullius' is - and always was - a monstrous lie. Aboriginal peoples have been settled here for well over 60,000 years. What happens about the details of the Voice to Parliament will always be a matter for the Parliament and should not be seen as the main game in relation to the referendum questions. We are not enshrining any particular form of the Voice in voting 'Yes'. We are affirming that the voices of First Nations people have a special status in our society because (somewhat analogous

to the voices of scientists) they have long knowledge and culturally consolidated experience about living in this land.

For members of the Uniting Church in Australia, we should know that our church lives in a covenantal relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and that Congress has encouraged us to vote 'Yes' in the referendum on the 'Voice to Parliament'. In 2009, the Uniting Church in Australia acknowledged the long history of First Nations people in this land and enshrined this recognition in our own Uniting Church constitution. Our Assembly has affirmed support for the 'Yes' campaign.

Christian faith is that God in Christ has called us into a unity of love with each other and with, ultimately, all people. So the extremely generous offer to walk together as one people in this land through voice, truth and treaty that is contained in the 'Statement from the Heart' seems to me like a simple gospel imperative. The unhealed wound of the disruption of aboriginal life and culture across Australia continues to fester. This is the time when we need to take this important step as a nation and commit ourselves to truth telling and eventually treaty.¹

In the 'Statement from the Heart', we Second Peoples in Australia have a most generous and open invitation to a process that promises to lay to rest the unquiet ghosts in our land. Voting 'Yes' in the referendum is only the next step in the envisioned process, but it is a genuine next step.

¹ As an international comparison, I learned of a similar situation of internal conquest in the history of the Korean nation. Apparently, fifteen hundred years ago, the southern part of the Korean peninsula was divided into two kingdoms, that of Paekje in the west and Shilla in the east. Shilla conquered Paekje and the consequent dominance of the eastern people over the western people has a continuing influence. This was a part of the explanation that I was given for the violent government suppression of the Kwangju demonstrations in 1980 (killing hundreds of people), where Kwangju is on the western side of the Korean peninsula. The idea that old, large scale injustices can safely be ignored is an illusion.