

Lessons from Australia's the 'voice' referendum



Indigenous women sit on a bench at a polling place in Redfern as Australians cast their final votes in Sydney, Saturday, Oct. 14, 2023, in their first referendum in a generation that aims to tackle Indigenous disadvantage by enshrining in the constitution a new advocacy committee. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)

by Conrad Black

Canadians should perhaps pay more attention than we have to the referendum in Australia on Oct. 14 on the subject of the Aboriginal peoples. There are just under one million designated Aboriginals in Australia, slightly below four per cent of Australia's 25 million people. The roughly

corresponding figures in Canada are that Indigenous Canadians, including in both countries a good number of mixed ancestry, are slightly under five per cent-just, at under two million in a population of 40 million. The issue in the referendum was a proposed amendment to the Australian Constitution by which a federal advisory body comprised of native people would be set up which would have only a consultative role. How this body would be selected and its recommendations presented would be dealt with later. The idea was just to give Aboriginal people, in the wording of the referendum, a "voice" in the politics of the country.

The history of the white settlers of Australia and the natives whom they encountered there is fairly parallel to the Canadian experience. Initial contact was friendly enough, but there was a native vulnerability to certain diseases to which the Australian natives had had no occasion to develop an immunity. Their lands were gradually encroached upon although the inconvenience to them was for a time not as great as it was in Canada where the conversion of huge tracts of arable land on the prairies into immensely productive grain producing farms made it steadily more difficult for our native people to maintain that part of their diet bred on the buffalo. Australian Aboriginals had less difficulty, at least for some time, retreating to places that did not especially attract the settlers, and where it was comparatively possible to maintain a traditional life.

However, there was soon inevitably interaction, some of it successful intermarriage, and some of it outright racial friction with not infrequent outbursts of violence, though nothing on the scale of the Riel rebellions in this country, let alone the outright warfare of the American Indian Wars. But eventually, reservations were created for some Australian Aboriginals. In contrast to this country, there was practically no attempt to help formally educate them or to assist them in integrating into the larger Australian society.

They were gradually pushed to the nether regions of the immense country, almost as large as Canada and with a greater habitable area, and the provision of health and education services to the natives was greatly less generous in the amounts of money and numbers of personnel involved than the corresponding efforts in Canada.

Gradually the theory developed and took hold in Australia that perhaps the early settlers and the autonomous government of Australia created by the British in 1901, could have been more generous and thoughtful. As these matters tend to do, the issue gnawed somewhat at the conscience of white Australia and finally in 2008, the government of Australia passed through both houses of its Parliament an apology and expression of regret for past injustices. There was nothing remotely like the orgy of self-defamatory penitence backed by stupefying amounts of money that has flowed in this country like the Niagara River onto the native people.

Shortly after the new Labor government in Australia was elected in 2022, it proceeded with its declared intention to hold a referendum on the issue of giving the Aboriginal peoples a "voice." And soon after this campaign began, it became clear that the proposed measure was going to have a rocky ride with the country. The predominant opinion among Australians above the age of 45 was that the native had the opportunity to participate fully in Australian life and that there were some substantial gestures of assistance made to them that the more purposeful native people took up.

The majority of Australian voters below the age of 45 generally seemed much more critical of the treatment that had been accorded the natives and were much more disposed to agree this step as a method of facilitating the Aboriginal peoples making their views clear to the country. By Canadian standards, it was a most tentative and elemental proposal. The "No" side effectively said the voice would be divisive, would slow down government and was not a priority for Australia's

Aboriginal people. The "Yes" side wasn't the guilt-ridden Canadian view of simply ladling out the money with one arm while flagellating our own backs with the other; rather it was a pseudo-good-natured and patronizing view that the natives could not help what had befallen them and that there is a responsibility for white Australians to improve their lot. It was easy to get the impression that if anything like our Indian Residential Schools had been operated in Australia, whatever their shortcomings, they would have been hailed by everyone as a gesture of great munificence by the white man.

The proposition required an absolute majority in the country and a majority in a majority of the states of the country; it was rejected by 60 per cent of Australians and by all of the Australian states and only the national capital district at Canberra voted in favour of it. There appear to be three particular implications of the Australian result for Canada. A proper and impartial and comprehensive airing in this country of the entire history of European and European-Canadian relations with our Aboriginal people should be conducted and at the end of that the country should be invited to vote on a number of policy options. This would give public policy the legitimacy of specific popular approval and blunt the influence of the charlatans in the native victimhood industry and their collaborators in government.

The second conclusion is that however imperfect our treatment of native issues, they certainly bear comparison for compassion and good intentions with other countries including Australia, the United States, and the horrifying outrages routinely committed in Latin America, where many of the countries are in fact predominantly native though they speak Spanish or Portuguese and are overwhelmingly Christian.

Finally, we should consider why Canada is so susceptible to these tropical fevers of guilt and the fabrication of excuses for self-mortification such as the nonsense about murdered native children in unmarked graves. Frequent readers will be

aware of my view that, with both good and regrettable consequences, we are so heavily influenced by the United States that when it suddenly fell into a slough of despond in a period acute self-criticism over the legacy of slavery, we felt in this as in so many other matters, a compulsion to emulate them. Our record in receiving fugitive American slaves and avoiding slavery was impeccable, (despite the scurrilous myth-making of former Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin and others), so an orgy of confected self-hate about our native people and “systemic racism” was the best we could do. We can do better.

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