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## OPINION

### ***Symbolism isn't enough. How will AFL bring about real change for Indigenous people?***



*Mathew Stokes during his playing days with the Cats.*

By Mathew Stokes  
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As a Larrakia man from Darwin who grew up immersed in family, I arrived in Adelaide aged 16 sporting a rat tail haircut that gave me the nickname “Matty Rat” and chasing an AFL dream.

I had little idea what lay ahead.

Overlooked in three consecutive drafts, I plugged away with Woodville West-Torrens until the Cats took their chance on me with pick 61 in the 2005 national draft.

Sixteen years down the track, with two flags and 200 games behind me, a year at Essendon following 11 seasons with the Cats and time at the AFL and Geelong in Indigenous focused roles, I have plenty to celebrate from my time in the AFL.

The experience made me into the man I am today, one who made as many mistakes as good decisions as I wake up on Wadawurrung land in Djilang (Djilang is the Wadawurrung name for Geelong, meaning a Tongue of Land) on January 26, a father

of a young family hoping to continue conversations that lead us towards harmony rather than division.

January 26 is a tough day for many First Nations people and one I would hope causes sombre reflection on the true history of this country. It's also an opportunity to hear a variety of perspectives on what we should celebrate about a great country such as Australia.

You might not feel that. That doesn't mean you're wrong and I'm right. It just means our journeys have been different.

What's most important is that despite our different perspectives we engage in conversations to make Australia even better. Such interaction might not always lead to agreement, but it will increase understanding, fostering respect among people from all sorts of backgrounds.

No doubt AFL clubs will acknowledge, as they did last year, the trauma attached to the date Australia Day is celebrated and what it represents for many Indigenous people on their playing lists with a well-meaning, carefully worded statement on the issue.



*Eddie Betts was vocal about Indigenous issues during his playing career.*

That's a discussion worth having and I commend them for that stance. But I don't want it to be a smokescreen that hides the continuing absence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in influential positions in the game.

Will clubs go beyond such symbolic gestures and discuss at a board meeting next month and each month after that the opportunities outside of playing that Indigenous people have in the game?

Will they examine why it is that despite one in 10 AFL players being Indigenous, only about one in every 100 people spread beyond the locker room into clubs, the AFL, the media, player management, coaching, sports science and within executive ranks are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders?

And will clubs think about how to set Indigenous players up to succeed post playing in such areas so a range of perspectives and voices exists in all areas of the game?

The number of Indigenous players began with a trickle before it grew and the same growth in presence can occur in other parts of the game if young Indigenous people can see themselves working in other parts of the industry and set themselves to do so.

These questions are directed at clubs and the league, but it's only half the equation. If the game creates opportunities, it's incumbent on players in the game to do the work to take them when they arise.

There have been shifts this off-season with each club having to employ an Indigenous liaison officer, Michael O'Loughlin joining Sydney's board and the elevation to the coaching ranks of legends such as Neville Jetta and Eddie Betts. Pauly Vandenberg has also been a great addition to the AFL alongside Tanya Hosch, who sits on the executive.

As important as Reconciliation Action Plans or symbolic gestures of support are, nothing beats more involvement and talk.

Investing now in people with potential, such as Hawthorn's Jarman Impey and Chad Wingard, or Carlton's Jack Martin, or Fremantle's Michael Walters, to keep them involved when their careers end will strengthen the game's collective voice and set a foundation for the future rather than merely calling on people to plug holes when a crisis hits.

Right now the onus to discuss the real issues confronting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within clubs still rests – in the main – on Indigenous players who are all at various stages of their careers, at various points in their lives, with various viewpoints and exposure to culture, grappling not only with the challenges of elite sport but the expectations placed on many Indigenous people within clubs.

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Those expectations would even surprise some teammates; they range from checking out a jumper design to how to deal with an incident of racism from supporters, to a view on the Black Lives Matter movement or Australia Day or, as we saw in the Taylor Walker case, whether his Indigenous teammates were comfortable with the contrite forward's reintegration to the club, and planning for Indigenous round.

Not everyone has the knowledge, skills or time to assist in the way others expect.

I realised when I moved into administration roles post-playing how naive I was about key parts of the football industry when I was a player and how tough it was for one person within a club or administration to affect change.

Everyone noted how Adam Goodes was treated for speaking up about broad issues and there remains too few being asked to do too much because the game's Indigenous voices are mainly found in the playing ranks.

It's only now I am confident enough to say there is no question in my mind the date in which Australia Day is celebrated should be changed, but I'm not sure I would have said so publicly during my AFL career, when I had enough on my plate forging an elite sporting career.



*Adam Goodes was poorly treated after he spoke up during his playing career.*

Indigenous liaison officers do a great job but if they are inexperienced or not a centre of influence within a club then they too are placed in difficult positions when tough topics arise.

To create sustainable change, experts in the field working well-defined roles in a structure that creates action are needed.

Otherwise what happens too often is that clubs land on the most convenient solution to a problem and hope to move on.

It isn't hard to see that clubs are never going to be able to create the change needed if they continue to make decisions on Indigenous issues without Indigenous people being part of the conversation.

Imagine the conversations the industry could be having now and the different perspectives the game would enjoy if Indigenous voices were commonly heard at executive level, in list management, in coaching, in medical and conditioning areas or in finance, reflecting the playing population.

The different perspectives would permeate through clubs, making them stronger and more equipped to take a leadership role on issues important to this country's social fabric.

That not only affects clubs but is reflected throughout the community where media voices are often the same and the perspectives remain earnest but narrow.

How much better would discussions in the media about issues relevant to everyone be, if people with lived experience of being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander were given more chances to talk and give their perspective alongside the current crop of media commentators? Tony Armstrong has been excellent on the ABC and Betts vital on Fox Footy, but it can't be the same people all the time.

If you want an example of the impact such a shift could have, you only need to see the impact of female commentators, administrators and opinion-makers (sadly too few coaches) have on our perspectives with the advent of AFLW.

The presence of Indigenous players has improved the locker room at each AFL club even though there are still rocky periods and previous eras were tough on many Indigenous heroes of mine such as Nicky Winmar, Michael Long and Goodes.

Australia Day is a good day to start thinking about what real change needs to happen to enrich our conversation, both in this country and in Australian rules football.

We don't all have to agree, but we need to hear from each other as AFL teammates do throughout their careers.

Until all voices are heard and our influence goes past being players, the game will not reach its full potential.

***Mathew Stokes is a Larrakia man who played 200 games with Geelong and Essendon. He played in Geelong's 2007 and 2011 premiership teams.***