Review of: "The Uluru Statement from the Heart – A consideration from three perspectives"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

David Turnbull (Jan. 2023) positions himself in relation to the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* using a framework of conceptual analysis derived from three perspectives, that of the First Peoples who issued *The Statement,* a second from occupational science, and a third from Aboriginal philosopher, Mary Graham, based on Aboriginal naturalistic philosophy. He states that the juxtaposition of these perspectives:

I am not familiar with the two latter perspectives, and therefore am writing this review from the position of an adopted “old lady” (of the Ngalanbali clan of the Kunwinjku of western Arnhem Land), and my study and practice as a social scientist, mediator and counsellor. While relying on already published materials I also sought the opinions of Aboriginal relatives, friends and contacts (and thus followed cultural protocol) including Marrathiyel, Limilngan-Wulna, Larrakia, Kunwinjku and Tiwi in the Top End, Anangu in Central Australia, and my Barkinji (NSW) nephew. Where comment was forthcoming I have expressed their views.

In this review I mostly use “Aboriginal” because this term is used by my Bininj relatives when describing all First Peoples or those whose affiliations they don’t know. The term ‘Bininj’ includes the First Peoples of Darwin and its hinterland, and the northwestern Top End.

It should go without saying that a First People’s voice should be enshrined in the Constitution because they are the original occupants of this continent. Therefore, they have a basic right “to participate in political decisions that affect their economic and social conditions” (Rice, 2023, p. 15) and the establishment of a voice to parliament that has constitutional backing will give them an advisory role on laws and policies that affect them.

There are varying opinions on *The Voice* to parliament, and therefore I sought opinions from Aboriginal relatives, friends and contacts. Tjimpuna Tjimpuna, an Anangu woman who does not support *The Voice* posted on Facebook (January 25, 2023) that her people are more worried about “not getting on day to day but hour to hour with their daily lives in their communities”. A Barkindji nephew, D.B. felt “50/50” about *The Voice.*

Ms. Tjimpuna also asserts that *The Voice* lacks a “grassroots voice”, a point reiterated by D.B. (8 Feb., 2023) who emailed that there had been “no input in (his) community”. Others, “the majority of remote community members”, according to Independent MLA Yingiya Guyula, “do not know what a *Voice to Parliament* is” (Cunningham, 2023 p. 9) while others have not heard of *The Voice* (Anonymous, 2023).

Ms. Tjimpuna also avers that *The Voice* is a tool of “black elites and academics”, while D.B. wrote that in his community

there are “only the squeaky wheel fellas that are always talking to government people”. A Kunwinjku relative, D.R. wrote on Facebook (Jan. 2023), “Ironically, we need a voice to determine 1st Nations’ support for a ‘Voice’”.

Many, First People and others doubt *The Voice* will deliver real change. As Chris Kenny writing in *The Weekend Australian* (2023, p. 15) asserts, it is “not a magic bullet”. But he adds, what is being done now is not working and for “workable change” to occur there needs to be “direct input” from Aboriginal people. As Indigenous senator Pat Dodson has said his community only want a voice “so we can tell you when things are not right and they can be improved” (Himbrechts, 2023).

Truth-telling and justice are major aims of *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*, and as Mr. Turnbull notes the history of colonialisation in this country has resulted in dispossession, disease, removal from land, and discrimination. The introduction of mainstream culture, for example through the church (Whitaker, 2018) (and missionaries as Mr. Turnbull mentions), welfare and education systems etc., has undermined Aboriginal culture and self-determination.

On violence, I have heard the stories, one from a Luritja acquaintance who told me of his grandmother, raped a century ago at the age of twelve by a white man. He still grieves for her. Some are much more recent; in the early 1980s family members began to tell me tales of police abuse (Goodfellow, 2007). “People are frightened of the police wherever you go – Tiwi, Darwin and Borroloola people” (Thompson and others, Goodfellow, 2005, p. 2).

Welfare took children and didn’t return them. A Kunwinjku/Larrakia couple turned their life around when they lost custody of their children, so much so that a court ordered the children returned. The foster parents didn’t comply. The mother died, officially of kidney disease, but all agreed that what killed her was a “broken heart”.

Whenever authorities behaved inappropriately word spread, often throughout much of the Top End. After an alleged police assault of a child in 2013 a Kunwinjku relative, N. Maralngurra said, “everyone knows”, as they did when those children were not returned to their parents. Complaints were dismissed, as happened when nine Kunwinjku relatives and I tried to report the appalling behaviour of police officers in Gunbalanya to the Ombudsman (Goodfellow, 2005), and more recently when I tried to mediate without success between police and family over the assault of that child. The police were not interested (Goodfellow, 2022).

