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# **A Search for the Soul of the Nation: Who are we?**

Presentation by

[Emeritus Professor Julianne Schultz AM](#)

Author, academic, and thought leader on media and culture

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Video and audio versions of this speech, where available, can be found at [www.communitiesincontrol.com.au](http://www.communitiesincontrol.com.au)

## **About the presentation**

What is the “idea of Australia”? What defines the soul of our nation? Are we an egalitarian, generous, outward-looking country? Or is Australia a place that has retreated into silence and denial about the past and become selfish, greedy and insular? A lifetime of watching Australia as a journalist, editor, academic and writer has given Julianne Schultz a unique platform from which to ask and answer these critical questions. In this keynote, Julianne will explain us to ourselves and suggest ways Australia can realise her true potential. Urgent, inspiring and optimistic.

## **Introduction from Our Community group managing director Denis Moriarty**

Now, I’d love to stand here in front of you all and claim that the search for the soul of the nation tagline was all mine – the genius I am.

But the truth is, it came to me when I was reading one of my favourite books of the past 12 months, a book by the Emeritus Professor Julianne Schulz, who I would like to invite onto the stage now.

Julianne is the publisher and founding editor of *Griffith Review* and Professor of Media and Culture in the Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research at Griffith University.

She is a non-executive director of The Conversation – which has made a terrific contribution to defining the soul of our nation over the past decade – and she chairs its editorial advisory board.

Julianne is an acclaimed author of several books, including *The Idea of Australia: A search for the soul of the nation*, which inspired the conference theme for 2023. And she wrote the librettos (the text) to the award-winning operas *Black River* and *Going into Shadows*.

Julianne became a Member of the Order of Australia for services to journalism and the community in 2009, and an honorary fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities the following year.

She has served on the board of directors of the ABC, Grattan Institute and Copyright Agency, among many other eminent board roles.

Today, Julianne will discuss “the idea of Australia” – what it is, what it means, and what it should be, if we’re to realise our true potential.

Please make her welcome.

## **Julianne Schultz, author and academic**

Thank you, Denis.

I too would like to acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the Wurundjeri land that is this part of the Kulin nation, Naarm, the place we now call Melbourne.

Making this acknowledgement at the beginning of speeches and public events always reminds me that names merit interrogation.

It worth remembering that it is only 28 years since AIATSIS, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, first published the map of Australia we now know so well. The one that depicts the continent more like it has been for millennia: with winding lines following rivers and valleys,

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marking the territories of First Nations and language groups. This map made it possible for the first time, for us ordinary Australians who were curious about the pre-colonial and continuing history of this place. This started to provide us with tools we needed to acknowledge traditional owners by name. Before then that knowledge was held solely by traditional owners, and those brought up with cultural knowledge and scholars. Now thanks to the recognition that has come through the native title process and the accompanying unlocking of cultural knowledge, even Australia Post has a line on its express envelopes for the ancient and enduring traditional name.

That map was, and remains, breathtakingly different to the ruler-straight lines of the states and territories that you, like me, probably drew in primary school, tracing those pastel-coloured plastic templates.

In my school, because we had an American teacher, we had to memorise not only the names of the Australian states and territories and their capitals, but those of America and Canada as well. When we mastered them, it was on to the rest of the Americas and then the world. As a result, my knowledge of geography remains very good!

I don't know if Australian school children are now expected to memorise the names of the many, many First Nations on that AIATSIS map, the ones that have made this continent whole for millennia. But maybe they should. It would be a great lesson in imagining and history. And a spelling test without peer.

Names, languages, and maps matter. They are the building blocks of our sense-making. They are tools that help us imagine our place into being. They lie at the heart of national definition, in a country that uniquely in the world is an island continent with only one continuous wave-bashed border.

I suspect that, for instance, few people in this, the self-styled cultural capital of Australia, could tell you that Melbourne is named after an otherwise forgotten British prime minister. William Lamb was a viscount who took his title from a Derbyshire village called Melbourne. And there you go.

