

Many of my own people tell me they don't understand the Voice

By Stan Grant

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Stan Grant (second left) with Rob Williams, Aunty Patty Undi and Madina Penrith at Warangesda. *(Supplied)*

Are we nothing? Are we just fence posts by the side of the road?

Aunty Patty Undi sitting next to me is talking on our country. In a place of our ancestors.

She is an old lady now and she is talking about her mother and her grandmother. She is wondering does this nation — Australia — truly care for us?

The white people, she says, were more worried about stealing the land than caring for the people who walked on this land.

Aunty Patty speaks from hard experience. She knows that for most of her life — to white Australia — we have been nothing. Our history has been denied. Our culture has been destroyed. Our people were rounded up and put on missions and reserves.



It is rare for so many of our mob to come together as we did this past weekend.

(Supplied)

This past weekend we have all come together at the old Warangesda mission at Darlington Point in New South Wales.

All our mob are here: cousins, uncles, aunties. We are all connected by blood and country and history.

This is rare. We don't often get to come to this old site. It sits on private land today but back in the 1880's it was set up as a refuge from the brutality of the frontier.

Protection became cultural genocide

From the 1830s relations between black and white turned violent. White invaders formed armed posses to attack Wiradjuri people.

The Wiradjuri responded with our own resistance.



This is what is left of some of the Warangesda mission buildings, but memories of the place remain strong. (*Supplied*)

The Reverend John Brown Gribble, an Anglican missionary, founded the mission settlement. He had a vision to save Aboriginal people.

The name Warangesda was a combination of warang, the Wiradjuri word for home, and Bethesda, which is Hebrew for house of mercy.

This "camp of mercy" did not always appear so merciful. Here were the beginnings of the Stolen Generations.

Children were taken from their families and put into dormitories. People were forced onto the mission to "protect" them.

Protection became cultural genocide.



The camps were a place where protection became cultural genocide and the beginning of the Stolen Generations but years later the Tikandi Inaburra Wiradjuri dancers prove culture has survived. (*Supplied*)

We carry the truth

My great grandmother, Florence Foster, was born at Warangesda. My great-great grandmother, Lidia Naden, was brought there as a young girl rounded up alongside other Wiradjuri people.

My great-great grandfather, Frank Foster, a Dharawal man was sent there from Sydney when Aboriginal people were being pushed out of the city.

In this land is our truth. It is truth we carry with us.

Darren Wighton whose great grandparents also lived here reminds us that all our families carry trauma.

Yet he says we must forgive. Not just because the perpetrator is worthy of forgiveness but because we are strong enough to forgive.

In forgiveness he says there is healing. And for us there is healing in this place.

Forgiveness and truth require justice. And in between the dances and ceremonies this weekend there has been hard talk of justice.

Wiradjuri people are rebuilding our nation. We are reviving our language and practising our ceremonies.

Can the Voice speak for my people?

This year the nation will vote on a First Nations constitutional voice. Many of my own people here tell me they don't understand it.

These people live close to the earth and the Voice conversation — like all things of politics — feels distant.

They don't know who to trust. They wonder if the Voice will truly speak for them.

Wiradjuri people are rebuilding our nation. We are reviving our language and practising our ceremonies.

We are deeply spiritual people. Our land is our soul.

They want to know if the Voice will protect these things. Will the Voice lead to treaty? What about our sovereignty?

One old uncle reminds me we are a tribal people. We should control ourselves.

He says he doesn't want Indigenous people from outside our nation speak for us.

He says we should not be at the white people's table but at our own table.

Here people cling to our survival. These are not things to debated but things of life and death.

There are people here who say they will not support the Voice because they suspect it will not speak loudly enough.

Still others passionately support it. They wear pins in the red black and yellow colours of the Indigenous flag emblazoned with the word "yes".

Braden Lyons is the first Wiradjuri member of the local council in the nearby Narrandera Shire Council. He says he has tried to raise support for the Voice amongst his fellow — all white — councillors.

Out of nine he says only one supported him. But he says he will persist. Because he says the Voice is necessary for our people.

Like all people we disagree.

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Something powerful unites us

But there is something more powerful that unites us.

Wailwan and Wiradjuri lawyer, Teela Reid, tells a meeting of our people that treaty and Voice don't have to be in competition.

She says this is not just about recognising us in the Australian Constitution, it is about a First Nations voice. It is a reckoning with history and truth.

She reminds us that Australians know the truth, they have just not wanted to confront it.

Voice, treaty, truth. There has been a lot of talk about this at our old mission this weekend, but above it all there is this place — our place.

The Murrumbidgee River flows through Wiradjuri land, pictured here near Wagga Wagga.

(CSIRO)

I walk through the trees, under the blazing sun, I can feel the distant cool breeze of the Murrumbidgee River, I can hear my people's laughter, I feel the touch of my people's skin.

It can feel the spirits of my ancestors.

We are from here. We belong here. This is ours and that will never change.

Never.

We are not nothing.

Stan Grant is presenter of Q+A on Mondays at 9.35pm and the ABC's international affairs analyst.