
NEVILLE BONNER ORATION: PRIME MINISTER THE HON. TONY ABBOTT MP

Friday, 28 November 2014
Sydney

It's an honour to give this lecture in memory of Neville Bonner, the first Aboriginal Member of the Australian Parliament, a member of the Foundation Council of Australians for Constitutional Monarchy, and a delegate to the 1998 Constitutional Convention to consider whether Australia should become a republic.

There were many fine speeches at that convention but Neville Bonner's was the one that gripped people's soul. This is what he said:

We have come to accept your laws. We have come to accept your Constitution. We have come to accept the present system. We believed you when you said that a democracy must have checks and balances. We believed you when you said that not all positions in society should be put out for election. We believed you when you said that judges should be appointed, not elected. We believed you when you said that the Westminster system ensures that the government is accountable to the people. We believed you when you taught us that integral to the Westminster system is a head of state who is above politics. We believed you when you said that, as with the judiciary, Government House must also be a political-free zone.

This magnificent old man, went on to say:

How dare you! You told my people that your system was best. We have come to accept that. We have come to believe that. The dispossessed, despised adapted to your system. Now you say that you were wrong and that we were wrong to believe you. Suddenly you are saying that what brought the country together, made it independent, ensured its defence, saw it through peace and war, and saw it through depression and prosperity, must all go.

It was by far the most powerful speech of that intense period in our nation's life. As he sat down the supporters of the 'no' case all rose in their seats—and the republicans remained frozen in theirs. And then the most unlikely figure rose in his seat—it's Neville Wran, standing to honour the dignity, conviction and wisdom of a great man. And the rest then rose as one. It was the only standing ovation at that convention.

Despite the many indignities that might have soured his outlook,

Neville Bonner had a great love for our country, its institutions and its people. He grasped that modern Australia has an Indigenous heritage, a British foundation and a multicultural character. His final speech brings to mind another image from Old Parliament House. On the day of its opening back in 1927 along with the Duke of York and numerous dignitaries there was just one Indigenous man present. He was not an official guest. He had no place of honour. Yet his presence was as much a symbol of unity as that of our future King.

Although unacknowledged, uncounted in any census and not dressed in the finery of others, Jimmy Clements—for that was his name—carried with him an Australian flag. It was his demonstration that he loved our country as much as anyone, despite not sharing in all its benefits.

As a constitutional conservative, like Neville Bonner, my instinct is to keep the Constitution; to conserve the Constitution exactly as is. 'Don't fix what isn't broken' was the rally cry of the 'no' campaign at the Constitutional Convention and at the subsequent referendum. Like John Howard, my distinguished predecessor as leader of the Liberal Party and of the Liberal National Coalition, I don't normally seek to change the Constitution. I don't seek to remove the Crown. I don't seek to change the separation of powers. I don't seek to change our representative system of government.

These days, I don't even seek to change the states' constitutional role because I appreciate that we should not lightly change that which has stood the test of time. I understand that change is often far more trouble than it is worth. I do, however, seek constitutional recognition of Aboriginal people in a form that would complete our Constitution rather than change it.

Today, I invite the friends of our Constitution to suspend scepticism.

As a constitutional conservative, I would never seek change unless I was convinced that it would be change for the better. That, after all, is what the founders of our Constitution envisaged when they provided a mechanism for changing it.

Changing the Constitution was meant to be hard: it requires an act of Parliament, a vote of the people and a majority of four of six states. It is rightly much harder than changing a law, but it is not meant to be impossible because our Constitution's founders never imagined that the Constitution should never change. Sometimes, after all, change is necessary for survival and sometimes change is desirable for improvement.

The opening of our Constitution states that the Australian people "humbly relying on the blessings of Almighty God have agreed to unite in one indissoluble federal Commonwealth under the Crown". It is an acknowledgement of our British and our Christian heritage but it does not in any way hinder the development of a free, multicultural nation which gives people a fair go and encourages them to have a go.

It is precisely because we have done so well under the Constitution we have that we should be so cautious about changing it. Our whole history, though, is one of change for the better—change that builds on what we have rather than throw it away to start again. The challenge is to find a way to acknowledge Aboriginal people in the Constitution without otherwise changing it. That's the task now engaging the Government and our Parliament. I do not underestimate its difficulty but I don't underestimate its importance either if we are to achieve all we can as a nation.

You are rightly cautious about any change to our Constitution. So was Neville Bonner. And so is anyone who appreciates the scale of the Australian achievement over the past century. Still, it would be an odd constitutional conservative who cherished every single clause in our constitution except the clause allowing it to be changed.

The establishment of this lecture, in his honour, was Australians for Constitutional Monarchy's tribute to Neville Bonner. Today, I am asking you to consider a change that, if done well, I am sure he would have asked you to support. If done well, acknowledging Indigenous Australians in the Constitution would strengthen our country, not weaken it.

Constitutional recognition can't substitute for real action to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians—but it can complement it.

Every day, this Government is working with Aboriginal people: to get children to school, adults to work and to make communities safe—as we should, because by far the most troubling feature of our national story is the dispossession and marginalisation of Aboriginal people. It's not that our constitutional founders made a mistake—they simply failed to give Aboriginal people more than

a passing thought. So, in addressing this subject, our job is not to correct their work but to complete it.

Like John Howard, I have come to support the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the Constitution because it already recognises our British heritage and, if we are to acknowledge part of our history, we should acknowledge all of it.

My hope is that any future referendum to recognise Aboriginal people will echo the successful 1967 changes, not the unsuccessful 1999 ones, which, as you will remember, were to insert a recognition preamble as well as to become a republic. Nineteen sixty-seven was a small change to our Constitution but a big change for our country. It was Australians' first acknowledgement that Aboriginal people mattered. It was the first sign that they should not be treated as second class citizens in their own country. Like 1967—but unlike 1999—any future referendum campaign should be an act of affirmation rather than a political argument. If there is to be a victory, it has to be one for all of us—as 1967 was.

Consideration of a proposal should be a conversation as much as a debate: careful, considered and civilised—because if it is to build national unity it can't be a 'winner takes all' contest.

Both sides of politics, and all Members of Parliament, are now working together on a good way forward and the best possible wording to be put to the Australian people. The bipartisan committee chaired by the House of Representatives' first Indigenous MP, Ken Wyatt, will soon make final recommendations about the precise changes that could be made. We should be prepared to consider and refine any proposal for some time because it is so much better to get this right than to rush it. The worst of all outcomes would be dividing our country in an effort to unite it.

A successful referendum would be another demonstration that Australia can in every way be a beacon of hope and an exemplar of unity and decency.

As the Constitution's fiercest defenders, our temptation is to dismiss all change as constitutional vandalism—but today I invite you to consider this change more as renewal and refurbishment; as a grace note in this most serviceable of foundation documents.

Indigenous culture, after all, is part of our common heritage as Australians; as much as our language, our Parliament, our system of law and our Crown. If all Australians are to walk forward together, the least we can do is acknowledge the first of us in our foundation document.