Class-based deference was typical of the times. So that was how this magnificent Victorian – there you go again, thank you queenie – city became known as Melbourne. Personally, I preferred Glenelg – which it was briefly.



That too was the name of another upper-class man, a Scot, but at least it has the fun of being spelt the same backwards and forwards!

I live in beautiful Bundjalung country – what we now call the Northern Rivers of New South Wales. The view from my home tells a similar story. It overlooks Cavanbah, the most easterly point of the continent, looks down on a river named for a German princess, a beach called after an English seaside town near a river where soldiers left for home at the end of the First World War. This is in a suburb named by Pat Boone, its American crooner developer. He thought it was reminiscent of a topographically similar area in Washington state on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. The kids call it Ossh. It has to be said that Bundjalung has a better ring to it!

I have said all that by way of introduction because I want to extend a particularly deep, respectful, and heartfelt acknowledgement to all First Nations people here. Also to those of your friends and family, and those you work with, who cannot be here in person.

I know this is a particularly hard time for you. But please know that you have many allies. We feel some of your pain. We also carry the shame of being citizens of a country which, since it was created, more often than not permitted the poisonously slippery language of racism to flourish.

I hope you know. We do need to tell you more often. There are many of us who endeavour to do all we can to counter the racism that still lurks in our national DNA. Many of us accept the responsibility to help ease your pain, and to honestly and constructively address the underlying causes.

But as the last week has showed, this is not enough. Last week was yet another wake-up call, if we needed it, that this rotten DNA is still present in the fabric of our national body. We haven't seen such full-throated racist language in the public domain, endorsed and spoken by the heads of major political parties, since 1996.

That was the year Pauline Hanson was first elected. Her threadbare platform was that Aboriginal people had too many benefits, and Asians, and later Muslims, should go away.



John Howard became prime minister in the same election. Six months after the disendorsed Liberal candidate was elected, he opted to give Hanson her head.

He could have said that her language was illegal, unacceptable, and wrong. He could have implemented anti-racist public education campaigns, directed state resources to help those who did not have the resources and social capital to thrive. Those who felt they were on the wrong end of the restructured, privatised economy and looked for someone further down to blame.

But John Howard didn't do that. The John Howard who now, surprise surprise, opposes recognition and the Voice.

At the time he stoked their grievance rather than try to solve it.

So, six months after Hanson was elected and he became prime minister, he told a Liberal Party conference, and through them the nation, that it was good that people could at last, again, say what they really thought. Even if it was illegal.

And they did. It was ugly and furious. At the Queensland election two years later, the Liberal Party was decimated. Today it no longer exists. It merged with the Nationals and its membership has halved.

It was the beginning of the journey to the Liberal Party we see today. A party that cannot even hold seats like Aston that were always Liberal at heart.

But in the process, John Howard allowed the three percent of the population who supported Hanson to crack the whip over the rest of us. Historians were the first target, then judges, then public broadcasters, teachers and universities.

Then it got really personal and nasty – remember the tub thumping, the “we will decide who comes to this country” speeches. It lived on in most of Howard's successors who did not support Yassmin Abdel-Magied, Adam Goodes and many more. And now Stan Grant.

For the best part of 25 years, those literal and spiritual decedents of the advocates of the White Australia policy have had too much airtime. But listen to the polities, still cheerfully declaring this the best little multicultural country in the world, while talking about race. Didn't they get the memo? – the only race is the human race.



The violence and hypocrisy of this language has corroded our public life, with terrible consequences for individuals, communities, and the external reputation of this nation.

I had hoped that this year those of us who make up what I call the “other 97 percent” would have risen to embrace the three percent who are the First Peoples, those who are now and always have been of this place. Instead, many are sitting in judgement, ignorant of the history of this place.

I am angry and sorry that what should have been a year of growth and transformation is being so deliberately poisoned by people who do know better. Our better angels may still prevail, but they are currently in danger of being shouted down.

So, in this context, I want to start by saying thank you to you all for the work you do. As the program for this conference says, if a nation has a soul it resides in the volunteer and community sector.

