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Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
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Canberra ACT 2600

Senate Inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy

Submission by Dr Clare Wright, Associate Professor of History, La Trobe University

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Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this enquiry.

I am an award-winning historian and author who has worked as an academic, political speechwriter, historical consultant and radio and television broadcaster. In 2014, I won the Stella Prize for my narrative non-fiction book, *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka*, which is currently being adapted for an internationally co-produced television drama series. *Forgotten Rebels* was also shortlisted for many other literary prizes, including the Prime Minister's Literary Awards, and longlisted for a Walkley Award. I have written two historical documentaries for ABC TV (*Utopia Girls: How Women Won the Vote* and *The War That Changed Us*) and I am the writer/host of Radio National's history podcast, *Shooting the Past*. My latest book is *You Daughters of Freedom: The Australians Who Won the Vote and Inspired the World* (Text), the second instalment of my Democracy Trilogy. *You Daughters* has been shortlisted for the 2019 Prime Minister's Literary Awards. My essays and opinion pieces have appeared in national publications including *The Guardian*, *The Age*/SMH, *Overland*, *Meanjin* and *Griffith Review* and I have appeared as an historical expert on Q&A, *The Drum*, *The*

Project and in multiple television documentaries. I am a Board Director at The Wheeler Centre for Books, Writing and Ideas and am a member of the Australian Republic Movement national expert advisory panel. I am currently an Associate Professor of History and ARC Future Fellow at La Trobe University. My entire career as an academic and professional historian has been devoted to research and writing that explores issues of nationhood, national identity and democracy.

I have read the discussion paper for this inquiry and have elected to hone my submission around the following questions and ideas posed by the paper.

- What does a democratic culture look like and how can it be nurtured?
- How could a sense of shared civic community be encouraged for all Australians?
- How can the Australian nation recognise its Indigenous cultures, peoples and history?
- It is important to approach these issues with history in mind.

I would like to begin my submission by acknowledging the Ngunnawal people who are the traditional owners of the land on which the Parliament of Australia convenes and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I also respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Narm, the land on which I live and work in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, the Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation. I honour their ancestors, elders and next generations of community. I recognise that these lands were stolen and that Aboriginal sovereignty was never ceded.

It's a great honour to be invited to make a submission to a national enquiry. This is an element of participatory democracy that I neither take for granted nor would ever wish to see diminished in any capacity. If 'no taxation without representation' is a fundamental tenet of

democracy, then it is vital that representation be sought, encouraged and amplified among and to all taxpayers, for the benefit of all taxpayers. The voice of the people must be heard, and not only at the ballot box once every three years. I trust that the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee has sought a wide and diverse range of stakeholders in the affairs of our nation. That is, citizens.

My research focusses on a fundamental question in the life of any purportedly democratic nation: who counts?

What does it mean to count? To count for nothing. To stand up and be counted.

The people, events and objects on which my Democracy Trilogy turn (the Eureka Flag and Eureka Stockade; Federation and the women's suffrage movement; the Yirrkala Bark Petition and indigenous civil rights) all demonstrate that unquenchable human thirst and inalienable democratic right to be counted.

But the way events happened and the way history has recorded those events – and then the political uses to which that history is put – are not one in the same.

For example, the Eureka Stockade was, for 160 years, represented as a nation-building affair in which only men (miners and military) participated. Consequently, the values that were ascribed to Eureka as 'the birthplace of Australian democracy' were also gendered male: standing up for your mates, standing up for your rights and liberties, unity, anti-authoritarianism, egalitarianism. My research evidenced the fact that women were intimately involved in every aspect of the Eureka Stockade, and that women were even killed there. Seen in this light, the Eureka Flag represents not only individual masculine courage, ingenuity and effort, but also a collective communal voice that included women who, like their brothers, husbands and sons, hailed from all over the world in search of freedom. The flag was designed to represent all the disenfranchised who gathered beneath it, for whom the Southern Cross was the one uniting symbol. The flag said: we have come from all parts of the globe, we all have our own flags, our own languages, our own histories, but we are here now and we count. The flag was called, at the time, the Australian Flag.

My most recent book is clearly an international story to begin with because women's suffrage was an international rights movement. Indeed, fifty years after Eureka, women's suffrage was described as *the great world movement ... the most insistent political problem of the day ... the most significant revolution that has come over society in the first years of the 20th century*. The suffrage movement – or The Cause, as it was known — stood for rebellion, emancipation, spiritual renewal and a fundamental change in the sexual, political and industrial structure of society. *Its insurgence is worldwide*, wrote one contemporary commentator, *for this reason I think the woman suffrage crusade will, in the eyes of the historian, overshadow all the other events of these tumultuous times*. Votes for Women was what Kevin Rudd might have called “the great moral challenge” of the age.

And the remarkable fact is that Australia lead the world in finding a forward-thinking solution to this challenge.

In 1902, just one year after its inauguration, the new Australian parliament passed legislation securing white women's right to both vote and to stand for federal office. This Act made Australian women the most fully enfranchised in the world. As one journalist in 1903 wrote, *The purest type of democracy the human race has ever known flourishes to-day beneath Australian skies*.

