



It is never easy to see the world from the perspective of other people. If we are passionate about issues, it is hard to listen to someone who argues a contrary view. We also find it difficult to enter the world of people who are imprisoned, mentally ill or refugees whom popular opinion regards as less than ourselves.

We may need them to bang drums in order to make us see and listen to them.

That is why the National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee ([NAIDOC Week](#) (7-14 July) is so important. It emerged from the recognition by Indigenous Australians that they were neglected and not listened to, and from their determination to change things.

Began to organise

They thought it inappropriate to celebrate Australia Day on the anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet, because that was the beginning of their dispossession. So, in the face of considerable opposition they began to organise. They drew up a petition to send to King George V to ask for Aboriginal electorates, but the government saw it as outside its constitutional powers to provide them.

In 1938 a Congress of Indigenous people met in Sydney. Its members marched on Australia Day, which they called Mourning Day.

Australia Day is still celebrated on the anniversary of Indigenous expropriation, but NAIDOC Week provides an opportunity for all Australians to join in celebrating the culture and aspirations and hopes of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islanders.

The theme of NAIDOC Week this year is 'Voice, Treaty, Truth. Let's work together.'

Voice, Treaty and Truth lie at the heart of the Uluru Statement that represents an Indigenous position reached after long discussion.

Voice

It begins with the importance of voice. Indigenous culture, as with all cultures, is built around language; in this case many languages. When languages die out cultures are put under great strain. Because Indigenous Australians are the first Australians with some 60,000 years of care for country, the preservation of their voice and languages in education and communities matters to all Australians.

Voice is also important in the sense that Indigenous Australians seek an institutional say in the matters that affect their lives. This is captured by the second word of the 2019 Theme: Treaty.

Treaty

To appreciate its urgency, we need think only of the catastrophic effects of interventions by Australian governments, such as stealing and routinely jailing children, have had on people and communities.

There will be many legitimate differences of opinion about what shape that voice may have, but its need is not in doubt.

To understand the present condition of Indigenous Australians and to respond to their call we must understand the past.

Truth

That truth embraces the relationship between the Indigenous peoples, the first people, and the later people who dispossessed them by force, excluded them from their hunting grounds, stole their children and continue to jail them out of all proportion to the rest of the Australian population.

The relationships also include, of course, the later people who befriended and defended Indigenous Australians, studied their languages and culture, and sought to build a more just Australia.

These peaceful and enquiring relationships underlie the hope embodied in the NAIDOC theme: Let's work together.

Simple and attractive words, and a challenge to us all.

From Australian Catholics