Thank you all, for all of you. I’m sure that many of you, like me, breathed a sigh of relief when the government changed a year ago. In that time much has changed – but the scale of the entrenched issues has also become clearer. Whether you work in the care sector, climate change, the arts, community development, in mental health, education, with the homeless, disabled, and those needing refuges, in legal aid, justice and law or local government, or with refugees, migrants, prisoners, and First Nations people, I think you know what I mean when I say we seem to be again in that space that this country does so well: one glide forward then two quick steps back.

It’s only May, but I am sure that many of you are already feeling tired. Hopefully these days in Melbourne with your colleagues from all over will be restorative.

The work you do is truly the glue that binds us together, that opens new doors and says welcome, sit down, let’s chat and maybe even have a laugh.

I know you are not often publicly thanked and appreciated. When the community sector is talked about it is often in terms of the many billions of



dollars it contributes to the economy, or the 1.2 million people who work in it, or the 600,000 organisations that make it up.

But you know, and I know, that these numbers miss the big point: the real work you do to make people's lives, and the places they live, better.

As I mentioned I live in the Northern Rivers, and last year we were reminded of the power and latent fury of those fat rivers. The floods devastated my area, and over the course of the year many other parts of Queensland, New South Wales, Tasmania and the Riverland communities of Victoria and South Australia and then this year northern Australia, was inundated. These floods have left a legacy that will take many years to recover from. Just like the fires that preceded them, and the pandemic that swept through in between.

I was going to use some slides of images from that time to accompany this talk. But I figured for some of you that would be triggering, and I don't want to dwell on the destruction.

The image that stays in my mind is one I am sure you all remember well. The picture of scores of people in small boats on waterways that were once roads. Tinnies and kayaks, filled with people who needed rescuing. People who had climbed to their rooftops in the dead of night, people who had swum out of their houses leaving everything behind. It is a great enduring image of a community pulling together, one of many I am sure you can conjure. These were people who cared, people who made up for the gaps in the official response.

As anyone who has lived through a major flood brought on by torrential rain knows, it is hard to shake that sense of it never ceasing. The relentless noise, the overflowing gutters, growing potholes and then the smell of mould, the stench of mud, the memory of footpaths piled high with a lifetime's possessions. These stay with you forever.

I've lived through three floods. That sort of heavy rain – 300 or more mms in a day – is different. It raises my anxiety levels. I even once wrote a libretto about it for an opera by my brother Andrew. *Black River* it is called – it's about a judge investigating an Aboriginal death in custody, and the flood forces them to remain in the cell where the man died. In the end, everyone except the grieving



mother is helicoptered out. The others move on, but she can't. Her losses are too great, her grief overwhelming.

Sadly, it is probably as true now as it was 35 years ago. One glide forward, two steps back. Trauma, like shame, lingers in our national and personal DNA.

I am personally grateful for the work you do – not just in times of disaster, but all the time. As we wander along life's path, most of us in middle-class Australia find that the need for your services comes and goes. Now, as someone with very elderly but fortunately not yet frail parents, a loved one with a terminal illness, and a daughter with a demanding job and a wonderful but needy toddler, I am seeking and finding the support that once was at the edges of my life as a busy professional. Your generosity touches my soul and fills me with gratitude.

So, thank you for inviting me to speak today. I was so honoured when Denis called and asked if he could use the subtitle of my book, *The Idea of Australia*, as the theme for this conference. Searching for the soul of this nation was my covid project.

I do like a big project.

By the end I think I found it. But it wasn't without some dark days along the way.

Understanding the soul of a nation is a bit like trying to make sense of the soul of a person. It requires deep listening, *daderrri* in the language of former Elder Australian of the year, Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Baumann. It requires patience and courage, a readiness to learn from uncomfortable truths.

You cannot understand a person's behaviour and motivation without understanding their past. So too with the imagined, created thing we have called a nation since 1901. To do this requires an understanding of the past, a reckoning with the good and bad, of patiently trying to make sense of the genesis and gap between intent and action. There is much that is good, but some dark corners that we need to spend a bit more time contemplating.

