THE VOICE: A ROUND UP OF RELEVANT FACTS, STATISTICS AND PERSPECTIVES - AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

Virtually all Australians want to see the living standards of First Nations People rise and their life experiences improve. It is easy to reach these conclusions without much thinking. It's a slam dunk. The moral justice behind both propositions is undeniable.

But further thinking we must do because there's a big difference between defining what we'd like (the ends we seek to achieve) and finding the best ways of delivering those ends sustainably, equitably and affordably (ie. to find the best means to achiever those desired goals).

Supporting the elements of The Uluru Statement from The Heart (Voice, Truth Telling and Treaty) on ethical, moral, cultural and emotional grounds is one thing. Bringing those entities to life is another. Our past attempts to do both have met with some successes, but also many failures (notably ATSIC, the Mark 1 version of The Voice and many Close the Gap initiatives).

A part explanation for the slowness and lack of progress lies in the fact that while it is relatively easy to stir peoples' emotions it is much harder to deliver concrete, viable change. In 1987 Bob Hawke's promise that "by 1990 no Australian child will be living in poverty" examples the phenomenon well.

Different groups within society press for many just causes, demanding immediate action for their cause as if theirs was the most important (if not the only) cause confronting the nation.

At any one time a variety of Australians (most recently teachers, construction workers, nurses, 'me too' supporters, anti vaccinationists, LGBQTI+, farmers, small business proprietors - and many others) almost simultaneously hit the streets demanding 'they' (meaning the powers that be) immediately meet their many very different demands.

All marchers use the same catchcry," what do we want (insert demand here) and when do we want it?" to which the chorus invariably replies, "NOW!"

While ordinary people march in the streets, the lobbyists of corporate and other vested interests quietly and invisibly tread the corridors of power seeking, behind closed doors, to convince governments that their client's needs are paramount.

Both protestors and lobbyists seek the same result - to move their cause to the head of the queue. It's a beggar-thy-neighbour approach that discounts (or more frequently simply ignores) the pressing nature of others' claims while inflating the importance and justice of one's own. That's human nature. You can ignore that fact by pretending it doesn't happen or rail against it by claiming things shouldn't be that way. But it is. Always was and always will be.

Australians feel we have a right to better hospitals, better schools, a much stronger defence force, greater tax relief, more parental leave and child support, more housing (including more domestic violence refuges and pensioner accommodation), vastly improved aged care homes, lower power prices, better public transport, support for new industries...etc. Wanting it all, now, is pie in the sky stuff. It should be obvious not all worthy demands can be met fully or quickly. Government resources are limited. Priorities must be set. In a democracy that result is achieved by compromise. And, as the ancient Greeks remind us, the sign of a good compromise is where both parties walk away feeling somewhat disgruntled they didn't get all they'd hoped for - but are nonetheless content to honour their agreement.

What's all the above got to do with The Voice?

I'd suggest the debate over The Voice, so far (to early August,) has been overly emotional, simplistic in content, too politicised - and vague in terms of providing details voters need if they are to make an informed vote. The advocates of both a YES and NO vote are equally culpable in this regard.

Ask your friends what they think The Voice can do and - and how it will be funded and staffed to do it. At best, you're likely to get a few generalisations.

Ask them to elaborate as to how The Voice will (or won't) work in concert with Truth Telling and Treaty and their responses will become even vaguer.

Finally, ask them how much taxpayers' money should be expended to support First Nations Peoples in their quest for fair treatment and you'll be confronted by an embarrassment of silence.

Most voters simply don't know enough to make an informed decision.

A first step to rectifying this situation is to look at some basic information as to where FNP now stand, the starting line if you like - and how they got there.

This review doesn't attempt to tell a full history. Only those who deliberately don't want to know are totally unaware of how British colonisation served to dispossess, damage and marginalise our Indigenous peoples.

Non-indigenous Australians may not know the details of this country's history. Nor, on the other hand, do they know much about the cultures of Indigenous Peoples or their pre settlement ways of living.

