

Dear Chairs of the Referendum Council,

I write to you in favour of Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

I've already made a submission through <https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/submissions>. I understand that responses in the website help you group together what people and organisations think about different aspects of this key issue for our country. But the submission format makes it harder to express how this issue makes us feel. That's why I wanted to share my story with you, to tell why I think this the most important issue for our nation to face.

In our society, we're often told not to dwell on things... but I keep thinking about an experience that happened to me in primary school.

My primary school was a bit different to most Australians'. I grew up in Kempsey, NSW; school was one third indigenous, in one of the most disadvantaged areas of Australia's East Coast. We played together before, during and after school, but there was something different about the indigenous kids. One time a mate didn't turn up for weeks, he later coolly explained that the cops were after his uncle, so the whole family cleared out of town for a while. Another time a girl tried to stab another with scissors, and then the teacher; we were told there'd been problems at home. I didn't understand any of that... I figured most families were just like mine.

Our school year was closest during our Canberra excursion at the end of Year 6. It was exciting to be together, away from home, and without our families. For me, the son of teachers, Dux and School Captain, the highlight would be the Parliament House tour by our Cowper MP, Garry Nehl.

The tour was amazing: we were shown the House of Representatives – by our representative! But after the tour, he asked our teachers to change our program and come back again the next day. Most were disappointed: we got up early, wore school uniform again, then we waited for what seemed like an age in Parliament House's main foyer. We were the first school there; the crowd kept growing; and we didn't know why we were there.

As the doors opened, I realised why: we were Bob Hawke's welcoming party to greet the recently freed Nelson Mandela to Australia. I was 11 years old, but I remember Bob and Nelson walking towards us; and the jostling and excitement of my classmates as others realised who they were. Mandela stopped in front of me, and I can still picture the lines on his hand the moment before we shook. But when I looked up towards his face, due to all the camera flashes, all I saw was a silhouette with a halo of light.

That day, everyone in our year shook hands with Nelson Mandela or Bob Hawke, some kids even shook hands with both of them. That was the trip highlight for all of us, and we chattered excitedly afterwards. But days later we were back on the bus to Kempsey, then months later to High School where we were divided up into different classes.

What I dwell on... what I keep thinking about... is that in primary school, our class met the person who made the longest strides to global freedom and equality in the last 50 years. But that opportunity didn't change any of our lives. Our lives were already determined by our parents; the education levels we already had... and by the colour of our skin. The same issues as what Mandela had struggled against.

6 years later, I graduated high school to head to university. None of the indigenous kids took that same step. At primary school, they'd been the best at sport, music and art. With the same chance to study, they'd have done just as well in maths, science and languages. Most had left by Year 10. We learnt about the Stolen Generations in Years 11 and 12, the school years many of them missed... but the lesson their families knew all about.

We mostly walk in different worlds, but I've run into some of the aboriginal adults that met Mandela as kids. For many, the summary is jail, unemployment, drug addiction, mental illness and preventable health issues. There have been so many lives broken, so much opportunity not realised... and in too many cases, so many dreams that were never imagined.

I'm telling you this story because that disadvantage makes me angry. I know what my classmates were capable of. I don't want you and other Australians to say and think that is wrong... I want us to feel indignant about what happened to the kids I grew up with; and what still happens to too many of their kids today. I want it to feel personal, because that disadvantage affects all of us in this land; and because we all have the opportunity to change.

I believe that we're at a crossroads as a nation. Constitutional Recognition can transform our history and mean that indigenous and non-indigenous Australians can finally look eye to eye; and that afterwards all Australians will be able to walk forward together. For over a century

it's been beyond the never never, but what this Referendum Council takes to Australia's Parliament has the chance to bring Constitutional Recognition of the First Australians within reach. It'll give the chance for indigenous Australians to take a greater part in our future, because we recognise their past, present and future.

Constitutional Recognition is the rest of the apology we need to make to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. It will show that non-indigenous Australians respect and want to understand indigenous culture. That's when we'll achieve meaningful Reconciliation, because it'll be based on respect. In your work, I ask you to truly connect with indigenous Australia, both traditional culture and modern experience. And then I ask you to catch a songline to a place that dreaming never ends.

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