

# How can I feel Australian when this country has told me I don't belong?



[Stan Grant](#)

Like many Indigenous people I struggle to forge a deep allegiance to a nation that excludes us from its constitution, culture and opportunities, writes Stan Grant



Deborah Cheetham, the Indigenous soprano, turned down the chance to sing at the AFL grand final because she could not sing the national anthem with sincerity Photograph: Felix Clay for the Guardian

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I am thinking now that I have to speak very gently. I need to tread warily and allow you the chance to absorb what I want to say.

There are things that can tear us apart. There are people who are more interested in turning us on each other.

It is so easy to distort words to take something that is meant with sincerity and fill it with hate.

My people – Indigenous people – are especially vulnerable, because we are so few and often so fragile.

Yet, there are things that need to be said and we need to find a way to have hard discussions.

Here goes. I am not an Australian or more precisely I don't feel Australian. I am not alone among my people in feeling this way.

There is nothing in Australia's myths that includes us. Our stories don't form this country's folklore. [Clancy of the Overflow](#) wasn't black. The [jolly swagman](#) wasn't black.

Bush poet [Ted Egan](#) got it right: we were "[poor bugger me, Gurindji](#)".

The [sweeping plains and rugged mountain ranges of Dorothea Mackellar's imagination](#) were also places of death for our people. We were stricken by disease on those plains. We were herded over those mountains.

After the coming of the settlers, this was the "wide brown land" for us.

For most of this country's history we were not citizens. Some of our people – my grandfather included – [enlisted to fight in Australia's wars](#) but returned to a segregated country where they could not enter a pub to share a drink with the diggers they fought alongside.

We find our peoplehood in the ancient nations of this land. For me it is [Wiradjuri](#) and [Kamilaroi](#), for others [Bandjalang](#) or [Luritja](#) or [Arrente](#) or [Ardnyamathanha](#) or [Yorta Yorta](#). There were many hundreds of nations here when Europeans came. Yet, we were conveniently bundled together as Aborigines – our identities extinguished along with our rights to our land.

It didn't end there. The [Australian Law Reform Commission](#) records 67 different definitions of Australian Indigenous people – you told us who we were, but you never called us Australians.

This isn't history – it isn't some distant past

Government policies have ranged from protection – smoothing the dying pillow of a race destined for extinction – to segregation to integration to assimilation to self-determination.

The Australian constitution does not recognise us. Provisions in that same document have meant that our children have been taken away; our homes could be invaded; our privacy ignored.

This isn't history – it isn't some distant past. In my lifetime the dispossession has continued. In the year I was born, 1963, [police at gunpoint removed Aboriginal people from their community of Mapoon in Queensland](#). Their homes were torched as they were loaded onto trucks and driven away. Today those people remember that time as the burning.

[In 2007 in the Northern Territory the army moved in](#). Remote communities were declared at risk. Violence and abuse – sexual assault of children – had triggered a national emergency. Rights were curtailed – welfare money quarantined, alcohol banned. Managers were installed.

Yes, people needed protection – no question. But in the process communities complained they were not consulted, they felt disempowered. Pat Anderson, the Indigenous co-author of the "[Little Children Are Sacred](#)" report that highlighted the abuse, complained that what became known as the Intervention risked exacerbating the very crisis it was meant to arrest.

There are so many reasons this country has told us we don't belong.

Deborah Cheetham – Indigenous performer and associate dean of music at the University of Melbourne – [has revealed that she declined an invitation to sing the national anthem at the AFL grand final](#). It would have been the largest audience she had performed before.

Yet she says she could not [sing those words](#) with sincerity.

“Australians all let us rejoice.” What is there for us to rejoice about in our troubled history?

“For we are young and free.” My people are some of the most incarcerated people on earth. We are less than 3% of the population and a quarter of the total of Australians in prison. For juveniles it is even worse.

“We’ve golden soil and wealth for toil.” We are the poorest community in this country. We have the highest levels of unemployment – at least three times greater than other Australians.

Advance Australia fair is an aspiration, not a reality, for Indigenous people.

Let’s not forget that Deborah Cheetham would have been singing in front of people who may well have been among those booing [Adam Goodes](#), the Sydney Swans champion and Australian of the year.

There is a yearning for this place: it is our home

Goodes himself had retired. [He too would not attend the grand final](#).

Now he is being [targeted again for racial abuse](#) after he signed as an ambassador for department store David Jones.

[Indigenous actress Miranda Tapsell this past week has also told of how she struggles to truly feel Australian](#). She says that when others are comfortable embracing her – accepting her identity – she may then feel she truly belongs.

She was pilloried on social media. She was accused of being ungrateful: of denying the opportunities Australia has afforded her. Some would say the same about me. But whatever we have won has been hard earned. It has often been despite Australia – not because of it.

I work. I pay taxes. I abide by our laws. I respect the rights of others. But I struggle with a deeper allegiance.

Yet we want to believe. As much as Australia rejects us, we reach out looking for a way in. My grandfather went to war to prove his loyalty. Indigenous people have represented this country – some have captained our sporting teams. There is a yearning for this place: it is our home.

Deborah Cheetham longs for a day when we will sing a new anthem – one that springs from tens of thousands of years of history and belongs to us all. On that day she hopes our voices can rise together.

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