



St Leonard's College
An education for life.

From the Principal

Peter Clague



“You’re the Voice, Try and Understand It”

Sibling Rivalry

Growing up in New Zealand, you are always conscious of your cousins across the ditch. Sibling rivalry with Australia is part of our national psyche and, like any younger brother or sister, we are always trying to catch up or compete. Occasionally we get one over on our nemesis (anyone heard of the All Blacks?) but generally we look at Australians with a funny mixture of envy and fraternal pride.

Which is why it feels odd, having taken up residence here now, to hear Australians speak enviously about race relations in NZ. As clamour about “the Indigenous Voice to Parliament” has grown this year, and while institutions like St Leonard’s wrestle with how best to offer genuine and meaningful acknowledgement of Indigenous culture, I am often told that “We are so far behind New Zealand”. Which would probably come as a surprise to most Kiwis, as we definitely don’t consider that we have got it right yet.

There is no doubt that Maori culture is deeply embedded into all that it is to be a New Zealander, and respect for the country’s original inhabitants is enshrined both in law and daily custom, but we are still a way off from completely redressing past wrongs or achieving national harmony. What I would say is that, in my lifetime, significant progress in respect, reconciliation, and reparation for our tangata whenua (people of the land) has benefitted all New Zealanders, not just Maori. I am deeply proud of the role that Maori culture plays in my identity as a Kiwi. That is not cultural appropriation, it is just respect and gratitude for the way their stewardship of my homeland has enriched my life.

It is from that perspective therefore, that I offer the following observations on what role schools might play in the current conversation about the status of Australia’s First Peoples. Not pretending to be any sort of expert, and openly acknowledging that I am the very newest of the many migrants to this land since the first inhabitants arrived some 60,000 years before us all. These are thoughts offered with humility, but also, as Australia now seems to be following the same trajectory as NZ did during my childhood, with a belief that positive progress and a sense of mutual benefit are definitely within reach.



“We Will Remember Them”

Whenever I lead an ANZAC Day Service, it is usually my privilege to read the famous lines from The Ode to the Fallen and to have students repeat after me the promise “We Will Remember Them.” For me, that is an easy commitment to make. My father served in the Second World War and when asked to remember those who made a sacrifice to protect our future, I simply think of him. However, as the years have gone by, I am increasingly conscious that most of the young people I teach have no actual person to remember. Which is why educating them about what happened in the dark days of past wars becomes so important. As Winston Churchill once said, “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it”.

I see similarities as we ask our young people to pay due respect to our First Peoples, and to acknowledge the grievous treatment that befell them when other people came to their land. As with the solemn promise “We Will Remember Them,” so too must we educate our children properly about what happened in the past, before they can genuinely commit to the true intent behind an Acknowledgement of Country, or the aspirations of the Voice referendum. Sadly, to complicate matters, many previous generations were not afforded that type of teaching, and so there is an added imperative to educate parents and grandparents as well. All of which makes the St Leonard’s College [Reconciliation Action Plan](#) so important. Indeed, we are indebted to the dedicated working group who have created such a worthy and workable map to follow.

Thankfully, not all our teaching needs to be about unveiling past ills though. There is also a wealth of knowledge to be taught about the unique and vibrant heritage that has evolved in Australia over millennia. Even better, so much of that learning lends itself to St Leonard’s ‘Experiential Education’ philosophy. Our children learn best when they get to actively engage in activities that build their appreciation of Indigenous culture. You only have to watch our ELC children working lovingly in their Indigenous garden, or witness the stunning artwork in the Leonardian foyer, recently created by senior students and local Bunurong artist Adam Magennis, to understand the power of learning by doing.

Sorry, Not Sorry

Ironically, for a phrase that usually refers to speaking, the “Voice” has generated an awful lot of written words so far. Amongst the most discordant to me, was this quote from a newspaper columnist recently:

“As well, especially among the overseas born, voters are starting to ask why this generation of Australians – who have never been responsible for mistreating Indigenous people – should have to make it up to current generations of Indigenous people.”