This is particularly challenging in a nation that is outgrowing its capacity to define itself. We haven't been able to come up with a slogan, an anthem, an

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advertising campaign that speaks to the complexity of this society for years. Partly this is a result of growth – the population has increased by nearly a third since 1996, without paying enough attention to the social needs. Partly it is a result of faith in globalisation, and the short-term gains that many experienced from the early years of neo-liberalism, that made them think everything would be all right without them having to pay attention.

If this is a land that defies the odds, it does appear to have been lucky. So we don't do the hard work of figuring out who we are, how we got here and how we might imagine and create the future.

In the 19th century when the people of the Australian colonies were debating whether they wanted to become one nation there were a lot of poets – many of them bad – holding forth. They liked to declare in rhyming couplets that no blood had been spilled in the creation of the nation. This was not only untrue, but at odds with the way in which nations are always formed, with bloodshed. Bernard O'Dowd was a popular, somewhat pessimistic bard. He wondered whether the new nation would be a new Eden or a land of Mammon. A prescient observation. That line now sits as a frieze atop the Federation Pavilion in Centennial Park, but you'd have to look closely to figure it out. Mammon seems to have been winning.

Souls are funny things. Some people can't get past the religious sense of a soul. But in this secular age most of us use it as a shorthand for trying to understand the essence of what makes us truly, most generously and perplexingly human. It is where the things, Bobby Kennedy famously said, that make life worthwhile reside. The things we still haven't figured out how to count: our compassion, our wit, our courage, our humour, our wisdom, our learning, our generosity and kindness, our devotion to an inclusive and welcoming idea of the nation.

Soul talk has even entered the political discourse, which is a bit of a worry. It's one of the many things we have copied from America. It's easy to feel that many of those who use the word, with a performative Christianity, wouldn't recognise a soul if they tripped over. Their eye's always on the next prize.

Which of course leads to the inevitable question, which is canvassed in the conference program, and which I have fielded at some writers' festivals: is it possible for a nation to have a soul? Isn't this just anthropomorphising?



Of course, a nation is not human, but humans imagine and make a nation. They can do that with generosity or with fear. Those who pursued the creation of Australia may have been blinkered, they may have been excessively bound to Britain, they may have turned a blind eye to the wars of occupation, but they did have an idea of a civic nation in mind.

That is why we had universal white male suffrage from the beginning, and why Australia is a secular state, without an official religion. Both of these attributes were important. But limited. The Catholic archbishop of Sydney sat on the steps of his cathedral rather than attend the Federation celebration because he had been denied the right to say a prayer. Rather than boldly embracing female suffrage it was reduced to a political deal two years later – and took another 80 years for women to be legally equal.

There was always a trade-off in a political deal, and when it came to female suffrage it was done with a trade, stripping the vote from the British subjects who happened to be Aboriginal or Asian.

What was called race, but was actually about skin colour, shaped our civic nation. So the first piece of legislation was to deport South Sea Islanders who had been brought as indentured labourers, virtual slaves. This may have been motivated by some sense of decency and opposition to slavery but was more about so-called racial purity.

As was the legislation that followed and barred non-whites, with various iterations, for 73 years. So our imagined civic nationalism was always limited. Beholden to Britain, fearful, dismissive of those they declared a dying race. There was little commitment to the rights we now sign up to in international agreements.

We are uniquely fortunate that as far as the people who have been here forever are concerned, there is no question: country and soul are intertwined. They make up the culture which is the law of the oldest continuous human civilisation in the world. This is something that we see clearly in their story, song, dance and painting. And then we realise that this is embodiment of something much bigger, much more encompassing: it is the law itself.



Early in the events I did for the book, Melissa Lucashenko asked me if I loved Australia. We were in the town hall at Kyogle not long after the floods had done their damage. Her question took me by surprise. “Yes, but...” I stumbled. Love is a strong word, it forgives and respects, it acknowledges the darkness and finds a way forward. I hear people like Melissa and Stan Grant talk about their love of the country, and I understand what they are saying. They are generous and inclusive.

