

# You are not unloved: An open letter to Indigenous Australians after the referendum

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Evidence of good will towards the First Nations of Australia is everywhere apparent. If this new appreciation, sometimes verging on reverence, cannot be called “love”, then what can? (bennymarty / iStock Editorial / Getty Images)

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- In his [2022 Boyer Lectures](#), Noel Pearson described Aboriginal Australians as “a much-unloved people”. The devastating result of the referendum on the Voice to Parliament seems to confirm this. But notwithstanding that result, I want to protest that Aboriginal people are anything but unloved in contemporary Australia.

The [initial announcement of the referendum](#) on the night of Labor’s election victory in May 2022 was greeted with widespread enthusiasm. When the campaign was launched in August that same year, [support for “Yes” was at 64 per cent](#). If the majority of Australians held racist views with respect to Aboriginal people, this could not have been the case: such racist attitudes would have been reflected in the polls from the start.

The eventual [reversal of that original ratio of “Yes” to “No”](#) — with approximately 60 per cent voting “No” and 40 per cent voting “Yes” — was surely largely a result of the “No” campaign.

This is not to say, of course, that a racist rump does not exist in this country. Nor is it to deny that a sizeable proportion of the electorate is simply unengaged. Though indifferent to any

political issues not directly related to their own self-interest, they are forced by law to vote anyway; without personal investment in change, they would have been unlikely to vote “Yes” in the referendum. There are also those who, being disadvantaged themselves, resent another class of the disadvantaged being singled out for special consideration. All these groups, ill-disposed in different ways towards the Aboriginal cause, would have figured among the original 36 per cent of voters opposed to the Voice.

But among the 64 per cent of voters originally in favour, a significant proportion must surely have been eventually persuaded by the “No” campaign that the Voice was not the best way of serving Aboriginal interests. Much of the credibility of this campaign was gained from its recruitment of high-profile Aboriginal leaders, such as Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, Nyunggai Warren Mundine, and Lidia Thorpe. Their arguments – that Aboriginal people would be disserved by the Voice and, by and large, did not want it – received extensive media coverage. For non-Indigenous Australians, and even for some Indigenous Australians, this message created confusion and irresolution: how could one best support one’s Indigenous neighbours and fellow citizens if the Voice might effectively reinforce historic racism by [generating a system of “racial separatism”](#), reminiscent of apartheid?

To ignore the effects of such arguments on the electorate, and attribute instead the resounding defeat of the Voice to the ill will of non-Indigenous Australians, is both deeply hurtful to Indigenous Australians and damaging to the morale of the country.

Evidence of good will towards our First Nations is, in fact, everywhere apparent. Long gone are the days of the [“Great Australian Silence”](#) towards Aboriginal history and culture. Our national arts, literature, and music are now suffused with Aboriginal influences, bursting with Aboriginal notes and themes, richly populated with Aboriginal voices. Decolonisation is a lens through which all our cultural and academic discourses, across the spectrum, are being unpicked and reviewed. Preoccupation with exposing our colonial history is pervasive. On our public broadcaster, there is a daily stream of Aboriginal-referenced content and commentary. A new appreciation for the richness and sophistication of the traditional Aboriginal *Weltanschauung* (“worldview”) is running ever deeper in our collective consciousness.

If this new appreciation, sometimes verging on reverence, cannot be called “love”, then I don’t know what can.

In this moment, when the hurt to Indigenous Australians is still so raw, and the [week of silence](#) has just ended, it seems important to try to enunciate this love, to counterpose it to the easy inference that the referendum proved Noel Pearson correct in characterising his people as “much unloved”. This is not to imply that the Aboriginal right to self-determination is in any way contingent on the lovability of the people: they are, of course, entitled to self-determination regardless of such questions. It is only to protest against the inference that the outcome of the referendum signified rejection of Aboriginal people *themselves* rather than uncertainty about how their interests might best be served.

But how could such a matter of the heart — the love of a nation for its Indigenous people — be enunciated? The ways in which we love are intensely personal. Immersed as Australians are in a culture in which Aboriginal personalities and issues feature prominently, different aspects of the diverse mosaic that is Aboriginal Australia will resonate differently in different hearts. Perhaps if I try merely to enunciate which of those aspects have most resonated in my

own heart, I might have a chance of capturing a little of the subterranean swell of feeling that has been increasingly, palpably, charging our national culture for the past two decades.

## **To the people of the First Nations of this land ...**

**I love you because** this land we love is steeped in you. Because your Ancestors hover by every tree and hidden spring and rocky outcrop. Because Dreamings whisper in the stillness of the bush; if we pause, and listen, we too perhaps can hear their breathing, and the touch of their breath can be felt on our cheek.

Each bird sings its own name, the names you knew, or still know, or will know again, and which we long to learn. Names sit lightly, lovingly bestowed, on every old-days thing, bespeaking friendliness, familiarity, family-ness. We ourselves cannot see these cryptic names, but know they are there, in your keeping, or sleeping until you re-awaken them. This gives us, orphans and outcasts that we are, comfort as we sit amongst the ruins, the desolated landscapes, the stumps of the Dreaming.