I am sure that sentiment isn’t unique to some Australians. No doubt there will be people in other countries where reconciliation and reparation for marginalised First Peoples is called for, who may hold the same views. To me though, it does strike at the core of the notion of what ‘sorry’ actually means. As parents, we teach our children to say sorry when they have done something bad. To apologise and make amends for their wrongdoings. But we also teach them to be empathetic. To recognise the hardship and suffering of others and to feel regret for other people in such circumstances. Confusingly though, we call that being ‘sorry’ as well.

Whilst it is true that most right-minded Australians don’t intentionally mistreat Indigenous people today, and therefore don’t have their own actions to apologise for, that doesn’t in any way preclude them from showing sorrow at the awful events that have befallen them historically, or prohibit them from understanding the importance of ‘Closing the Gap’. It is equally possible to be sorry in both meanings of the word. Kevin Rudd did just that in his landmark speech in 2008, when he said sorry, both on behalf of previous Governments for what they had done (especially to the Stolen Generations), but also by expressing the sorrow of all Australians today for the plight of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. You only have to look at the nationwide outpouring in response to that speech to understand how much good that single apology did. Yet sadly, for too many people, the act of saying sorry comes heavily laden with feelings of guilt, shame, and embarrassment. As if their ego won’t permit them to even utter the word, for fear that they will somehow be diminished as a person by doing so. Another responsibility of schools then, is to help normalise the act of saying sorry, rather than stigmatise it, and to help distinguish empathy from culpability.



ELC students explore a Map of Indigenous Australia which represents the language, social or nation groups of the Indigenous Peoples of Australia.

“You’re the Voice, Try and Understand It.”

I am not sure whether John Farnham knew how prescient he was when he first sang those words in his smash hit of the mid-eighties. Intended as a protest song decrying the Cold War, it seems to have renewed relevance as modern day Australia debates the prospect of altering the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. Today, the Voice is a symbol of the very things that Farnham sang about. “This time, we know we all can stand together/With the power to be powerful/Believing we can make it better.”

To a New Zealander, the proposition of the Voice seems like a no-brainer. In a country that has dedicated Maori seats in its Parliament, a Treaty with its Indigenous people (empowered by a judicial tribunal to address perceived breaches), and a multi-billion dollar fund set aside to redress past wrongs, the idea of recognising the world’s First Nations People within the Australian Constitution along with the right to non-binding consultation with the original inhabitants of Australia by the government of the day seems like an obvious decision. Yet I understand the uncertainty and nervousness that accompanies such advances, and commend the national debate about what it might involve.

Likewise, I acknowledge people’s right to express their views and take a stance. To those who ask where the College stands on the Voice though, I say this. We are an educational institution. Our job is not so much to teach children what to think but, rather, how to think.

As an educator, it pains me that often it was education itself that was used to inflict the harm suffered by Indigenous communities. Children forbidden from speaking their own language in the schoolyard. Lessons used to reinforce stereotypes. Curriculum that conveniently omitted awkward chapters from our history. It is shameful to think of schools being used to indoctrinate entire generations. Hence, we must guard against a different form of indoctrination, no matter how well-intentioned. That is why the College won’t be making public pronouncements about where it stands on the Voice. For a start, we are a community of over 2000 individuals; what right do I have to speak on behalf of them all? Instead, we are committed to the daily work of educating young people, equipping them with the knowledge, skills, confidence, and maturity to form their own reasoned views on this and any other issues of political persuasion and personal conscience. In my view, schools should spend time building virtue, rather than simply signalling it.

Let me end where I began. The respective status of our First Peoples may be one of the few areas of daily life where Kiwis might currently edge ahead of their Australian elder siblings. However, if New Zealand’s experience over recent decades is anything to go by, it won’t be long until things even up here in Australia. Then all we poor Kiwis will be left to cling to will be rugby (and the fact that we own Pavlova, Phar Lap, and Crowded House).