Of course, there is no avoiding the fact that that all indigenous Australians were disenfranchised by the very same act of parliament that secured women their historic rights. The Franchise Act of 1902 meant that race, not gender, became the precondition for inclusion in the body politic of White Australia. Few international onlookers batted an eyelid at this scenario, although there were members of that first parliament who spoke out against the injustice. Instead, people across the globe watched on with either delight or horror or just plain curiosity as Australian women turned up at polling booths and stood as candidates for election.

It's this extraordinary situation — that Australia was the proving ground for democratic idealism, the poison tester of the progressive world, offering proof of concept that women's

suffrage could not only happen, but that it could work — that made Australian women “You Daughters of Freedom”, as one of the leading British Suffragettes of the day wrote to Australia’s most prominent suffragist, Vida Goldstein in 1911.

Yet you will not find this narrative of national pre-eminence in the majority of literary, visual or civic representations of Federation and the pre-WW1 era of nation-building. How many Australians today know that women’s suffrage was the precondition of a federated Commonwealth of Australia? Prime Minister Andrew Fisher is remembered now for saying that Australia would follow Britain into war until *the last man and the last shilling*. Who recalls that he also told a captive London audience in 1911 that *a true democracy can only be maintained honestly and fairly by including women as well as men in the electorate of the country?*

My prevailing point here is that women, non-AngloCeltic migrants and Australia’s First Peoples have not sufficiently figured in the national reckoning of *who counts*. This is patently evident in the lack of public memorials, statues, museums, road and suburb names, electorate names and other commemorative devices. Our national historical consciousness, our shared civic community our identity as a nation with a proud (if flawed) tradition of world-leading democratic achievement is diminished by Australia’s seeming unwillingness to honour and remember the elements of its past achievements and atrocities that do not conform to a narrow definition of what it means to be Australian – and therefore to count.

Every Australian school child should learn the names of our indigenous frontier warriors or our internationally famous suffrage campaigners just as they learn about Charles Macarthur, John Monash, Charles Bean, Weary Dunlop or Peter Lalor. I would prefer that every school child has the opportunity to *forget* their names than never have learned them at all. At least they will have imbibed the lesson we all learn from school history, long after the names, dates, causes and effects have been forgotten: we internalise the idea of agency, that some people make history, while others are the passive victims of it.

At the turn of the twentieth-century, Australian women may have been counted as citizens in the new and exciting nation, but they have not been sufficiently accounted for in mainstream histories of nation-building since.

Core popular narratives about our national political history still remain depleted of women, despite decades of scholarship to retrieve and record the role of women as productive and reproductive agents of change. Women – not only their actions but their ideals, their aspirations — have hardly touched the sides of key stories of national generation.

I think one of the key reasons why history of idealism and experimentation has been lost to popular memory is that federation-era optimism was soon overshadowed by the cataclysm of World War 1. A new dawn of political, industrial and social awakening was replaced, all too quickly, by the darkness of death and grief.

For Australia, the cataclysmic that was WW1 precipitated the beginning of a new national narrative. In this story, Federation was a false dawn. It was, we are told, Australia's participation in World War I—and specifically, the Gallipoli campaign—that proved our worth in the eyes of the world. Australia's confidence as a nation, we are told, can be attributed to its performance in the Great War. This narrative has established the tendency to equate patriotism with military service, rather than with national traditions associated with progressive reform and democratic rights.

In remembering a visionary movement for social change, we are compelled to examine not only who we were, but who we are and who we want to be. This is unfinished business. National debate around the most appropriate and respectful date to celebrate Australia Day is indicative that we are engaged in an ongoing conversation about just whose history counts. I think there is some limited basis for arguing that 1 January could replace 26 January as our national day: Federation Day. Federation was a generative act built on decades of debate and eventual consensus by ballot about what sort of people Australians were and who they wanted to be. Many of the conclusions reached in 1901 are not the same as the conclusions

that we might come up with today if constitutional questions of identity and belonging were put to. Questions of an Australian head of state and an indigenous voice to parliament are still to be negotiated. But the *process* of federation is, I think, one to be celebrated if not its racist and imperialist underpinnings.

The Anzac legend, by comparison, offers a prescriptive notion of who we once were. It is stuck in time and place. It supports a paternalistic, militaristic version of nationalism. It needn't — soldiers of empire don't have a lien on courage, sacrifice and mateship — but thanks to hundreds of millions of dollars of government funding to certain Anzac-centric institutions and programs, it does.

When Geoff Whitlam unveiled the restored Eureka Flag in Ballarat on 3 December 1973 he sets out the principles of a new nationalist ethos based on the Eureka legacy.

Whitlam said: “the kind of nationalism that every country needs ... is a benign and constructive nationalism [that] has to do with self-confidence, with maturity, with originality, with independence of mind. If Australia is to remain in the forefront of nations ... if it is determined to be a true source of power and ideas in the world, a generous and tolerant nation respected for its generosity and tolerance, then I believe that something like ‘the new nationalism’ must play a part in our government and in the lives of us all”.