Just as the exploits and lives of white colonists have been both romanticised and sometimes demonised, so too have the ways and lives of this Country's Indigenous hunter gatherers. Time adds a gloss to the 'great and good' of all cultures...and deepens the stain accorded the 'selfish and 'evil' who damage those cultures.

Anybody who hasn't already delved into Australian history is unlikely to do so in the next couple of months before they cast their vote in the referendum.

So this is not the place to explore history of either the oldest, continuous culture on earth nor the achievements and sins of contemporary Australia.

We should note, however, that while we can learn from history we cannot change it. The best way, indeed the only way, to expiate past sins and the wounds they continue to inflict, is to take action now. Our efforts should focus on the future, not the past.

And a good place to start getting things into perspective is to look at some basic statistics on the circumstances in which First Nations People currently live.

Population

▷ According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' latest Census there are approx. 940,000 Australians who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders - that's 3.8 % of the Country's population.

▷ In the five years between the two, latest census periods the total number of Australians identifying as Indigenous increased by 23%. Such a massive increase over such a short period cannot be due to higher Indigenous fertility rates alone.

Other factors are obviously at work.

Why, for example, are more Australians identifying as Indigenous? And what are the likely flow-on effects of them doing so?

These are complex questions that can't be adequately addressed here.

Both questions, however, raise the core conundrum of how to fairly differentiate Indigenous Australians from non-indigenous Australians-at least in law. It's a sensitive subject that most prefer to ignore, often for fear of being branded racist.

In times past skin colour was the distinguisher. Then, as sexual contact and intermarriage became ever more common different jurisdictions tried different 'bloodline' tests that resulted in variants of classifications such as full blood, half caste, quarter caste etc. Over time, as the number of generations between pre-settlement times and today grew, this type of classification was deemed both more offensive and less relevant as attitudes and mores continued to move in more progressive directions.

The fact is the vast majority of Indigenous people alive today have ancestral trees with Irish (convict and otherwise), or Scot, or Chinese, or Pacific Islander, or Afghan 'cameleer' (and even some British) branches. Over 95% of Indigenous people have mixed race backgrounds. Less than 50,000 (or thereabouts) have full, unbroken, ancestral bloodlines that stretch back to settlement times.

At a time when we all say we want to 'come together' as a multicultural nation, it doesn't make much sense to keep focusing on trying to find definitions that serve to keep us apart. Surely the ultimate goal of a multi-cultural society is to walk side alongside each other, irrespective of race.

Nonetheless, we'll need definitions if we are to treat one part of our citizenry differently from others. The three-part test we currently have for defining Indigeneity (demonstrating ancestry, identifying as Indigenous and community acknowledgement) is loose and contestable.

It's a task most are reluctant to address because that fear of being called racist still exists. It's the fear that lies beneath the tip of the iceberg in all discussions on where to draw the line. Non-indigenous people don't like being branded racist just as much as Indigenous Australian don't like being called bludgers. Each side is prone to blame the other for perpetuating the current situation, a situation that is unsatisfactory to all. Nelson Mandela aptly advised those tempted to play the blame-game,

- "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies"-

▷First Nations Peoples are a young population - fully a third are children under 15. That compares with 18% in the non- indigenous population.

The future of Indigenous Australia very much depends on the opportunities afforded these children and the experiences they encounter as they grow up. If we exclude the young (under15), the old (over 65) and the disabled there are approximately 500,000 to 600,000 Indigenous adults alive today (2023).

▷The distribution of Indigenous Australians across the Country is wide. Their geographic spread (and the differences in life experiences between city and remote communities) explains why the perspectives and needs of different 'mobs' are so diverse...and why decentralised and customised solutions are required on ground. The concept of a centralised Voice that speaks for all is alien to many FNP.

