

The Voice Inside the Progressive Head



Thomas Keneally

by Theodore Dalrymple

Among my wife's family papers dating from the Occupation of France are a couple of certificates of *aryanité* issued to her forebears, that they might continue to be employed and not deported. In Australia, people apply for certificates of aboriginality, in order that they might receive various advantages, subventions, etc.

The former is bad racism, the latter good, at least for those who believe in positive racial discrimination. Unfortunately, it is logically impossible to believe in positive racial discrimination without also believing in the negative kind, irrespective of one's supposed good intentions.

Australia [recently held a referendum](#) on a proposed race-based

amendment to the constitution. The amendment proposed something called "*The Voice*" to be inscribed in the constitution: an advisory body composed of Aborigines who would advise parliament on matters specifically affecting Aborigines. The details of the proposed body—how it was to be chosen or appointed, its purpose, its powers, its duties, its emoluments—were not specified, and those in favour of it, up to and including the Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, were either unwilling or unable to specify further, relying entirely on the Australian emotional equivalent of Noel Coward's famous song, "Don't Let's Be Beastly to the Germans." The latter was not much of a policy.

Australian voters, initially favourable to the proposal, [rejected it by a large majority](#), suspecting, rightly in my view, that they were being sold a pig in a poke. They also suspected, I surmise, that what was being proposed was a corrupt and corrupting bureaucratic pork barrel that would reward a small class of Aboriginal Al Sharptons. Far from improving the situation of Australian Aborigines, which is sometimes but not always tragic, the Voice would permanently raise the ideological temperature and prevent measured debate about practical improvements. Benefits would be received without gratitude and, would never, virtually by definition, be sufficient. And of course, the Voice would be the end of the ideal of racial equality. Australia would join the old South Africa in its inscription of race in its constitution.

The abysmal intellectual level of the proponents of the Voice was very well instantiated in an article by Thomas Keneally, the famous Australian novelist, [in the Guardian newspaper](#). It began as follows:

Last Sunday, many in Australia profoundly mourned the loss of the Indigenous voice to parliament referendum, the greatest kindly Amendment ever to be proposed for the Australian constitution, those dreary old articles of association by which our states and territories rub along together in far-

flung federation.

I will overlook the use of the word *profoundly* in this context: I think the words superficially, self-satisfactorily, and exhibitionistically would have been better. But note that, even if the loss were deeply mourned, only the grossest of sentimentalists would claim that such mourning would have any bearing on the rightness or otherwise of the loss that was mourned. Many Nazis and many communists mourned the loss of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia far more deeply than any Australian mourned the loss of the referendum, but no one, I think, would sympathise with them because of the depth of their sorrow.

It seems not to have occurred to Mr. Keneally that is not the place of constitutions to be “kindly.” (Again, I overlook the implicit racial condescension of the application of the word “kindly” in this context.) To expect kindness in a constitution is like expecting readability in a paper about quantum mathematics. No doubt a constitutional clause mandating decent treatment for hamsters would be kindly, but it would not be good constitutional law.

As to the allegedly “dreary old articles of association,” they have allowed for (not mandated) the development, over a period of 120 years, of one of the most successful countries and societies in the history of the world—not without blemishes, to be sure, but no human construction of this kind is without blemish. I suspect that a constitution written by Mr. Keneally might be less dreary, but I suspect also that it would soon lead to masses of people trying to leave Australia rather than immigrate into it.

Among other things that Keneally asserts is that:

Settlers’ children like myself have been here [Australia] less than 250 years. Aboriginal Homo sapiens is claimed to have been here for 65,000 years. Whenever I say that, I see a

child running up a beach into sand dunes, for the Aboriginal people not only travelled in families but in clans. And in a clan the children sometimes run ahead.

This is unutterable bilge, in which some kind of poetic vision is made to do the work of thought. It is almost certainly insincere into the bargain, as the last sentences of the article illustrate only too clearly:

The rate at which Aboriginal Australians die in custody is obscenely greater than the white and Asian settler community. Indigenous Australians do not live as long as whites, having an average life span that is eight years shorter. We would have had a federal mechanism for dealing with all that, on good advice from the people themselves. For they are the true owners. What part of "no" was an attempt to deny that? (emphasis added)

I will refrain from pointing out that Aboriginal life expectancy is now twice what it was when the first Europeans arrived, or that the members of the proposed "Voice" might not be—in fact, would not be—coterminous with the people themselves. I will instead focus on the idea that the Aborigines are "the true owners."

The true owners of what, exactly? Mr. Keneally's copyrights, for example, or of his house, his library, his belongings, the clothes he stands up in? I doubt that he means this, although that is the corollary of what he says. To assert "they are the true owners" therefore leaves the question dishonestly hanging in the air: what are they truly the owners of? It is to substitute a kind of mushy, self-satisfied, and all-encompassing benevolence for the hard task of thought.

The article is valuable, for it is a kind of *locus classicus* of modern Western feeling (thought would not be the right word for it). It captures to perfection the imprecision,

doubtful sincerity, condescension, and self-satisfaction of a large part of the Western intelligentsia.

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