And then I hear the “oi oi oi” brigade couch it in the negative – “That is un-Australian, this is the best little country in the world, what are you going on about” – and I realise how much work there is to be done to foster a generous civic sense of national identity.

The challenge I set myself was to find a way forward. Excuse me as I read a little bit from the beginning of [my] book. It’s from a chapter called “Terra nullius of the mind”:

Australia remains an oddly amorphous idea. ‘What idea?’ some ask. ‘No idea,’ others respond. The continent is solid, physically distinctive and vast. But the idea of its essence, and what it might be, has been contested ever since British ships ‘first rose like a cloud out of the sea’. The definition of a nation that is more than a place is still a work in progress, denied by those whose lives have been transformed by life in a relatively safe, rich and ordered society.

The paradox is that Australia is both solid and provisional. An island continent with thin soils, underground seas, rainforests, deserts, serpentine rivers, endless beaches and minerals accreted over millions of years. A derivative nation, ready to absorb and transform ideas carried on the wind like migratory birds from afar. A place where forgetting is essential, making a mockery of the most celebrated epigram, ‘Lest we forget’. ‘Best we forget’ would be more honest.

Describing Australia’s defining nature beyond the physical – her spirit, her essence – rarely gets beyond worthy but anodyne statements of universal values, pride in democratic institutions, and boastful backslapping about being the most successful multicultural nation in the world. It has taken a long time for the inconvenient truth to penetrate that,



for all the many and real achievements of the past two centuries, Australia is only truly unique as home for 65 millennia to the world's oldest continuing civilisation. The numbers drip off the pen, but the reality of what they mean – of how people lived, survived and thrived – forces a pause. Until that truth is fully embraced, the paradox will prevail, erode the soul of the nation and leave Australia half-formed.

That is why this year's referendum is so important.

Covid proved to be a useful moment for this quest. Everything was thrown into sharp relief, especially here in Melbourne where you were locked down for so long and it caused so much distress for so many people. It happened everywhere as borders were closed, schools shut, work moved online and people confined to a five kilometre distance discovered their community, they discovered their neighbours, and they reconsidered the really important things in their lives.

My book came out three months before the election, and when the results came in in late May, I was rather pleased with myself. Despite the equivocal nature of the polls when the publishers pressed the print button in January, I had predicted the outcome. On the ground it was clear that people were ready for our good old values of fairness, egalitarianism, community and imagination to reassert themselves. Ready for the negativity of the previous two and half decades which had been inflected so badly by Hansonism to be sent to the rubbish bin of history.

But the issues I diagnosed in the covid x-ray of our national physique are still present, as we are seeing every day. I talked about it as taking an x-ray of the nation, and what that showed in the immediate responses to the covid pandemic. The first thing of course was bringing the Chinese Australians who were in Wuhan back home to Australia as news of the virus first started to spread. At one level it was an extraordinarily generous and forward-thinking action. It was terrific that these people were being rescued from the epicentre of the pandemic. What was not so terrific is that they were sent to Christmas Island, which was five hours from Perth and a major hospital, and they were meant to be coming from a place which was infected with an unknown virus.

There were similar examples all through the pandemic, which on the one hand showed our capacity for generosity and on the other its tinged nature.



So when I was diagnosing this covid x-ray, it struck me that many of these things had been here for a long time, and they were weren't going away any time soon. And what I've seen is it's very much present today. It is one of the things that surprised me – that the discussion that the book was meant to provoke barely got off first base. People would say, I don't really want to talk about that, it's a dangerous right-wing idea, it's not something we can control, it's just an accident of fate. It was as though after the election happened that it had been sorted, that that's all it took, just a change of government. I'd written 400-odd pages about this, let me tell you, it can't be sorted by one election, or even possibly two.

Imagining what we want this country to be requires paying attention, it demands that we consider what this might mean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, rather than in the 19<sup>th</sup>.

The phrase that I have used is that it is as though after the bruising of the past 25 to 30 years, we have lost the muscle for a serious discussion. That it has been wasted by lack of use, by fear and complacency. It's interesting this morning in his flagging of his Lowitja O'Donoghue address this evening that the prime minister is using that talk about fear, the way in which fear has been used to constrain this nation for so long, and that that is what we need to overcome.