Indigenous Populations by State

•NSW	340,000	
•Queensland	273,000	
•Western Aust	120,000	
•Victoria	78,000	(1.2% of the State population)
•NT	76,000	(31% of the Territory population)
•SA	52,000	
•Tasmania	33,000	

* Type of community lived in ,

•Cities	38%
•Regional	44%
•Remote	18%

Earning a Living

▷The last Census (2021) reported the unemployment rate of Indigenous Australians at 12% (of a 'workforce', as defined by ABS, at 360,000) - about 3 times the rate amongst the non-indigenous population.
Indigenous unemployment rates vary widely across the Country and between communities. It's highest in remote communities where it peaks as high as 50% plus.

▷Somewhere between 60% and 70% of young Indigenous Australians (those aged between 16 and 24) are neither employed nor engaged in education/training.

▷The vast majority of Indigenous workers are salary/ wage employees: 93% are employees, 4% self-employed and around 2% employers.

▷The top 5 occupations (and the industries they work in) are (with the exception of Professional) medium to low paying.

OCCUPATION		INDUSTRY	
Labourer	18%	Health Care & Personal Assistance	14%
Community & Personal Service	18%	Construction	14%
Professional	15%	Public Administration	11%
Technical & Trade	14%	Retail	10%
Clerical	11%	Accommodation & Food	8%

▷On average the weekly income of Indigenous Australians over 18 is about a third lower than for non-indigenous Australians.

▷The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare claimed (in 2022) that 68% of Indigenous weekly incomes (18+) were under $800.
(*please note that estimates as to weekly incomes vary widely between different sources*).

▷The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare also reports that the number of Indigenous Australians receiving income support payments increased 26% between June 2018 and 2020.

▷It's estimated that around a third of Indigenous peoples live in poverty. Upwards of 50% (aged 16+) are on some form of income support.

Housing

▷The figures below speak for themselves,

	Indigenous	(non-Indigenous)
Renters	64%	27%
Purchasing	19%	27%
Owner	13%	41%
Unknown	5%	6%

Health

▷Life expectancy is around 82 years for non-indigenous women and just over 70 for Indigenous women. The life expectancy of Indigenous males is even lower at around 60. The Productivity Commission (working in conjunction with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap-2008) monitors 15 socio economic facets of Indigenous life - including targets set for infant health, child health, adult health, education/training, employment etc. After more than a decade, and billions of dollars, there has been promising advances in some areas and disappointments in others.

In their 2023 Report the Commission reports the following,

GOOD IMPROVEMENT - AND ON TRACK TO ACHIEVE TARGETS
*young indigenous people in detention, down (currently 28/10,000)
*Indigenous people aged 16 to 64 in employment (56%).
*child pre-school enrolment (99%)

IMPROVING - BUT NOT ON TRACK
*babies born with healthy body weight (89%)
*15-24 year olds in employment, education or training (88%)
*young adults (20-24) who attained/completed year 12 (68%)
* adults (aged 25-34) completing tertiary education/training (47%)
*people living in appropriately sized housing (81%)
*life expectancy of males born between 2015-2017 (72 years)
*life expectancy of females born between 2015-2017(76 years)

WORSENING, NOT ON TRACK
*children starting school with appropriate development skills (34%)
*adults in prison
*children out of home care (57/1000)
* suicide (27/10,000)

The above is a brief summary of a detailed and complex report. Those interested in greater detail can access the report online.

What the data points to is that improvements have been too slow, too patchy...and very expensive given the results achieved.

This conclusion suggests past 'lifting-strategies' largely (implemented by multiple government instrumentalities) should be critiqued and assessed before implementing 'more of the same'. Such a review could have major implications as to the advisability of going down a national, advisory Voice route as opposed to rebalancing and pivoting toward more action oriented, on-ground approaches that involves local Indigenous people in planning, staffing, managing (and accepting part responsibility) for what happens on their patch.

▷Currently about two-thirds of Government monies allocated for direct (ie. non Centrelink Government) projects are absorbed in overheads/costs of bureaucracies running those projects – about one-third is spent on-ground in Indigenous communities.

