

Migrants should not have constitutional recognition alongside first Australians



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Liberal MP Ian Goodenough wants migrants to be recognised in our constitution along with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. He's wrong



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are this continent's first story – and one that warrants primacy in our national narrative. Photograph: Michael Amendolia/In Pictures/Corbis

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The federal Liberal MP Ian Goodenough has got it wrong.

He wants successive waves of migrants to be recognised in our constitution alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people because, he says, they, too, are Australians, and have made a unique contribution to Australia.

Which misses the point.

If you are a proponent of recognising [Indigenous Australians](#) in the constitution (I harbour serious misgivings about dedicating so much public energy and finance to the symbolism of conciliation when Indigenous life and history is mired in inextricably linked catastrophe) then you might well be confused by Goodenough's argument, too.

Multicultural Australia is blessed to have its roots in the successive waves, pre- and postcolonial, of migrants who came, and continue to come, to Australia. From the Chinese who came to the goldfields in the mid-19th century to the Vietnamese of the 1970s, from the Afghan cameleers to the post-war Europeans and, now, those from the Middle East

(omissions here are unavoidable given Australia's ethnic composition), each has brought something unique and invaluable to this continent.

Many have faced enormous persecution in their countries of origin and have endured serious hardship and danger to get here.

Some have come to Australia from countries where their families had been for generations, centuries, millennia. They are, rightly, welcomed in Australia. Indeed, many more of the world's persecuted and dispossessed should be invited to make a home here.

But none of these people are "first Australians". [Migration](#) and consequent multiculturalism is an intrinsic and, quite rightly, cherished, part of the Australian fabric. But Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are this continent's first story – and one that warrants primacy in our national narrative.

And that is the point that Goodenough – and others who would claim symmetry in the historical plight between immigrants to Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders – seem to be missing.

Goodenough, who is of English, Portuguese and Chinese extraction, has harked back to the British who came to Australia after invasion and occupation (more palatably anglicised and culturally accepted here as "first settlement") in 1788 to justify his argument.

[Writing for the Drum today](#), here is part of what he argued:

"Our success as a nation is due in great part to the western culture introduced by the early pioneering settlers from Britain – they brought with them a culture characterised by the Protestant work ethic of hard work, thrift, prudence, civility and the rule of law. The early settlers introduced to Australia modern methods of agriculture, efficient means of industrial production, scientific principles and the Westminster system of governance.

"These factors combined with our natural resources are largely responsible for the social and economic development of our nation into the strong society that it is today. Today Australians enjoy a far higher standard of living than many countries in the rest of the world, making Australia a highly attractive destination for migrants."

He neglects to mention that the British soldiers, explorers and settlers brought with them much else besides, not least guns, disease, grog and strychnine to poison the bread that was left out for the black people. From the moment of first contact, wars and battles of occupation raged across the Australian pastoral and exploration frontier ... conflicts that continued to manifest in the massacres of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people until, shamefully, well into the 20th century.

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By the most conservative accounts, at least 20,000 Indigenous Australians died in conflict with soldiers, settlers, vigilantes and "native" police. Other credible academic research points to a much higher fatality rate.

The dispossession and violence that accompanied white European settlement of this continent reverberates through countless Indigenous communities today. The ongoing trauma from the frontier (effectively yesterday in the 60,000-year-old story of the first peoples, kept alive in oral history, visual art and songlines) resounds little less today than it did in the 19th century.

Life expectancy in some communities (42 for men in some places I know of) is third world. The gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians on some critical social and economic indicators continue to widen. The imprisonment rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, despite a royal commission into deaths in custody a quarter of a century ago, are a matter of profound national and international dishonour.

And it remains an uncomfortable truth that the enormous wealth that non-Indigenous Australia has harvested (to which Goodenough refers) has come from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Earth and sea. The wealth has not been rightfully distributed among traditional owners, who continue to fight multinational developers and miners who desecrate sacred lands and poison waterways.

“Indigenous people are not the only Australians who have been wronged or been subjected to injustice – many immigrants to Australia have faced these ordeals through war and displacement, taking their own time to cope and move forward with their lives,” Goodenough says.

Indeed.

But Australian culture, history, national conversation (or for those who want to argue for it, the constitution) should, nonetheless, rightly pay unique acknowledgment to the experience and against-the-odds endurance of this continent’s first peoples.

All the rest of us have our roots elsewhere. We reside in their country. And that is not the same.
