

## Australia Must Finally Listen to Its Indigenous People

Australia's First Peoples are not even mentioned in the country's modern-day Constitution. Despite being citizens of one of the world's richest nations, many live in poverty and despair.

5 Indigenous Australians like me hope this can start to change when the country votes in a referendum on Saturday. If approved, the measure would amend the Constitution to recognize Aboriginal peoples and establish a permanent representative body, the Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

The outcome is far from clear, with recent polls showing that under half of respondents would vote for the measure, though support is rising. But I remain optimistic. I must.

10 The white founders of modern-day Australia believed that Indigenous peoples were a dying race and, after Australia gained independence from Britain in 1901, sought to expedite our extinction. (...)

15 Massacres were not uncommon, even after independence, as an expanding white population competed with Indigenous peoples for land and resources. The most recently documented massacre happened in 1928. Discriminatory policies and laws providing for the segregation, forced assimilation and marginalization of Indigenous peoples continued into the 1970s.

20 Many Aboriginal people still live in overcrowded housing and lack access to clean running water, adequate roads or reliable power. Many are illiterate and, for some, English is only a third or fourth language. Indigenous people are 14 times as likely as other Australians to end up in prison, and their life expectancy is around a decade less. These statistics are not a reflection of our culture — they are the result of invasion, failed policies, neglect, prejudice and our lack of a voice. (...)

25 Our political influence is minute. Of Australia's 26 million people, around one million are Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Spread across a vast continent, we are easily divided and exploited — voiceless in our own land. (...)

In essence, the referendum is about enshrining the principle of listening to us, through a body whose members will be chosen by Indigenous communities and who will advise Parliament and the government on matters pertaining to Aboriginal people.

30 Our voice should be heard, and not just to safeguard our rights and interests. Modern society, with its individualism and alienation, has much to learn from the sharing, generous and harmonious nature of Indigenous ways. (...)

35 The storehouse of knowledge that we accumulated in caring for this ancient land of ours also remains more relevant than ever. The bushfires of 2019-20, which were so widespread and destructive that they are known here as the Black Summer, awakened new interest in what could be learned from the First Peoples, such as how we sustainably tended to the land for millennia, understanding when and where to use fire to protect the land and its animal and plant life. Surely only good can come from listening.

40 But the campaign against the referendum has caused confusion and fearmongering. In May, an opposition party leader, Peter Dutton of the Liberal-National coalition, said that approval would "reracialize" Australia. The online trolls emerged from beneath their bridges, and fake accounts and hateful keyboard warriors viciously attack those who express support for the Voice to Parliament. (...)

45 Despite the grossly dishonest fear campaign, Australia must vote yes on the referendum — to ensure that ancient Aboriginal wisdom endures, to preserve the reputation of the country that we love and the health of our democracy and to give hope to our Indigenous brothers and sisters around the world who also are fighting for their rights.

Thomas Mayo, *The New York Times*, October 9, 2023.