I also experienced some of the fear the police generated; after exposing the inappropriate behaviour of some in Arnhem Land an officer warned that I stay away from Arnhem Land else I “vanish” (message delivered verbally by Reverend Peterson Nganjmirra, August 1998). But I had choices that my relatives didn’t, simply because I was white.

The goals of truth-telling and justice will be difficult for many non-Aboriginal Australians to accept. Some may deny that such atrocities occurred, a reaction that is not unknown some Germans still do not acknowledge the concentration camps of the World War II, instead “reframing … the questions concerning responsibility and victimhood” (Eder, 2020). Others believe that historical atrocities have nothing to do with them. I understand that others feel threatened.

And that’s where Ms. Graham’s inclusive approach as outlined by Mr. Turnbull, and the invitation to “walk with us” are so important. It demonstrates the willingness of First Peoples to take the lead in moving toward national reconciliation.

At our first meeting in 1981 the Larrakia elder who later adopted me made it clear she “hated whites”, and to test my resolve as a city council alderman to represent her people she told me to catch her a snake, which I did. Consequently, I was threatened with prosecution (Goodfellow, 2007; Goodfellow, 2017a). The fear that I might be jailed caused Mrs. Thompson to adopt me, her reasoning being that if recognised as “black” I could hunt legally (Goodfellow, 2007). Through the complexity of the kinship system I became a member of a clan (Ngalanbali) of the Kunwinjku people who lived on a remote outstation, Kudjekbinj, in western Arnhem Land.

A few months after my adoption Mrs. Thompson, whom I now called Gunyok (sister-in-law) asked for help in removing a police officer from Gunbalanya that she and other elders said was assaulting people (Goodfellow, 2007). That complaint was followed by many others over the years (my efforts led Kunwinjku elders to name me Lawungkurr after an ancestral woman respected for her mediation skills). Not a year later Gunyok was describing me to other Bininj as “white by accident, but black inside”, and saying that all had no choice but to learn to live together. In 2016 her daughter (my *Mamamh*, daughter-in-law) and I reiterated her words in giving the Welcome to Country address at the opening of the 13th Northern Territory Parliament, 18th October.

In 1988 Kunwinjku elders who had not seen white people until the 1960s and knew little about mainstream society and so were concerned about its effects on their children, asked for help in starting a little tourism project at Kudjekbinj. Having met the international and national birdwatchers I guided they believed that building relationships with such Balanda (white people) would help their young people to stay on country and the culture to survive.

The invitation to “walk with us” implies the building of social capital with its components of trust, reciprocity (as Mr. Turnbull points out) and caring for others (Goodfellow, 2022), and one result of the Baby Dreaming Tourism Project was the creation of such social capital between visitors and Kunwinjku (Goodfellow, 2022b).

Caring is fundamental to Aboriginal culture as it is in mainstream society. But in the latter caring is often treated as a matter of choice, whereas among First Peoples it is regarded as a necessity. And caring extends to strangers. For example, after a backpacker was killed by a crocodile in Kakadu National Park in 2004 Yvonne Margarula, a Mirarr elder wrote that “we tried to treat people from the other side of the world properly. In traditional way we Bininj look after each other. We are all bound together. We all have to care” (Margarula, 2004). Kunwinjku elders empathised with parents who had lost children at birth, asking me to tell those “sad mothers” that “we understand” for “we know that sorrow too” adding that a site on Kudjekbinj for “lost babies” was for all, “black, white, doesn’t matter” (Goodfellow, 2022c).

The Baby Dreaming Tourism Project prioritised the needs of community (as expressed by my relatives), Kunwinjku culture and the country, over conforming to the Northern Territory Government’s highly regulated Indigenous tourism policy (Goodfellow, 2017a; Goodfellow, 2022a; Schmalleger & Carson, 2010), a model not suited at all for a people with so little exposure to mainstream society. To that end we adopted a business model based on the traditional sharing economy but with market components (Goodfellow, 2017), and training was a combination of traditional methods of teaching/learning and mainstream education (Montessori method has much in common with traditional education [Goodfellow & Nganjmirra, 2019]). In other words, we used that old community work axiom, that is we started from where the people at Kudjekbinj

were at.

Families were involved, from children (who as “little parents” learn to care for others from toddlerhood) to “old people” (among Bininj it is an honour to be called “old”. It means “wise”). We used “reciprocal learning” as mentioned by David Turnbull, one example being a six-year-old visitor who taught a Bininj toddler how to count using a solar calculator, the student becoming the teacher. Where possible a Bininj lens predominated, not just because it was the most suitable approach, but because it worked with the innate nature of human beings (Goodfellow, 2022a, b; Strauss et al., 2014). Thus, the Project attempted to do what is envisaged by *The Voice,* bringing people together but prioritising an Aboriginal voice.

