The Voice and Aboriginal Society in Australia

Bill Rubinstein

The forthcoming vote on the Voice amendment to the Constitution is expected to see the amendment pass by a large majority. Overt opponents of the amendment have so far been few and far between; opposition to the amendment by our political parties has so far been confined to the Nationals. Yet it also seems clear that there is a wellspring of opposition to its enactment which, outside of conservative sources like *Quadrant* magazine, have yet to be heard. Support for the Voice amendment is also almost always made in the context of a totally distorted version of Aboriginal society and history which has been uncontested. In this Opinion Piece, I would like to set out some of the reasons why the Voice amendment should be opposed and why the real nature of Aboriginal society was very different from that normally depicted.

No matter how this may be disguised or concealed, the Voice proposal is an example of blatant racism. It would give Aborigines – however they may be defined, which itself is not a straightforward matter – rights in law, embedded in the Constitution, which I don't have and which few readers of this article will have, purely because we are not Aborigines. Although it may seem as if Aborigines have been neglected by our federal and state governments, this is not the case. According to the 2021 Census, there are about 66,000 people in Victoria who state that they are Aborigines, roughly one per cent of the population. This figure is only slightly more than the estimated number of Jews (60,000) in Victoria and is certainly less than the number of persons of Greek, Italian, Chinese, or Indian birth or descent. Yet – in contrast to the other groups – there is a separate Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Spring Street, which is represented in the Victorian Cabinet with a Cabinet minister. Every state and territory has a similar situation. Aboriginal people are already entitled to a wide range of benefits available to them alone, as googling "Aboriginal Benefits" will show. The main reason for the dysfunctional nature of remote Aboriginal communities is simply that they are hundreds of kilometres from the nearest big city, with the employment and educational opportunities to be found there. Even if the Voice amendment is passed, and followed by twenty other laws to benefit them, these communities will still be hundreds of kilometres from the nearest big city: nothing will have changed.

In recent years, the actual nature of pre-Contact and early colonial Aboriginal society has been depicted by most observers, and especially by left-leaning academics and politicians, as the exact opposite of reality, in a way worthy of George Orwell. The widespread portrayal today of an idyllic, almost utopian society of gentle, spiritually oriented rural dwellers is pure fiction: the actual nature of Aboriginal society was utterly different. When Europeans first settled here in 1788, they encountered a continent of almost incredible, indeed nightmarish, barbarism and violence. This reality was caused by the central fact that all of Australia's Aborigines were nomadic hunter-gatherers who did not domesticate livestock or plant crops for food. As a result, the hundreds of small tribes constituting the (entirely false) "First Nations" were engaged in a never-ending struggle to find what little sustenance existed on this largely dry and barren continent. The most important consequence of this central fact was the absolute necessity of keeping the population of each tribe sufficiently small for its members to survive on what food could be found. It was therefore absolutely necessary for each tribe to avoid additional mouths to feed above the

strictly limited numbers who could be kept alive as nomadic hunter-gatherers. They did this by eliminating any and all of the excess mouths.

Probably the most important method of eliminating these excess mouths was infanticide. The deliberate murder of babies and small children occurred among virtually all of Australia's indigenous tribes. For instance, William Henry Willshire (1852-1925) a Mounted Policeman, "says of the parts of Central Australia known to him, at least 60% of the women committed infanticide. He tells of one woman that she had five children, three of whom she murdered immediately after birth, and she explained in her broken English, 'me bin keepem one boy and one girl, nogood keepem mob, him to[o] much wantem tuckout.' Therefore, the women of the bush daily murder their children and do not wish to murder more than two." The second baby of twins – and sometimes both – were often killed at birth because the mother could not suckle it. Worse, murdered infants were often cooked and eaten – cannibalism was widespread among the Aborigines – and fed to an older sibling in order to strengthen it.

Apart from the inability of pre-Contact Aboriginal society to gather or produce enough to feed all, another reason for infanticide was the inability of their mothers to carry more than one child. It is not realised that Aboriginal women did *all* of the carrying, not only of infants and small children, but also of all of that tribe's possessions. It must be grasped that the Aborigines had no pack animals or wheeled vehicles, and the sole means of carrying any child or object was by members of that tribe, a job exclusively for women. For this reason, in Central Australia a new-born infant was killed if its older sibling was aged eighteen months or less; in other places they were killed if their older sibling had not yet turned three or four. Just how many Aboriginal infants and small children were murdered because of the near-universal practice of infanticide? The percentage killed in this way has various estimates, with 30 per cent probably being the median figure. The Aboriginal population of Australia in 1788 is generally estimated at about 350,000. Given about 10,000 Aboriginal births each year and a 30 per cent infanticide rate, about 300,000 Aboriginal children were murdered in the course of each century, or *three million* per millennium. Over the course of 50,000 years of Aboriginal residence here, about *150 million* Aboriginal infants and small children were slaughtered by their tribes. While today's radicals and activists make the (nonsensical) claim that European settlement resulted in "Aboriginal genocide", what are we to think of a murder toll which makes recent dictators look like humanitarians? And if Australia had not been settled by the British, who quickly and decisively put an end to Aboriginal infanticide and the other enormities, as they did throughout the British Empire (for example, their suppression of *suttee* and *thuggee* in India), something like *700,000* additional Aboriginal infants would certainly have been murdered by their tribes after 1788. This discussion of infanticide merely scratches the surface of Aboriginal barbarism, which also includes cannibalism and tribal massacres, their universal mistreatment of women, and their hellish initiation ceremonies, among others. Today, all of this has been systematically censored out of all accounts of Aboriginal life, so that, for instance, one Victorian government publication states that "Aboriginal communities were self-developing [sic] and Aboriginal children were nurtured and protected", while for Aborigines, "colonisation meant massacre, violence, and disease."

A great many other things accepted as true of the Aboriginal community are more than a little dubious. For instance, the "Welcome to Country" ceremony, presented as if it originated in the ancient mists of Dreamtime, dates all the way back to 1976, when it was invented out of the whole cloth by Ernie Dingo, the Aboriginal actor, and Richard Whalley, in order to welcome a group of Maori

artists who were participating in the Perth International Arts Festival. Although many places have been declared to be Aboriginal "sacred sites," the 2021 Census found that there precisely 5244 persons in Australia who claimed to be adherents of an Aboriginal tribal religion, out of a total Aboriginal population – according to the Census – of 812,000, or around seven-tenths of one per cent. Forty-four per cent of Australia's Aborigines claimed to be Christians, about the same figure as among the overall Australian population, and to whom these sites may be meaningful but are certainly not "sacred".

(Emeritus Professor William D. (Bill) Rubinstein held Chairs of History at Deakin Univesity and at the University of Wales.)