

# Liberals must join Barnaby Joyce's Uluru rejection

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Much of what stability the Turnbull government enjoys derives from the common sense and good instincts of Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce. Were it not for the Nationals' stellar performance at the election last year, the Coalition would now be in opposition.

So his straightforward rejection of the recommendation of the Uluru gathering of Aboriginal leaders for an elected indigenous consultative body to be inserted into the Constitution ought to put the matter to rest. Surely even a government as prone to self-harm as this one would not repudiate Joyce's sound judgment.

Joyce has not been peremptory or unduly hasty. A false narrative is springing up that proponents of radical constitutional change are entitled and encouraged to canvass every option, but people opposed to constitutional change in principle are somehow or other impolitely jumping the gun.

It is of the utmost importance that the Liberals and Nationals indicate their red lines on constitutional change. Over the past 1½ centuries, nationalism, and the associated issue of sovereignty, has been the most important dynamic in international life, while in recent years the wholly destructive movement of identity politics has become the chief obsession of cultural progressives.

Australia is in grave danger of provoking internal divisions that would unleash the forces of nationalism and identity politics in profoundly destructive ways. Nationalism can be good or bad. Its gruesomely exaggerated version led to aggression in World War II, but nationalism as love of nation also impelled the Australian soldiers who defended this country to their last measure on the Kokoda Track. Part of the task for a civilised, mature democracy is to sustain decent nationalism and reject its exaggeration or its repudiation by extremist or misguided political forces.

The Aboriginal leadership over the past 10 years has taken a terrible wrong turn in seeing continued political and constitutional change as the main engine for advancement of indigenous people. It has been encouraged in this grievous, historical error by both sides of politics, though the culpability rests more with the Coalition than with Labor because the Coalition's political tradition, with its emphasis on the exclusive rights and obligations of a universal citizenship, should help it to more strenuously resist this mistake.

Many members of the government, frontbench and back, are extremely unhappy with the proposals for constitutional change but for many reasons have kept silent. That

silence is now damaging Australia, as the expectation of radical change will ultimately become self-fulfilling if there is never an in-principle counterargument.

The Uluru gathering recommended a new consultative body for Aborigines be guaranteed in the Constitution, a new process heading towards a treaty, and a species of truth and reconciliation commissions such that Australia's historic crimes against Aborigines can be run through time and again.

All these proposals are wrong in principle and would be profoundly damaging in practice.

Five years ago I would have supported recognition in a constitutional preamble, so long as it was inclusive and non-divisive, of the Aboriginal presence in Australia before European settlement. But as I have reflected on the matter more deeply, I see now that any departure from the single treatment of all Australians as citizens is bad in principle and would be damaging in the real world.

Tony Abbott promoted the preamble recognition idea as "completing the Constitution". This meant it was a one-off symbolic gesture. But it's clear that this process will never end. Not only has the Aboriginal leadership rejected such recognition, it has repudiated the idea that the Constitution can ever be completed. Instead there is an endless series of demands, all of which compromise national sovereignty and create different classes of Australian citizens.

If Liberals cannot oppose this in principle, it is difficult to know why they exist at all as a political party.

The point of constitutions and symbols is that they should be stable and mostly not front of mind. You get your symbols right partly so that you can forget about them and get on with life.

The prospects for Aboriginal advancement, which every decent person desires profoundly, lie in business, employment, family life, community, education, sports, religion and every other decent part of Australian life. The greatest disadvantage felt by contemporary Aborigines is in remote communities. It is difficult for remote communities to offer their residents the range of opportunity and support that non-remote communities take for granted.

This is a problem governments have addressed without much success. Nothing in constitutional change would have any effect on this. There is nothing useful a government could do with a changed Constitution that it can't do now.

When the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission was born in 1990, I was a reporter in the Canberra press gallery. I well remember the minister at the time, Gerry Hand, making speeches about the beneficial effect ATSIC would have, which were almost word for word, certainly sentiment for sentiment, the same as the rationale coming out of Uluru. Once Aboriginal people had control over their own affairs, the promoters of ATSIC said, they would "own" the policies and the community buy-in, and community pride, would soar, and so on.

In the event, ATSIC was a disaster. Because it didn't exist in the Constitution it could be, rightly, abolished.

It is no longer paranoid to conclude that the drift of Aboriginal politics over the past decade has gone into the very dangerous waters of a challenge to the normal understanding of Australian sovereignty, has embraced illiberal ideas of distinguishing citizens from each other on the basis of membership of a race or ethnic group, and would have devastating consequences for our society, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, if implemented.

Why might the consequences be devastating? Here's one example. The rise of Donald Trump indicates that if you have enough fixation on identity politics of racial subgroups, you will ultimately provoke a movement of identity politics among whites.

This is wholly destructive territory. For Australia to go down this road is crazy.

For the past 10 or 15 years, the US Democratic Party strategists thought they were heading for success because of their support among African-Americans and Hispanics. But the more exaggerated their rhetoric and claims became, the more they demeaned and alienated the white working class — the people who join the police and military, who hate it if they have to live off welfare and whose patriotism has been least affected by the postmodern fashions of academe.

Trump does not represent the idealism of the white working class but he did get its anger. Many Hispanics also rejected identity politics and voted for Trump.

Do we really now, in the context of changing the Constitution, want to relitigate whether the Aborigines who were here 250 years ago formed a single sovereign nation, and what was their sovereign relationship to each other and to the other peoples they displaced, and what implications should that now have for declaring different classes of citizen in contemporary Australia?

Will a future Labor government aim for a treaty without a referendum, and would the Liberals be capable of resisting such a move?

A nation forever fighting over its past is seldom happy. Mainstream political leaders owe it to Aborigines, and to all Australians, to repudiate this dreadful wrong turn