

Nyunggai Warren Mundine AO - "It's Not Our Voice" – 4th July 2023

He began by noting many see the Voice as a gift, a hand reaching out by aboriginal people for reconciliation and recognition. In his view, it goes further than that.

He referred to polls showing 60-70% support for the Voice among aboriginal communities, but he considered this untrue from his business travels to widespread remote aboriginal communities. He referred to a recent Crikey poll of aboriginals, finding 70% of those surveyed "had never heard of the voice, have heard of the voice but don't know what it is, or are going to vote no". (This surprising figure fitted his argument, but one wonders about the methodology or the representativeness of the poll sample, noting the number may include many people who would like more detail).

He noted there are many falsehoods in the campaign for the Voice, especially claims that "Aboriginals do not have a voice". He disputes this, noting his work on mine sites involves very close consultations with the local communities. Nothing is done on sites without referral and listening to the locals and negotiating outcomes, which often include employing local aboriginals. Over 1,000 are employed in his businesses. Thus, these traditional communities do have a voice at the grass root level in these matters. It is usually similar for projects by large mining companies. The same applies with local governments building roads, bridges, wharves etc. He cited his own experience going back 30 years when AGL consulted locals prior to developing gas pipelines etc. The first National Aboriginal Advisory Group was set up in 1970s by the Whitlam Govt and ever since, there have been groups advising government. Today there is an 80 person group called Coalition of the Peaks, which sits with National Cabinet and the Federal Government, having conversations about aboriginal health, housing, education, disability, etc. Today there are about 3,000 committees that are set up to advise governments on aboriginal and Torres Strait islander issues.

He claims the issue is not a lack of a voice, as there are many voices. On his regular trips to Canberra, he encounters numerous groups making representations on indigenous issues to government, opposition and cross benches, along with numerous lobbyists from all sorts of bodies. Same for State governments. Advice may be ignored, but there is an open door, so these first nations representatives do have a voice.

He recounted growing up in the 50s in Grafton, later in Campbelltown, in a family of 11 children, with strong emphasis on education, work, and catholic values. He referred to his early jobs in industry, then going to university, and subsequent business career, developing his love of Australia's multicultural life and liberal democracy with its foundation of equality. He is involved with a charity that is highly successful in supporting education of 1,500 aboriginal children through school, trades courses and university.

He recalled his experiences as Chair of the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council (appointed by PM Abbott, and reappointed by PM Turnbull). To achieve Closing the Gap objectives, he made the Council commit to education and skills, with focus on economic development and participation (which had been missing previously in his view). In 2015, they bought in the Business Economy Strategy, with award of contracts to aboriginal business that year. This year these contracts are worth \$8.7 billion, with employment grown under this strategy to 45,000 jobs.

So his thesis for the way forward is not about the Voice, which in his view will become a huge bureaucracy, adding to existing voices to parliament. He has been told that some traditional owners are concerned when deals are done with mining companies etc on their land, that the Voice may be lobbied by third parties not in the interests of the locals.

He noted the progress since 1967 of freedoms and achievement in representation of first nations people in mainstream Australian roles (28 MPs, 3 supreme court justices, etc, but he did not refer to the indices measured by Closing the Gap, on which the current system has had little success despite massive expenditure).

He said we should not look at treating aboriginals as a homogeneous group, and instead focus on people's needs. Senior aboriginal politicians and academics do not need a voice – they already have it. But there are many who are struggling. The focus needs to be on their education and economic participation, as well as dealing with safety issues in communities, not because of black and white, but because we are all Australians. He believes those advocating the Voice are looking to government to solve problems, whereas he sees the solution through self-help through education, economic participation and hard work.

In the Q&A, issues discussed included affirmative action (US supreme court decision), avoiding victimhood mentality, parental example, looking for and taking opportunities instead of expecting government to provide, etc. He was questioned that there seemed a focus on those with drive well placed to strive ahead, but there are many who have deep problems including poverty, and consultation via the Voice may be a mechanism to deal with such concerns and setting up programmes to improve their situation. On the contrary, he saw the Voice as a continuation of the past government-centred policies/bureaucracy on a grander scale. He estimated the cost of implementing the Voice system as \$600 million per year, and wondered how that could be better spent based on needs. He also drew attention to the wastage on flyin-flyout contractors, instead of encouraging self-help through education/trades, including for construction/repairs

On behalf of members, Keith Hartman thanked him for giving his perspective of a road map through education and restoration of hope, avoiding more bureaucracy.

Peter James