**I love you because** you testify to a different way of being human. Until recently it was believed that barbarity was an inevitable part of human nature, that wars, massacres, enslavement — the theft or torching by one horde of all that belonged to another — was our grim human destiny, a legacy of our primate origins. But you have shown us otherwise.

The endless cycles of conquest and subjugation that are the pattern of our history emanate not from innate human tendencies but from forms of governance you do not share. These forms of governance are, I believe, rooted in the regime of agrarianism — the subordination of land to human will — that emerged a mere five to ten thousand years ago. At that time, your contrasting system of governance, rooted in [Law](#) — a chthonic logic that tied human flourishing indissolubly to the flourishing of land — had already been in place, keeping your people strong, well-nourished, free from domination and oppression, nurtured by family, community, Ancestors, spirits and cosmos, for tens of thousands of years.

**I love you because,** despite our agrarian heedlessness and your own patently superior form of governance, you did not preach to us, you did not stand over us, you did not wither us with your judgement. You accepted — and accept — fallibility, not expecting too much of anyone. Instead of reviling us, you appealed to our presumed humanity, reaching out to us, over and over and over, with a generosity of heart that can, in the circumstances, only stupefy us.

From where you sit, or have sat for millennia, around a campfire at the centre of the Milky Way, it seems it is this depth of heart — let us call it simply, “Heart” — that strikes you as the essence of the human, and our lack of it bemuses you. Perhaps you think that if you show it to us, we will remember that we have it too, and will shamefacedly set our meanness aside and embrace you, as we ought. Alas, thousands of years of so-called “civilisation” — of wars and tyrannies and systemic bigotries and hatreds — have closed, clenched up, our own hearts defensively, and we, unlike you, can no longer slip down through that opening in our chests to emerge into the vastness of the Milky Way. That you can do it, so effortlessly, even without our thanks, is our hope and our potential salvation.

My love is not romance. I do not imagine that this extraordinary endowment, Heart, is part of your genome. It may be, but my love for you in no way depends upon this being so — your system of governance, honed over countless millennia of trial-and-error, is quite enough to explain it.

I realise that, as individuals navigating the wreckage that modernity has wrought upon the world, you too can become orphans, exiles from Law, prey to the temptations of a Lawless order. Any one of you orphaned, cut adrift in this way, will likely seek security in the consolations that modernity prescribes — power, money or reputation. Or perhaps you will resort to the anaesthesia of addiction. We can vouch that all such remedies bring in their train corollaries – conflict, violence, deceit, and misery, for self or others. The mere fact of genetic descent is not proof against loss of Law, and hence of Heart, whether for political leaders or disconsolate long grassers. [Irene Watson](#) describes this loss most poignantly:

Today in the modern world the will to live in a place of lawfulness is lost to the greater humanity. Evidence of this is found in the growing list of global crises, poverty, environmental disasters, famine, war, and violence. What the greater humanity have come to know as law is a complex maze of rules and regulations; the body of law is buried, barely breathing. Law came to us in a song, it was sung with the rising of the sun, law was sung in the walking of the mother earth, law inhered in all things, law is alive, it lives in all things ... Law was not imposed, and those who lived outside the law did just that, they were in exile from the law. We could say the greater proportion of humanity now lives in exile from the law.

You might reply to my warm appreciation of traditional Law that it is the right of different Aboriginal communities, in their pursuit of self-determination, to choose whether or not to follow such Law or adapt to alternative norms. In the vastly altered context of the contemporary world, a range of different strategies may be required for survival. The value judgements of non-Indigenous people, whether allies or otherwise, have no part in this. I accept this without demur. I speak only of the ways in which you have — unwittingly and unintentionally — won my heart, not of any obligation that falls upon you in return.

Finally, **I love you because** you delivered to us perhaps the most beautiful political bid in all of history, the [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#) — a document into which all the distinctive elements of this Heart of yours were pressed, like petals of your spirit. You upheld the sanctity of Law, and with it your inalienable *sovereignty*, yet from the *torment of your powerlessness* under conditions of colonisation, you appealed to the colonial government to return to you *power over your own destiny*: for a *constitutional Voice to parliament*, for the right to *agreement-making* or treaty, and for *truth-telling with regard to history*. When *Makarrata* had thereby been accomplished, your culture, you said, would be *a gift to your country*, and you invited us to *walk with you in a movement of the Australian people for a better future*.

Now that the first of your requests, the constitutional Voice to Parliament, has been rebuffed, the millions of us who — if the early referendum polls were any indication — are so committed to your cause, grieve with you. We are shattered too.

But we must not give up on Uluru, on the Statement from the Heart. May we double down on it, insist that its demands be met, if not constitutionally then by other means. May we, all of us, store the Statement “in our hearts”, learn it “by heart”, set it to music, make it our new

anthem — the anthem of a new Australia. May we pass it down orally, in this way, to our children, from generation to generation, so that, aeons hence, we will still remember this proclamation that heralded the true birth of our nation. We will still remember how a deeply wronged people proved immune to the virus of violence and counter-violence that had been shaping civilisations for thousands of years, and how they held out a cure to Australia, and, through Australia, to the whole of humanity.

Meanwhile, in this time of grief, may we, your non-Indigenous fellow citizens, ask not for your forgiveness — that would be too much — but only that we may continue to walk with you *on your trek across this vast country*.

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