

RIGHTING A WRONG: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON AUSTRALIA'S REFERENDUM TO CONSTITUTIONALLY RECOGNISE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE

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Australia is on track to reckon with a dark chapter in its history after its [Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese](#), made a promise to bring to its voters [a referendum to constitutionally recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander](#) people, thereby giving them permanent representation in the government, even if only in an advisory capacity. The specific subject of the proposed referendum, to be held later this year, is the Voice, a representative Indigenous body in the Australian Parliament, which would provide non-binding advice to Parliament on policy subjects that impact First Nations communities. As a representative mechanism, the hope is that the interests of the Indigenous people would be better addressed: as a social category they tend to be overrepresented in official figures on shorter life expectancy, higher rates of infant mortality, poorer physical and mental health, lower levels of education and employment, and higher rates of child removals, suicides, and community and family violence. However, despite the Voice proposal enjoying close to 59% public support (a recent poll), there are pockets of political resistance, including, ironically, from prominent Indigenous leaders such as Country Liberal Party Senator Jacinta Price. Ms. Price has expressed concern over wording which says that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice “may make representations to the Parliament and the Executive Government of the Commonwealth”, which she says elevates the Voice to a level surpassing a Cabinet Minister and potentially risks challenges to legislative decisions in the courts. Other Indigenous leaders favour a different prioritisation of approaches, for example, first agreeing on a treaty between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, which would recognise that the former’s lands were never ceded to the “invaders”.

At the heart of the referendum proposal is the idea of reconciliation, however politically fraught it may be. Since European colonisation in 1778 of “Terra nullius”, or “nobody’s land”, it took around 200 years for the government to express regret for the “Stolen Generations”, which ripped the fabric of Indigenous society. It was also only in the late 2000s that the Australian government formally signed the “Close the Gap Statement of Intent”, that committed to achieving better health and life expectancy outcomes for Indigenous peoples. The longer these national wounds are left to fester, the harder it would be to bridge and heal them. In this context, no matter what the political objections to and modalities of the Voice referendum are, the Albanese government would do well to pursue the process to its logical conclusion and give

every Australian the opportunity to speak up for how they believe social harmony can be achieved for their nation.

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