Economics

▷Behind all the calls for justice, sloganeering, emotionally laden rhetoric, the fact remains that someone - the taxpayer – has to pics up the bill for whatever is decided. Economics may be dull but it impacts on our ever slimming wallets.

▷In 2016 Warren Mundine (Indigenous leader, past President of the Labor Party and latterly Liberal candidate) made the bold and controversial statement that Australian taxpayers spent $30 billion a year on 500,000 Indigenous Australians. That claim was fact-checked by a senior university academic. His conclusions were peer reviewed by two other senior academics from different universities. They agreed that Mundine was pretty right about the money, but had underestimated the size of the recipient population.

▷It's hard to update that expenditure figure for 2023. It would certainly be higher than Mundine's figure…between $35 and $40 billion pa. would be a conservative estimate (ie a reasonable guess).

Australian governments may not be successful or efficient in the ways they go about supporting and helping our First Nations People, but you'd be hard pressed to convincingly argue that Indigenous Australians are neglected. The money is there. A large part of the task ahead is to spend that money more effectively.

▷That total of $35-$40 billion includes all governments' (Commonwealth, State and Territory) expenditures of both a direct nature (eg. welfare payments - the same payments available to all Australians in similar circumstances) and those specifically allocated for Indigenous projects and programmes. The former accounts for somewhere between 75% to 80% that $30 to $40 billion total, the dedicated projects 20% to 25%.

To increase that already sizeable amount to meet ever increasing Indigenous demands might, in these the tough economic times, mean delaying or cutting back on other high priority programmes.

The costs to the taxpayer for adding and paying for the running of The Voice (and the Truth Telling and Treaty processes The Uluṟu Statement from the Heart suggests should follow) would be significant. These would not be minor investments.

It is more than reasonable to consider the 'costs' associated with implementing such proposals before pressing the 'go' or 'stop' button. When that's not done outcomes are often unexpected, disappointing and involve unwelcome cost 'overruns' that results in governments delaying the completion of projects and/or the imposition of higher charges/taxes. Only the irresponsible and hot headed say 'let's get it done...and bugger the costs."

▷Amid the thick jungle of statistics that faces voters one stands out. It's a simple one - for every $1 spent on non-indigenous citizens (per capita) the equivalent spend is approx.$2 for Indigenous Australians - twice as much. That 2 to 1 ratio is based on the total of expenditures of all governments and territories.

There are reasons for this difference. More Indigenous peoples live in circumstances that warrant government 'welfare' support; the same support non-indigenous people living in those same circumstances are entitled to.

One could also, quite plausibly, also argue that government funded programmes (aimed to improve Indigenous living standards and life experiences) are sometimes badly designed or poorly run. Yet others will say that some Indigenous communities have become so welfare dependent that they don't avail themselves of the opportunities afforded by close gap initiatives. Whatever the reasons, welfare costs will not decrease unless and until the living standards of FNP improve.

▷So far we've focused on the monies spent by governments on FN Peoples. That's the money-out side of the equation.

On the money-in (revenue) side it's relevant to - very briefly - point out that Indigenous Australians pay less than 3.8% (their proportion of the population) of taxes and charges. Again, this is so because of higher unemployment rates, lower wages (which attracts lower income tax rates) and the small number of businesses owned by Indigenous Australians (which means very low business/corporate tax income).

That's further evidence that Australia has neither forgotten nor neglected its FNP.

▷Indigenous Australians already enjoy some other benefits that are not available to non-indigenous Australians.

For example. All Indigenous students (who meet academic entry standards) are exempt from paying University fees. They don't accumulate HECS debts as many non-indigenous

Australian students do or have to pay ‘pay as you go' fees most overseas students do. Indigenous students from remote areas are sometimes offered allowances to pay for their accommodation, travel and meals. Similar benefits for Indigenous students extend to other types of educational and training institutions other than universities.

