

By Peter Norden AO

I guess that many Australians will have a view about the proposal to establish 'A Voice to Parliament for Indigenous Australians'.

My view is based on several decades of experience in the social services, mental health and criminal justice fields across Australia.

As a young Social Work and Criminology graduate from the University of Melbourne in the 1970s, my earliest points of contact were in the juvenile justice field in Melbourne. Later, in the 1980s, I worked in the adult correctional field, at Pentridge Prison in Coburg and then at Barwon Prison in Lara.

Later still, in the 1990s, I established mental health outreach programs for young adults who were not effectively engaged by the established government supported programs. Existing government run, or government funded programs, were restricted to those who had mental health issues or substance misuse issues, but not those who had both.

In each of these areas of community involvement, I began to learn a little more along the way about the nature of the issues faced by indigenous young Australians. What I began to learn, over several years, was that the circumstances of indigenous peoples were all too often compounded by accumulated trauma.

I set out to engage and win the confidence of young Australians, indigenous and non-indigenous, through a series

of outreach and engagement programs, using music, art, drama, sport and creative expression. This process took months, and sometimes years, to be effective.

Working from a Victorian base, the proportion of Indigenous persons was not as high as in other States and Territories across Australia. Nonetheless, I learnt a great deal over this time, by listening, by engaging, by encouraging, and by accompanying.

Generally, government operated programs, and government funded programs, were simply not effective in achieving positive results. This was because they tended to impose solutions from a set of prior expectations. Such programs set limits on how many hours a week an outreach worker could spend with one person, or how many weeks such a person could remain a 'client' in such programs. I quickly learnt that this was never going to be effective.

Instead, I found independent sources of funding to enable the programs I established to truly listen to the person concerned and to enable them to develop their own resources and capacities, with the support of others.

That is why the Indigenous Voice to Parliament that is proposed makes so much sense.

Government representatives, based in Canberra or the State Capitals, or senior public servants, simply do not have the experience or the local knowledge to shape programs that will be effective in a broad range of locations and circumstances across this big country.

This sense of distance has only increased in so many social services and health areas in the last two decades here in Australia. The program designs and funding requirements coming out of Canberra and the State Capitals have become more inflexible and more constricted during this period of time.

This is why 'The Voice to Parliament' has become so urgently needed as the years and decades pass by.

Some who are uncertain about this proposal suggest that the money would be better spent on providing direct services, whether this be in the housing, health, education or social services fields. My experience over several decades of direct involvement in these fields suggests that this approach would only repeat many of the mistakes of the past.

After many years' experience of direct service provision in such areas, always involving indigenous persons as consumers or, where possible, as employees, I felt the need to pass on the experience I had obtained to those who were making such policy and funding decisions in Canberra, and the State and Territory Capitals.

Engaging the late Professor Tony Vinson AM from the University of New South Wales, and later the University of Sydney, we hatched a plan to accurately measure the nature of the problem of disadvantage and alienation that we had observed over the years in the various roles we had worked in with persons with some form of disability or disadvantage or sense of exclusion.

I project managed a series of quantitative studies that Tony Vinson completed measuring disadvantage by postcode, initially in New South Wales and Victoria, then covering the whole country. Our results identified the concentration of disadvantage in particular localities according to more than twenty disadvantage factors, ranging from low birth rate to mortality rates for every postcode area in Australia.

These results clearly showed the entrenched disadvantage faced by Indigenous peoples, and actually similar levels of disadvantage in the same postcode areas for non-Indigenous families too. The concentration of such disadvantage explained why mainstream government programs simply were not effective at engaging such persons with complex or serious disadvantage.

We presented these dramatic findings to Federal and State Ministers and the most senior Public Servants in Canberra and the State Capitals. They acknowledged the research findings but were simply not capable of implementing the sort of interventions that were required.

This is where 'The Voice to Parliament' is so urgently required, now more than ever. Indigenous leaders will be able to contribute to policy formulation at the highest levels where it is most required. Existing government initiatives are simply missing the mark. We must do better.

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