Dr. Stan Grant (2023) writes that “white supremacy can be experienced in a church or a school or a hospital. We see it on television. We hear it from politicians. It is something we navigate every day when we encounter the legacy of whiteness.” That idea of Balanda exceptionalism was demonstrated by the government response to the Project (Goodfellow, 2022). For example, in 2006 the head of the Department of Industry, Resource and Development department cut our funding, because elders lacked a “Certificate 4 in training”, and therefore “were not qualified” to teach tourism skills to their youngsters (Goodfellow, 2022). Yet Kunwinjku, like First Peoples all over Australia, have had a much longer involvement with tourism than any non-Aboriginal person; people had been visiting Kudjekbinj and surrounding country for ceremony and other purposes, for millennia.

The mainstream education system undermined the confidence of those Kudjekbinj parents who had attended boarding school. Some expressed their reluctance to teach their children to read and write and speak English because they lacked a “certificate” or “didn’t finish high school”, and so they didn’t pass on those abilities to their offspring. Indeed, one elder angrily said he was “too stupid” to learn to use a computer, a belief he picked up at school years before (Goodfellow, 2017a). My teenage son, Rowan, persuaded him to try and within a few hours he was playing a complicated jet fighter game and not long after that typing with ten fingers. This elder was later praised for his excellent instruction by students from Redlands University, California, and their professor after he spent some days with them (Professor Jim Spickard, personal comment, 26 Oct, 2016; Goodfellow, 2022).

Mr. Turnbull mentions the challenge of developing complementarity between science and First People’s knowledge, an issue highlighted by Professor John Tribe of the University of Surrey in a keynote address on knowledge systems (CAUTHE, 2015). Professor Tribe stated that people with Mode 1 knowledge (that of logic, measurement and universal laws) would never understand those with Mode 3 (community-based knowledge). The difference is in part gender-based; as psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen commented (2003), males systematise while females empathise. But Aboriginal people also demonstrate high levels of empathy. The gulf between science and First People’s knowledge is gradually reducing, for example, with the management of fire in savannah woodlands (Ansell & Evans, 2019), and while some understanding may still be lacking (according to Bininj informants), at least there is complementarity and acceptance (Goodfellow, 2017b).

Mr. Turnbull quotes Graham who notes (2008) that the kinship system has been damaged but “not altered substantially”. It will survive but its importance can diminish, the role of children as “little parents” being one example. While still

practised by Kunwinjku and related peoples to my knowledge it remains largely unrecognised in the education system (Goodfellow & Nganjmirra, 2017), and there is little in the literature the reason being, according to a Bininj informant, that it was "never written down" (R. Solen, personal communication, August 21, 2021). Yet its importance of preparing children to become competent adults and responsible members of community cannot be overstated.

Aboriginal law is valid for all people …. the relation between people and land becomes the template for society and social relations. Therefore, all meaning comes from land. (Graham, 2008).

Mary Graham's words are reminiscent of the Kunwinjku term *Mankabo*, the "river of life". Mankabo is inclusive of everything that has ever been, is now, and ever will be –everything, alive, dead, material or spiritual, sentient or unaware (personal comment, Reverend P. Nganjmirra, Aug. 2003). And all is connected. Science recognises that relationality of all beings (see for example, Rovelli, 2022) and therefore, the righting of wrongs must extend to protecting and healing the land. "Walking with us" must mean walking with the land as well[1].

Mr. Turnbull mentions "belonging" as "the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty" and proposes that there are two forms, the first related to the First Peoples and the second to those of a "colonial culture". It seems to imply there is little hope of coming together, but there is reconciliation in his repetition of the words of Mary Graham (2008) who states that even those of the "colonial culture" can participate "in the Aboriginal sense of belonging to the land" "regardless of cultural background", as long as they take responsibility for it. From that will emerge an "embryonic form of an intact, collective spiritual identity for all Australians which will inform and support our daily lives (Graham, 2008). That collective identity already exists, for example, in the reaching out of elders to those grieving mothers, the building of social capital in our project (and hundreds of others all over Australia), the number of blended families like ours and that we all are Australians.

For *The Voice* to succeed trust needs to be established and for First Peoples the belief that it would aid in the improvement of their economic and social conditions. Building trust relies on freedom from fear of harm and "veracity and accuracy of information" provided, shared goals and interdependence (White & McCarter, 2016 p. 3). And to achieve all this "grassroots engagement" is essential (Jakubowicz, 2023), and that requires information spread in a combination of culturally appropriate ways (Button, 2018), much discussion with trusted and informed others, both formal and opportunistic, and trust in Government, something that has been lacking among First Peoples (van Kody, 2022).

The response to Covid-19 pandemic could provide some guidance for building trust has been imperative in the acceptance of vaccination (Zapienza & Falcone, 2022), and here a visit to Gunbalanya in October 2021 provided a snapshot; almost all of those I met were vaccinated and indeed several including community leaders asked me whether I too was vaccinated. And while there has been criticism of the "we're all in it together" stance of governments and bodies such as the UNICEF it appeared that shared identity among ordinary people helped facilitate support for the program (Drury et al., 2020).

