

SAYING YES TO THE VOICE

LARA WATSON

Lara Watson argues the case for the importance of a Yes vote in the Voice to Parliament referendum. . .

After more than 65,000 years of continuous culture, it's time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are recognised in our 122-year-old Constitution. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people want recognition in a practical form by having a say on issues and policies that impact their lives.

It's not complicated or confusing, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are asking Australians to say 'YES' if they agree that we should be able to give feedback to the Federal Government when they are making laws and policies for us.

When the Constitution was being drafted, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were still being murdered, along with other atrocities and the view was we would die out with so few of us left. So, there was no thought or reason to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the document that sets out the rules for Australia.

I know many people are anxious and don't want to silence any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' voices, but it's curious that some people feel that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must have a 100% consensus to move forward and create a better Australia for all. We are just as diverse as any other group, we need opposition in our ranks, so we can have the robust conversations that deliver best practice and outcomes for our people.

Yes23 shared with us their polling which shows that 83% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people support being recognised in the Constitution (in the practical form of a Voice to Parliament). Further to this, there are numerous surveys and polls online that put this support at between 80% to 87%.

It is important to listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, when they talk about Sovereignty and Treaty before Voice, to understand their position isn't against Constitutional recognition, but a continued

fight against broken promises, oppression, systemic racism, exclusion and entrenched poverty. We all fight to better the lives and create opportunities for our families and our communities, we just choose a different path to get there.

Not only have government, but laws also and policies made for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples failed for centuries, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been blamed for this failure. This has contributed to stereotyping and misconceptions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

When I went to school, I learned about Captain Cook, the First Fleet and how the British 'civilised' the savage Natives. I was told not to identify as Aboriginal because I could get away with being white and I was asked why I was hanging around with 'those' people referring to my friends who were darker than me. I became disengaged from school; school became more of a social experience instead of a learning one. Educational disengagement is still relevant to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Indeed, many remote communities do not have high schools, so at 12 years old many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are put on a plane and sent away for school, away from everything they know, their family, community, culture, language and Country. There is little to no support, they are scared living in such a foreign environment and of course they don't want to go back to that.

Our children deserve access to education in the community in which they live, they deserve to have their culture recognised and their history told to build understanding and to break down those misconceptions. They deserve opportunities that lead to employment and careers, they should be our hope for the future. This is just one reason why a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous Voice to Parliament is so important. Governments have taken a generic approach to issues

in our communities, and this doesn't get to the heart of the cause of those issues. Each of our communities have different priorities and needs, and they have their own answers on how best to fix them. With a Voice to Parliament, we can share all this information, give our input on how to address them in a culturally safe way and really get to the core of the issue.

We have had representative bodies before, but when there is a change of government, they are de-funded and collapse. The vital work done fades into obscurity. We are continually having to start the work from scratch, time and time again: the same emotional and cultural labour. We have sent petitions, asked to be seen and heard, rallied, lobbied, campaigned, we have gone to governments, and we have gone to the monarchs, yet our issues are still the same. Governments continue to create policies that are expensive with no meaningful outcome, and which are often more harmful than productive.

This time, in 2023, we are inviting the Australian people (through the Uluru Statement from the Heart) to walk with us, to help heal our Nation and to create a fairer, inclusive and better Australia for all.

We are asking you to say YES to recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as the First Peoples, and to enshrine a Voice, so we can have meaningful input on the issues affecting us (our peoples and our communities).

Will you answer our call and vote YES?

REFERENCES

The Yes23 website can be accessed at: <https://yes23.com.au/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lara Watson is a Birri Gubba woman from Central Queensland.

Lara worked on the Australian Council of Trade Unions' (ACTU's) successful campaign to deliver working rights for Community Development Program workers.

She is currently the ACTU's Indigenous Officer and is leading their Unions For Yes campaign. She also created the artwork for this campaign. The symbol she used in it means 'wadja gathering'. 'Wadja' in Wiri language means 'speech' or 'word' (the closest word to 'voice'); gathering because the campaign is a community one)

