

# WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING FOR?

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I would like to share with you some of my personal reflections and experiences as a young Indigenous woman.

When I started thinking about what the 1967 referendum meant to me, and what I thought it meant for Australia, I was struck, not by what it did, but by what it inspired. What it meant to people – Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike.

It represented hope and possibility. It represented an avenue for change; for recognition of the deep-seated historical legacies that prevent us fully realising our national identity. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples it offered an opportunity to realise that history, and its devastating consequences for Indigenous peoples, could be resolved.

I want to capture some of that sense of possibility in this paper. I want to frame my vision in a way that is empowering. This has not been an easy task. At a time when what we are fighting against frames so much of Indigenous peoples' struggles, I want instead to try to capture some of what we are fighting for.

I started thinking about all this after I watched the reconciliation football match on TV. It spent 10 minutes showing, acknowledging and recognising the worth, inherent value, and hard work that has led to such levels of Indigenous success in that game. To me the program acknowledged the hard work involved for all players and associated people, the struggle of those early Indigenous footballers and, very simply, the work involved in overcoming some of the racism inherent in Australian society. I am not a football fan and I am generally unaccustomed to crying at football matches. But I was so proud at that moment because it showed a positive framing of my identity.

I believe that such a positive framing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity should be deeply entrenched in our vision of the future of Australia. However, for this to occur there are some fundamental things that I think are essential and non-negotiable if we are to make this country as great as we want it to be.

After seeing what can be done in the Northern Territory under our current arrangements, particularly around land tenure, we need the inherent rights of Indigenous people to be recognised and enshrined in our legal and constitutional framework. This framework must recognise the place that Indigenous people hold in Australia's history, identity and vision. These things should never be at the whim of governments to ignore or utilise for narrow political ends.

Secondly, there must be a National Representative Body with full powers and recognition to advocate, make decisions and negotiate on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Lastly, there must be a healing process in Australia that deals with the hurt and guilt felt by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike. This means that Australia needs to implement processes for working out who we are as Australians. I suspect that this requires a concerted effort to combat the racism (institutional and personal) that is prevalent in our country.

I now want to take you to a place far off in the future to spend a moment with my great-granddaughter, Lowanna, as she looks back at recent history. She is in, I want to believe, a place in which all Australians celebrate the fact that they are a part of the longest surviving culture in the world; a place where my great-granddaughter's only conflict with her

identity involves the means by which she becomes a better person, rather than a conflict about her place in Australia; a place where there is no clash between the cultural paradigms that are her experience because they are interconnected; a place where each is understood and respected.

This is what she is reflecting on. First, she casts her mind back to stories her great-grandmother told her about the time when she felt most hopeful; a time when big changes happened in quick succession. It was the time, her grandmother told her, that the Australian nation was born.

She remembers that in 2007 the Australian Government committed to rolling out the services afforded to all Australians – to all Australians. After trialling the now infamous intervention, the Government finally admitted its plan had been a failure, apologised, and implemented a plan designed by over 60 Northern Territory Aboriginal Organisations. This was a watershed in Australian history. Never before had so many resources been committed to Indigenous services in a genuine attempt to address and rectify systemic underspending.

In 2008 the elected government agreed to the ambitious task of closing the health gap across Australia within a generation. The targets, ostensibly focused on quality of life, were consistently met.

In 2009 Australia embarked on a national identity discussion that looked at whiteness, privilege and power. This was the basis for creating a unified vision for the future as well as allowing non-Indigenous Australians to feel part of the long, long history of this country.

In 2009 a newly formed National Representative Indigenous Body was established that allowed people to formulate their own representative bodies, on their terms. The Bunaba, for example, organised themselves around traditional clan groups; these groups were then enshrined in accordance with corporations legislation. The Adelaide community decided they wanted one elder and one young person decided on by consensus. In western New South Wales many communities decided they would nominate one representative through a majority voting system. All models were recognised and accommodated for under the new structure of the Representative Body.

The first order of business was to embark on a 10 year healing process based on truth and reconciliation; this process also focused on healing, identity and culture formation in Indigenous communities. This was one of the first times in history where blackfellas actually got to talk to each other about their experiences.

In 2015 the rights of Indigenous people were enshrined in the *Constitution* - a clear signal by Australians that this nation values its history and the contribution of Indigenous Australians to national identity.

In 2019 Aboriginal community-controlled health services became the primary health care provider of choice - for all Australians. This landmark recognised the service's unique approach to healthcare and excellence in delivery of medicine.

In 2020 the 2000th Indigenous doctor graduated and made an acceptance speech in his cultural language. Everyone in the audience understood because history and language of Indigenous people had become part of the national curriculum.

In 2027, 60 years after the referendum, a decade of genuine political effort, combined with the goodwill of all Australians, led to the signing of a treaty with Indigenous Australians. In the same year, by an overwhelming vote, Australia agreed to become a republic.

In 2030 the first Aboriginal female president was elected.

The reflection my great-granddaughter makes about this time in history is that it was based on honesty, integrity and a genuine willingness to learn and grow as a nation. It transcended political boundaries and cycles and engaged with all Australians. It recognised the inherent value that Indigenous people play in this country. It recognised human values and reflected a desire for Australia to achieve its greatest potential.

In my vision my great-granddaughter knows her place in the world. She and all Australians recognise her Aboriginality as valuable. Her modelling in the world comes from a heritage that has recognised the strength of over 2000 generations worth of extraordinary achievement by deadly women. She acknowledges that when her forebears were negotiating

and taking responsibility for the future of their country they never compromised, in the vision of their nation, a belief in basic human value.

### **Endnotes**

- \* Dameeli Coates is a member of the National Indigenous Youth Movement of Australia (NIYMA).