A shared identity can be built on acceptance of difference as I showed in my PhD on birdwatching couples (Goodfellow, 2017b). A shared identity can exist even with those we don't know, as Kunwinjku elders demonstrated when they

empathised with parents who had lost children at birth. And that particular instance as with the pandemic introduced another factor of importance, vulnerability. Government, authorities and indeed mainstream society, is not infallible as was demonstrated time and time again. But

The Project highlighted in a small way some of what Kunwinjku and thus other First Peoples have to offer the wider society, for example, sophisticated diplomatic and caring skills; holistic and lifelong education; the role of children as 'little parents' of both other children (Lohoar, Butera & Kennedy, 2014) and elders; multiple ways of knowing and *phronesis*, the combination of "prudence, ethics, and practical wisdom". Phronesis enables us to recognise "what must be done" to serve "the common good" (Khan & Altaf, 2015, 264) and to deal with change (Goodfellow, 2022).

Caring for others as a necessity for survival is less common among more individualistic societies for whom it can be seen as a matter of choice. Wealth can change people psychologically and physiologically such that our feelings of compassion and empathy drop (Gilbert, 2021; Piff et al., 2018). And so can extreme poverty. Yet, the tools are there to enable us to work together. Indeed, we are all hard-wired to connect with others, to be interdependent (Lieberman, 2013), and to both care and share (Narvaez, 2017, 2020), even with strangers (Keitner et al., 2014). As the pandemic demonstrated local responses to Covid-19 gave rise to interdependence, cooperation and compassion (Galea, 2020); people helping each other.

However, Covid-19 also showed the necessity of providing "clear and credible information" from trusted sources; "focus on common interests and identity"; and the ability and will to "listen to, recognise and resource community groups" (Drury et al., 2020, p. 4). But more than that it meant that authorities had to see the world through the eyes of others, namely their constituents. And that needs to happen in responses to *The Uluru Statement from the Heart* and *The Voice*. Walking together means not walking over others.

The challenges of the future require mainstream society to adopt multiple ways of knowing and *phronesis*. And it seems that this is the approach the Albanese government has adopted in recognising, in their support for *The Voice,* that the "wisdom of the community" cannot be ignored (Grattan, 2023). And business is already adopting related practices acknowledging them as having "enormous strength (Nonaka, 2007). Likewise, empathy has been claimed as "the fulcrum to (business) success (Morgan Latif, 2020). Yet it needs to go further. For example, the decoupling of rationality and ethics that has underpinned business, education, and governance, indeed much of western society, must be revised (Costello, 2018, p. 11).

Mr. Turnbull says further development of Mary Graham's concepts is for the future. Yet the future is with us now. And *The Voice* will help by providing a framework that aids in the negotiation of the uncertainties it brings. But *The Voice* must address the concerns of those who for various reasons intend to vote "no" or feel excluded. And it must be inclusive of all; too many still know little about it.

By bringing together these three perspectives Mr. Turnbull has started a conversation about *The Uluru Statement from the heart* in an imaginative and helpful way. By introducing the philosophy of Mary Graham, he has got to the soul of the matter, that we all need to participate for the good of the land and ultimately ourselves.

I recognise that I have stepped outside the role of the reviewer in furthering the dialogue with my own knowledge, for which I make no apologies. At a time when opposition is growing I hope my perspective may widen the debate and in a more positive way. And in that vein, imagine a people who begin to learn wisdom and multiple ways of knowing as small children participating "in political decisions that affect their economic and social conditions" (Rice, 2023, p. 15). Multiple ways of knowing are better than one "truth", particularly in a rapidly changing world, and First People's involvement can benefit us all. And implemented with empathy, diplomacy and determination *The Voice* can set a middle way between extremes.

As Gunyok said, we are all caught together, and recognition of that fact is needed now more than ever in this changing world. "Even if we fail, we can't give up". We have no choice but to try. Of course, there will be hiccoughs, particularly when it comes to reaching those who do not know about *The Voice* or do not understand what it is about. But the perfect cannot be "the enemy of the good".

Lastly, if people who have been hurt so much, lost so much and are still losing, can reach out to other Australians then the least mainstream society can do is meet them halfway. All of us must cultivate that shared identity as Mr. Turnbull in quoting Mary Graham has pointed out. It lies in the land, and in ourselves.

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[1] But while there has been some effort in some areas of Australia the damage is huge. Here in the Top End a weed, gamba grass *(Andropogon gayanus)* infests over 1.8 million hectares. As effective as land clearing, it is "driving the savannah to a treeless state" (Bowman, et al., 2020), and without question is causing local extinctions of flora and fauna on a massive scale.