

Indigenous call deserves response from the heart

JOHN WYLIE

By **JOHN WYLIE**

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Last month, 22 leaders in the finance sector issued a joint call for Australians to embrace the call in the Uluru Statement from the Heart for indigenous recognition in the Constitution through a Voice to Parliament.

None of the signatories is what would be considered a political activist or virtue signaller.

We're all profoundly interested in the economic growth and development of our country. It's in our self-interest, given our choice of careers, and we're a pretty economically rational bunch. We also want our kids to grow up in a country that offers even better opportunity than we've had, that's growing and successful economically. No one wants a Constitution that's a roadblock to a strong economy or that allows the overall interests of the nation to be hostage to vested-interest groups.

We made this call because we believe that while economic prosperity is fundamental, it cannot alone provide the narrative for a nation.

And we believe there is no conflict between our need for a strong economy and our desire for a confident and big-hearted country that has the ability to reach a generous and respectful accommodation with indigenous Australians.

We believe that accepting the call in the Uluru Statement for constitutional recognition will be a foundation stone of a modern Australia that's a spiritually generous country truly at peace with itself and its history.

We have confidence and faith that while much detail remains to be negotiated, the leaders who will guide this process for indigenous Australia have the wisdom and judgment to arrive at a balanced and reasonable conclusion — without our asking for every “t” to be crossed or “i” to be dotted before we express support.

This would be a conclusion reflecting what indigenous leaders do every day — walking in two worlds, proud members of indigenous communities and proud Australians too.

It's an expression of trust in, and respect for, indigenous Australia. In this way we would honour our indigenous brothers and sisters and their forebears, and acknowledge their incredible history of more than 60,000 years of continuous inhabitation of this country and their indelible connection to this land.

Recognition in the Constitution through an advisory Voice to Parliament would be unique in the world, but so is their story, their culture, their history and their connection to the land.

And we would show trust that the power sought with the voice will be used wisely for the long-term benefit of indigenous people, trust that due weight will be given at the same time to the interests of all Australians.

And this trust has already been merited by the leadership shown by the indigenous community in coming up with the Uluru Statement — a masterful effort to unite around a single succinct proposition on a major issue of principle, from a highly disparate range of initial views, a task that on occasion proves too hard for our political parties.

Those who fear this evolution of our Constitution would be wise not to underestimate modern indigenous Australia.

Underneath the radar, a golden generation of young indigenous leaders is emerging in our country.

Highly educated, accomplished and public-spirited indigenous leaders of the future abound around us.

One example is the 40 indigenous men and women under the age of 30 who've won entry to the world's finest universities in the past decade — Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Berkeley, Columbia and others. Winning entry into these famous institutions is the hardest and most competitive student academic achievement in the world today, and these kids have done it purely on their own academic merit, with no positive discrimination involved, only financial support from the Charlie Perkins and Roberta Sykes scholarships run by the Aurora Education Foundation after winning entry to these universities.

That's 40 Noel Pearsons and Megan Davises in the making. Young Australians of this calibre will have much to contribute to our national public life in the future, for the good of all.

This is not to gloss over the many and deep challenges that exist in tackling entrenched indigenous disadvantage in our country, and the need for practical solutions to practical problems in addition to addressing these structural and symbolic issues.

But it does say there are solid grounds for hope.

Common sense also says that the daunting prospect of winning a referendum vote, the first since 1977 if it comes to pass, will drive people towards the centre when negotiating the detail of the voice. Overreach of the kind feared by opponents of change is unlikely because this would almost certainly condemn a referendum proposal to failure.

The opening ceremony for last year's Gold Coast Commonwealth Games gave prime billing to the story of indigenous Australia. The giant Migaloo whale that concluded the ceremony was designed by local Quandamooka artist Delvene Cockatoo-Collins, as was all the artwork for the Games medals now sitting in living rooms across the world.

The ceremony was beautiful and moving, but it's hard to avoid the question: if the story of indigenous Australians is how we like to present ourselves to the world when we're putting on a show, how can we with decency refuse them the place they seek respectfully in our country's governance framework?

Any public function in Australia these days begins with an acknowledgment that it's happening on the lands of traditional owners and pays respects to their leaders past, present and emerging.

Let's show these are more than mere tokenistic, formulaic words. Let's show indigenous Australians we mean it and give them recognition in the form they seek in the Constitution.

Investment banker and philanthropist John Wylie is chairman of Sport Australia, among other roles.