That is a shame. The Australia I knew as a child was very different to the Australia that drew me back as an adult – that was open and rigorous, and prepared to learn about the past, to be more than tolerant, to be independent. That is all still there, but it is not front and centre. The fear that was there at Federation has crept back in.

The prime minister is talking about this at the moment, saying we need to imagine what we want to become as a country.

And I hope he steps up in the rhetoric, because when he says we can reinvent the sort of country we want to be, what I have found is that for many people this is too abstract. They have busy lives to lead and crises to manage, the cost of living is a real impediment for so many people's lives, that thinking about these big ideas seems a bit like a luxury, but it is the essential one.

We need leaders willing to engage with these really difficult conversations rather than squib them or clutter them with lies and misinformation. They are



happening on the ground anyway – I’m sure you are hearing these conversations every day, person to person – but they will only gain that genuine momentum when we have leadership that makes it possible.

There’s research done on the process of change which I’m sure some of you are familiar with because that’s the world you live in which shows that once you get to about 25 percent of people sharing a particular view or readiness to change, it develops its own momentum. I think we’re there, but it’s just this lumpy stage at the moment where it’s quite difficult.

When Stan Grant’s book was coming out, I sent him a text and said I hoped the time would be right for people to hear his argument. He and I had done a wonderful event in Balmain in Sydney and really canvassed a whole lot of these issues. But I said that it seemed the zeitgeist had been reluctant to embrace these debates. It hadn’t got the traction my publishers and I had hoped for. He thanked me, and he seemed optimistic that this would happen with his book, *The Queen Is Dead*.

A month on, we can see what the cost of that was. Closing down his analysis has been as violent as any act of censorship. The fear is present and always ready to be reactivated, the trauma is real and often unacknowledged, and the shame many of us feel is palpable but also unacknowledged. This doesn’t bode well for a big transformative discussion.

But I don’t want to be depressing. I want to be positive, because that’s what I do. I get to the end of this, I’ve got to give you some bits of hope to hang on to. So it seems to me there are some really big lessons we can learn from other countries. There are other countries that have changed as well, from really profound problems. South Africa, Germany, Japan, even Singapore. But Ireland is a great example and one that I’m sure many of you are familiar with. Not only because it is close to the heart of so many Australians, but because its transformation has been so profound.

Australia is in some ways the polar opposite of Ireland – where for decades, centuries, until recently, the population was shrinking, people left because of hunger, and lack of opportunity. They were constrained by the church and the tight control of society. Poverty drives emigration. Ireland is a place where for eons there was too much history, too much culture, too close to the surface.



Australia, on the other hand, was a place where those leaving moved to in many cases. Our population was growing so fast we didn't have time to pay attention and really draw on the richness this delivered.

Our history was obscured, and until recently not actively researched and taught in our schools. When I was writing the book, part of my argument was that people didn't know their history. I mentioned it was going to be a short meditation on this. It turned out to be a fat book. But part of the reason it grew is that when chapters were being sent out to various readers – and these were people in my circle or the publisher's circle – they'd come back with notes saying “I don't know about this”, “What are you referring to?”, “What were the Freedom Riots?”, what was this? I realised that there was so much that needed to be explained in a way that was relevant to now, not just a history book you read, but it went from being short meditations, as I say, to being a slightly fat book. But I think it still reads okay.

So that process of trying to integrate our history and culture into our story-telling, into our sense of ourselves, is something that we really all have to pay attention to. We can't just say, oh, I didn't know about that. I don't know how many of you are hearing conversations and comments from people now about the Voice and the referendum from people saying, oh, I don't know anything about that. I mean, how can people now know about it? It's been in the public domain forever. And yet there are people who somehow or other can manage to quarantine what's going on in the nation from what's going on in their lives. That's not possible. It's all tied up.