There are other examples of 'positive ‘discrimination. In the NT job advertisements are often along the lines of 'Indigenous XXXX Wanted'. The formal qualifier for 'wanted' is -'an Aboriginal or Torres Straight identified position'. Government instrumentalities, cultural groups, NGOs, even the YMCA, sometimes advertise this way. I have no argument with this. But it does strike some as strange given that religious (and other) groups are often criticised for only recruiting their own kind. The 'equality' we all seek is put at risk where double standards apply.

▷As the Country moves closer to the Treaty component of The Uluru Statement issues of compensation will become more centre stage.
Most Australians (both Indigenous and non-indigenous) have only the vaguest of ideas of what this shift might entail. Suffice it to say that treaties will involve the payment of some form of compensation to the descendants of the peoples who lived here before white settlement.

FNP will seek some form of payment, rent or compensation for their 'stolen' lands - and charge monies to organisations (such as mining companies) for access to lands under Native Title

There are a hundreds of Native Title groups across the Nation. These Indigenous organisations have rights or pending rights over more than half of Australia's land mass. As at 2022 just over 16% was (according to The Productivity Commission) already owned or controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders.

▷Few 'ordinary' Australians know much about what Indigenous peoples expect from treaties with the Commonwealth and State/Territory governments. Some Indigenous leaders talk about the Commonwealth Government paying a percentage of the gross national product to some body that will, somehow, distribute it to FNP. Others talk about paying native title holders rent or compensation or fees for access. It's all very vague.

Perhaps the best guide as to what to expect in the future is to look at a major treaty that already exists. The WA government has negotiated a treaty with the Noongar peoples of Southwest WA. The treaty covers an area of about 200,000 square kilometres with an Indigenous population of around 30,000 from six, tribal groups. The essence of the treaty is that WA taxpayers pay these native title holders the sum of $800 million (the equivalent of $270,000 per head) over 12 years. Those (tax free monies) will be used to build housing, community and cultural centres, fund start-up businesses and community programmes for Indigenous people.

In return, the taxpayers of WA (through their government) 'resolve' native title claims. What this treaty amounts to is a compensation payment made to Indigenous people for past sins of non-indigenous citizen s- and to settle past grievances raised by those peoples. The treaty draws a line between the past and the future. From here on in the native title

holders negotiate directly with those who seek access/use of their land. Miners come to mind here.
More of such treaties can be expected.

▷The Australian Tax Office points out that monies paid (by mining companies for example) to recognise the rights that FNP have over their land by tradition and custom, are not taxable. Income and capital gains taxes do not apply to such monies, be the recipients individuals or holding groups.

Here is a direct quote from ATO (Australian Tax Office) guidelines,

-"Mae is an aboriginal woman who lives in WA. Every year she receives a $100,000 native title benefit from a mining company. The mining company uses the land to mine iron ore. Mae is not taxed on this $100,000 because it is a native title benefit which is NANE (non-assessable non-exempt) income and not taxable "-

This is a generous concession that many a landlord or super fund holder would sorely like to enjoy.

▷Other types of compensation, not based on land rights, have been made to indigenous people for past government policies that are now held to have been injurious to them. NSW, for example, passed a reparation scheme providing an ex-gratis payment of $75,000 to living, Stolen Generation survivors who were removed from their families and committed to the care of Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards.

The term 'stolen generation' is widely and pejoratively, used to example the injustices and pain inflicted on Indigenous peoples by the tearing away young children from their Aboriginal families to be cared for by the State or fostered out to religious institutions or white families. And that's fair enough given the findings of the Royal Commission which amply exampled the shortcomings, physical brutality and psychological damages inflicted by that policy.

It should also be remembered, however, that a major motivation behind such schemes was the strong (and sincere) desire to try and give Indigenous children better opportunities to advance in life by removing them from environments of neglect, poverty, limited opportunity or violence. That the system has been judged misguided and too harsh is one thing. But the 'guilt' non-indigenous Australians still feel for those 'mistakes' made by their antecedents' should be tempered by the fact that while we can't change the past, we can expiate that guilt by acting fairly and in cooperation with FNP right now.

