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Why don't we listen to black Australia?

NIKKI GEMMELL THE AUSTRALIAN AUGUST 23, 2014 12:00AM

WE don't listen enough. White Australia, to black Australia.

The recent, invigorating ABC Q&A program from Arnhem Land, with its all-indigenous panel, proved that. The problem of listening – or the dire lack of it – goes back to the earliest times of colonisation. A notable exception was the naval officer William Dawes, who arrived with the First Fleet and studied the local Eora people. Through his friendship with the 15-year-old girl Patyegarang, he recorded their language in tiny, flimsy notebooks now at London's School of Oriental and African Studies. Richard Green, a Dharug Yellamundie man, recently advised the Bangarra Dance Company on its interpretation of the relationship. His summation of the enigmatic engineer, astronomer, explorer and linguist: "Dawes was different, he listened."

Earlier this year, Aboriginal actor Rosalie Kunoth-Monks forced this generation of white Australians to listen afresh when she responded passionately, also on Q&A, to former Liberal MP Peter Coleman speaking of the Aboriginal "problem". "You know I have a culture, I am a cultured person," she retorted in English and then her native language. "I'm talking another language, and my language is alive," she explained. "I am not something that fell out of the sky for the pleasure of somebody putting another culture into this cultured being... I didn't come from overseas. I came from here. My language, in spite of whiteness trying to penetrate into my brain by assimilationists – I am alive, I am here and now – and I speak my language. I practise my cultural essence of me. Don't try and suppress me and don't call me a problem. I am not the problem. I have never left my country, nor have I ceded any part of it. Nobody has entered into a treaty or talked to me about who I am."

Several panellists on the Arnhem Land Q&A spoke of our nation one day reaching "maturity". It's about listening. These slow steps towards a getting of wisdom that will release us all. In terms of Aboriginal invisibility in Australia's constitution, Northern Land Council chief executive Joe Morrison said, "I think the question about constitutional recognition represents an enormous step forward in the maturing of the country." Indigenous Liberal MP Ken Wyatt added, "We will build to the stages where we will... complete the social fabric of this nation, to make this a nation where we are all equals." Blazing words.

In this indignantly shouty world, so often it seems people don't listen to absorb what's being said, to empathise or understand – they listen to talk back. Jump in. To better the speaker, drown them out with their knowledge, perspective, anecdote. Their sense of righteousness. As Ernest Hemingway said, "When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen."

Successful leaders listen. Profound leaders listen without bias. With an open heart. It takes courage. By listening thoughtfully, closely, your heart opens wide. Hearing with compassion and empathy can effect enormous change, and has led to some galvanising moments in our nation's history. Gough Whitlam listening to Vincent Lingiari, Paul Keating to Eddie Mabo and all indigenous Australians crying out for an interpretation of history that acknowledges the true impact of European settlement on their culture. I have hope for Tony Abbott. He may have a tin ear for some things but not, hopefully, when it comes to indigenous affairs. Was it any coincidence that his personal decision to scrap contentious plans to water down the Racial

Discrimination Act came a day after the Q&A, when indigenous audience members and panellists spoke so movingly about the hurt felt when on the receiving end of racism?

Maybe we don't listen enough because it's too hard to bear the truth. Or we don't like the truth. But a person of maturity listens. Responds wisely, justly, with courage. Australia has a stain upon its psyche. Constitutional recognition of our first people will go some way towards ameliorating that wound.

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