
— Opinion

The Voice is national group therapy - not the help that's needed

The new body may be a way for us all to cope with endemic problems. But it is not going to offer anything new or practical.

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Columnist



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The move to enshrine a Voice to parliament is one giant, national coping mechanism in the face of perceived futility regarding Aboriginal affairs.

There is a term in health called therapeutic nihilism. It refers to a feeling of pessimism regarding treatment that undermines clear decision-making.



The demonstrations on Australia Day show that tensions are starting to rise over the Voice. **Justin McManus**

For example, a homeless patient who requires aggressive intervention might not receive it because of a perception they were unlikely to benefit. It can apply to entire groups and communities.

As part of medical training, I worked in the Northern Territory for a few months. I was located in the town of Elliot, between Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. Populated by a few hundred Aboriginals, it was then one of the most violent communities in the country.

I spent many a night stitching up gushing head wounds, the product of alcohol-fuelled violence. One man, laying in a pool of his own blood, asked affectionately if I had any blackfella in me.

Days later, I'd see the children of the relevant adults with ear infections and gastrointestinal disease, often the result of neglect, poor hygiene and erratic nutrition. Our team of myself, a nurse and Aboriginal health workers would help them recover, but they inevitably re-presented within a week or two.

The problems seemed so endemic and insurmountable that it was difficult to remain hopeful. While it was rooted in a historical dispossession of territory and identity, the reality on the ground felt like a people without a purpose, surviving on an opium of welfare payments and booze.

The premise appears to be that if only our leaders and non-Aboriginals listened better, we may meet the challenge.

I remember one way we reacted was to make an extra show of prioritising the areas we could control.

We sang Yothu Yindi [<https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-gxiqrn>] loudly at night by a fire. We paid extra attention to symbols displayed across the clinic and in the town, such as having more prominent displays of the Aboriginal flag. While there was still tremendous satisfaction from those we were able to help, even temporarily, the fiddling of outer symbols was our way of coping amid the therapeutic nihilism we were clearly developing.

It is difficult not to see the Voice to parliament as an example of a similar dynamic playing out on a national scale. I say this as an expert in assessing those who experience pathological voices.

Umpteen advisory groups and representative bodies have given their two cents and more for over half a century. The six Aboriginals in parliament across all sides of politics are a greater representation than before. Yet, as the Prime Minister makes clear in his speech regarding Closing the Gap, the markers of Aboriginal disadvantage have scarcely shifted. [<https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5ck12>]

The premise appears to be that if only our leaders and non-Aboriginals listened better, we may meet the challenge. The exercise seems to be predicated on a notion

of a pure, unadulterated message, almost akin to the ecological and cultural Eden destroyed by Europeans, that may be revealed through this legal mechanism. All of it is designed to deliver a constitutional dopamine hit to the populace in the event of referendum success.

The farce of the campaign is further exposed given its primary advocates, such as academics Marcia Langton and Noel Pearson, were arguing for the removal of any constitutional references to race only a decade ago. Instead, the reality is that the latest push is to enshrine group rights in our country's mission statement.

To the credit of Langton and Pearson, they have both argued against treating Aboriginal kids in education differently, advocating firm discipline [<https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5cggv>] and traditional techniques. By doing so, they have recognised therapeutic nihilism as a factor in education too.

But as indicated by the large cohorts of Aboriginals who joined the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, the Voice to parliament brings together many of the most dangerous aspects of imported identity politics.

This includes an Aboriginal exceptionalism, as a marginalised group who claim a unique consciousness that is worthy of unique accommodations. There is a strong psychological component as it elevates the subjective experience.

The Voice to parliament as it stands accepts and encourages all these features.

There is an element of political farce as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal elites engage in a dance to argue that a constitutionally enshrined advisory body will offer anything new and different.

Rather than encourage agency and practical solutions to complex problems, it will only entrench a victimhood that sees any kind of embrace of modernity as fealty to the colonial oppressor.

Let's accept the antics as the coping mechanism they are and get on with the hard work of improving outcomes for our Indigenous Australians.



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