Our culture is such an odd amalgam of Britishness, fear, grievance, multiculturalism, and there is a strongly masculine bravado which until relatively recently has been the dominant ethos. I think that's breaking now, but it has been absolutely such a strong sort of component, even though it's been women who've been driving the innovation right from the beginning. So, many paradoxes.

We rarely considered its ancient origins; instead a sort of terra nullius of the mind has always prevailed, eyes focused on the vast horizon.

When Ireland resolved its biggest problem, that is the brutal war with the homely name “the Troubles”, when the Good Friday agreement was signed, all



sorts of other things became possible. It was possible to actually prosecute the corruption which had been endemic in that society, acknowledge the corrosiveness of the church, which stepped beyond any reasonable bounds of its Christianity, the appalling treatment of women, the LGBTI+ community and travellers. After decades when none of this could be said out loud, seemingly suddenly it was in the public domain. It was possible to do something.

Now Ireland is a very different place to what it was before the Good Friday Agreement was signed. It's a beacon of inclusion and possibility. The tools it used were deliberative democracy and referendums – just like we've been seeing with the Uluru process, which in my mind is the biggest example of a deliberative democracy process that's ever happened in this country, and I would like to see it being repeated in all sorts of other areas. And then the referendum where the judgement is passed.

Australia faces a similar possibility if we can address the foundational flaw of not recognising or really listening to our First Peoples. If we can do that, anything becomes possible.

Again, let me quote a little bit from the book [page 416]:

During the federation debate, it was really difficult to get a slogan. I mean, we've always been bad at slogans. So the nearest they could come up with was "Ours is not a federation of fear, but a wise, solemn, rational federation of free people. Such a federation as ours has only become possible through the advance of intelligence..." blah blah blah.

I'll leave some of that because it's just not true.

The notion that it was a federation without fear was a selling point, and yet fear was being used as the subtext of all the public debates. There was fear about Aboriginal people, there was fear about Chinese, it was fear about migrants, it was fear that women would do something, that women would force teetotaling on the entire nation if they were given the vote early on. That was the big problem of women voting, was that they might mandate teetotaling. Which might not have been a bad idea!





So fear was being really actively fostered. So fear was fostered and some hoped that this vision might be realised. But it was not. The promise was not kept. It didn't even have time to become a myth. When the First World War and the Spanish flu devastated the nation just two decades later, heartbreak displaced hope. Yet the aspirational ethos to belong, driven by people in communities all around the nation, could, could not be revived, stripped of its foundational flaws.

Be bold, be bold, be bold, reform is hard but it's worth it. That was the catchphrase of Rose Scott, who was one of the women who was advocating for a different sort of federation. Adopting this ambition and applying the values of respect and truthfulness, imagination, fairness and egalitarianism would be a start. Platitudes and myths are not enough. A fully formed nation, grounded in a civic, not an ethnic, way of belonging, without fear, is still possible. The soul of the nation has a rich inner life. It holds the dreams and stories of those who've always been here and those who've come in waves ever since.

My search for the soul of a nation tells me that despite the noise from the fringes and Canberra's selective hearing, many, maybe even most, Australians, are willing to be bold, brave enough to make the nation in which they live more than slightly better than average again.

Finally, I would like to end on an even more hopeful note. My friend Janet Swain, up in the Northern Rivers, is a brilliant musician and community chorister. After the floods she began working with primary school children to help them deal with the loss and grief, the confusion and despair. To find the good bits in the experience, and the funny bits, to help them become more resilient.

It was called the *After the Disaster* project, where she went into schools and worked with the children who had suffered through the floods, and there is a film which I hope will be widely broadcast.

Central to their work was to help the children compose songs and then sing them. This involved deep listening, listening to the children, but also helping them to listen to the place, to their parents and to the land in which they live. I'd like to play one of the songs they created, sung by eight-year-old Isobel



Wardlaw. I suspect we will hear more of her in future. I think you will agree it's inspiring.

[Song plays]

ENDS

## **MORE INFORMATION**

For reports, audio, transcripts and video from the 2023 Communities in Control conference and from previous years, visit [www.communitiesincontrol.com.au](http://www.communitiesincontrol.com.au).

