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[Tanya Hosch](#)

Joint campaign director for RECOGNISE

Recognition: The Greatest Gift For All Australia's Children

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As most things perhaps should, this discussion begins and ends with our kids. Don't tune out if you don't happen to have children of your own -- I mean 'our kids' in the broadest sense possible. We all share a joint responsibility for all Australian children. They are the embodiment of our future, the people who will comprise this nation after we've all passed through.

Every one of us owes every one of them a duty of care; to ensure they are not harmed, to allow them to grow and experience childhood in an environment of safety and harmony and to let them live in a country which respects their individual backgrounds, family histories and cultural lives. We are responsible to ensure they are protected from disease, educated, kept healthy, properly fed and, ideally, each allowed to achieve their individual potential.

And we have a further responsibility: to work for improvements to the nation itself, piece by piece to fix the place up, to leave it better than we found it, to pass on to our children the gift of a nation materially improved on the one in which we ourselves were raised.

We delegate to our governments many of these tasks necessary to the wellbeing of our kids and their preparation for taking the reins when their time comes. We've built a society that is like a vast extended family. We elect representatives to government, we pay taxes to fund it, and for that we expect government to provide all those schools and clinics and police officers to take care of our kids. All of our kids.

But some of the larger national maintenance tasks, the 'home improvements' we need before passing the place on, fall back on us directly. Constitutional change is a good example. We all need to take part, we need to vote in favour of a referendum proposal in overwhelming numbers, and right across the country. Otherwise it can't happen.

If we had to hand this country over to the next generation of our children right now, they would be justified in thinking that it was less a gift than a burden. That we had badly neglected our responsibility to render it fit to take its place as a modern nation in the early 21st Century. Here's why:

This is a nation of people that has been established for at least 40,000 years and only recently experienced several waves of immigration. I mean, very, very recently. Compared to the time span of the original human settlement of this continent, the first -- British -- wave of migrants dropped anchor a couple of heartbeats ago.

These people went on to set up the legal architecture of modern Australia a mere century or so ago, federating a bunch of British colonies into a more-or-less independent Commonwealth governed by a Parliament. They were quickly followed by new waves of people from pretty much every corner of the planet, resulting in the diverse and culturally gifted country we enjoy today.

But there's a problem. When those British colonials drew up that national blueprint, they left out the people who were here all along. The Constitution they drafted purports to describe a nation that only popped into existence with the first migrant wave.

In doing so they not only committed a grave injustice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, they did all Australians a huge disservice. They robbed us of this rich and unimaginably long history and cultural legacy, in which, as modern Australians, we should all take enormous pride and ownership. The oldest living cultures on earth are here, they are as intrinsic to the landscape as eucalypt forest and they have been so for what in human terms is an eternity.

Yet you can't learn that by reading the Australian Constitution. This has to be rectified if we are to acquit our responsibilities to the generations following us.

What you can learn, sadly, is something of the attitudes 19th Century Europeans brought to their task of creating a new national blueprint and the place indigenous Australians occupied in their thinking. Two sections in particular -- one added later -- allow for flat-out racial discrimination.

Well, what else should we expect from the 19th Century? The far more important question is: what should we expect of ourselves in the 21st? What should we tell our children to say if an overseas visitor asks: "Is it true your Constitution lets governments discriminate against people based on race?"

We need a better answer than the one we have at present.

It's really quite simple -- child's play, you could say. Earlier generations bequeathed us a Constitution with some flaws so serious we simply can't carry them any longer. They are a dead weight impeding us, holding us back, as we continue our national journey together.

When it comes time to hand over to all these brilliant Australian kids, we should look them in the eye and say: "Here is your gift, we've fixed that for you, now let's see what you can do."

This blog is the fifth of 12 in a Secret Santas for Australia series by the Centre for Policy Development.

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