The time has come for non-indigenous Australians to drop the guilt trip and for Indigenous Australians to drop the blame games they use to justify their calls for compensation. It's time for both to live in the present and walk together.

Some Uncomfortable Perspectives

▷If FNP prove insatiable in their demands for more and more there will, eventually, be a backlash from the 96% of Australians who don't self-identify as Indigenous. If such

a breaking point is reached empathy for FNP will quickly evaporate to both their detriment and that of the Nation. A fair go for FNP is a National must. Holding the non-indigenous peoples of today hostage for the sins of colonisers, forever, is not.

People who migrated to this Country after WW11 (first people from the UK, Italy, Greece, Poland and other war-ravaged parts of Europe) and latterly the people from India, Vietnam the Arab world, China and Hong Kong and Africa, came in search of a better life). They must wonder why they should pay for the original sins of the British who came here so long ago to establish a convict colony.

The descendants of those long-ago dead convicts probably ask pretty much the same question, especially those (like the Irish) whose progeny went on to intermarry with Aboriginal partners in such large numbers. Are they friends or oppressors of Indigenous people? Are they great grandparents, grandparents' mothers and fathers, kith and kin...or is fair (as is increasingly the habit) to simply expunge them from the family trees of those who only want to identify as Indigenous?

Is a single link to an Indigenous person somewhere in one's family tree sufficient to qualify as FNP? Do you need a blood connection at all? Some argue that it is sufficient to identify with Indigenous culture to self-identify. It's a bit of a mess. Whatever methods of identification are used, however, the end objective is the same - to claim ongoing, special rights and compensations by right of inheritance.

If this multicultural democracy is to survive surely all Australian citizens, irrespective of when and where they come from - and no matter what religion or belief system they practise - must be treated equally.

▷To claim hereditary rights and entitlements for generation after generation after generation ...indeed forever, violates that democratic principle and can only serve to foster division.

The task for all of us living in this Country today is to address the damage suffered by Indigenous peoples in the past, to close the gap(s) and support them in lifting their health, living standards and life opportunities to levels enjoyed in the rest of Australia. The only way to do that is via customised programmes that satisfy local cultural and community needs so that they can lead and manage their lives their way. That's the way to break the destructive, welfare-dependent model that has so obviously failed both FNP and the Nation for far too long. If that is achieved, it will be job done.

▷If FNP go on to assert their 'ownership' of this Country by way of 'inheritance', demanding the payment of further billions of dollars by way of rents, fees and (tax free) compensation payments from non-indigenous Australians simply so non-indigenous people can continue to live here it will prove to be a bridge too far.

Sooner or later FNP will realise that they can't expect to just keep on living off 'rents' paid to them by 96%+ of the Country's population who arrived here after they did. That sort of

ongoing, inherited privilege is, ironically, just the sort of privilege FNP complain about when attacking the historical sins of the British monarchy.

Sooner or later FNP will realise how problematic it is to claim that because a someone in your ancestral tree can be traced back to pre-settlement days, it follows you (a very distant and tangential relative) have inherited the right to act as a landlord of the nation ad infinitum. History amply demonstrates that no such claim has withstood the test of time anywhere in the world.

The living citizens of a democracy have the right to determine their own future - not to be forever beholden to the past. In a democracy citizens have responsibilities toward others, not just rights for their own kind.

Once the gaps have been closed, once the ledger has been squared, FNP should pause before and think carefully about what reparations they can fairly seek from the Treaties they seek.

Is it reasonable for those identifying as Indigenous today to expect to live off penance-monies forever? Is their expectation that whatever lifestyle they prefer (be it traditional, modern or one of leisure) should be paid for by the descendants of past invaders and immigrants from all over the world? If so there will be troubles ahead.