To my mind, one of the great gifts of Eureka to the lives of us all is its enduring capacity to be a powerful foundation story for this country; its unique adaptability to the shifting concerns and aspirations of successive generations of Australians.

But I am less confident than I have ever been about the power of nationalism to guide in peace and prosperity, particularly when the dominant nationalist narrative is hitched to the wagon militarism.

In the past four years, over \$500 million dollars has been spent by state and federal governments to memorialise the centenary of World War 1. Another million has been added to this commemorative war chest by the corporate sector. (This doesn't include the \$500

million recently promise by the Morrison government to upgrade the Australian Memorial, a pledge given despite no request or case for funding being made by the Australian War Memorial.) Australia, which once lead the world as the most progressive democracy on earth, is now leading the world in commemorative spending for war dead, with almost \$9000 allocated for each digger killed in World War 1 (60,000) compared to just \$109 per British casualty and \$2 for each dead German soldier. What stories are we NOT telling, who are we implying DOESN'T count, but such a one-sided funding stream? And how is this fiscal overkill supported by a narrow interpretation of the remit of our paramount institution for commemorating martial combat, the Australian War Memorial, which currently refuses to recognise and represent the Australian Frontier Wars which, by conservative estimates, resulted in at least 60,000 casualties if not many more. What does this say about whose lives, whose lands, whose blood sacrifice, counts?

Our test as a mature democratic nation is to make our key foundations stories as inclusive and as complex as the archive truly indicates.

Lest we forget that our federated nation was forged in peaceful negotiation, through a process of compromise and admitting gender inclusion.

Lest we also forget that our liberal democratic nation was built on the back of the dispossession and massacre of our indigenous first nations, and their racial exclusion from citizenship.

Finally, lest we forget that the Australian nation that was born in 1901 has continued to mature, develop and expand to accommodate and respect the human rights of those formerly dispossessed and disenfranchised. This expansion and enhancement of what constitutes the nation has not occurred through war or the bonds of Empire. Militarism has only ever served to short up the most pinched and starved version of nationalism, the most narrow, frightened and defensive version of ourselves.

Militarism fans the flames of the most vicious and virulent form of nationalism: the binaries of ally/enemy, friend/foe, us/them that seek to dehumanise and devalue all who are cast in

the role of 'Other'. This process of othering has in the past vilified, among others, blacks, Jews, Celts, homosexuals and women, denying them basic political, civil, economic and human rights.

The Other du Jour is the refugee and Muslim, presumed guilty of being an enemy of the Australian nation, even when proven innocent.

At a time when the ugliest face of nationalism is once again feeling confident to rise about the parapet of civil society across the globe, it is indeed timely to restate and reaffirm the fundamental principles that lie at the heart of democracy: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, and the freedom to petition government. To these we might add the rule of law: that is, the restriction of the arbitrary exercise of power by holding governments accountable to legislation passed by parliamentary representatives of the people, as well as the principle that the law applies equally to everyone.

Lest we think our democracy is robust in these respects, the former President of the Australian Human Rights Commission, Professor Gillian Triggs, reminds us in her recent book *Speaking Up* that in 2014 the Law Reform Commission identified 121 Commonwealth laws that infringe our traditional democratic rights (and that's not including laws that encroach on human rights such as administrative detention of asylum seekers and the mentally ill). Furthermore, Triggs cites 52 examples of legislative reversals of the presumption of innocence and the passage of 70 counterterrorism laws since 2001, laws that work to erode our individual rights and liberties.

"Australia has been exceptional as a liberal democratic country", argues Triggs, "in failing to give legal effect to the international human rights treaties by which it is bound".

What happened, what went so terribly wrong between 1901 and 2001, that the notional of Australian exceptionalism went from evoking the post-Eureka achievements of the universal manhood suffrage, the secret ballot and the eight-hour day and the Federation-era achievements of full (white) adult suffrage, wage arbitration and other social legislation that saw Australia lead the world in democratic, industrial and welfare reform?

At a time when Australia has gone from being a global leader to a global lagger, lest we forget that the Australian nation was not born on the blood-soaked beaches of a far-flung militarised zone but in the town halls and parliaments of our own blood-stained land.

A land stained by the blood of those who had cared for this country for over 60,000 years. And, at a place called Eureka, a land stained by the blood of men and women who came from across the seas in pursuit of freedom, independence and opportunities denied to them under old world hierarchies of class, sex and creed.

Finally, we must never, ever forget that lazy, self-serving, opportunistic, political expedient nationalism subverts the rule of law. Nationalism defies evidence and logic. And nationalism rejects history.

How to be fully participative, tolerant and generous citizens is still the challenge that we collectively face.

To my mind, a perverse form of nationalism can be blamed for the decision of the former federal Education Minister, Scott Birmingham, to arbitrarily reject the recommendations of the Australian Research Council and refuse to sign off on 11 successful applications for research funding in 2017 - 18, worth a combined total of \$42 million. All the applications, which passed a rigorous process of peer review to wind up on the Minister's desk, were in the Humanities. Several were historical in nature, if not in strict disciplinary terms. A colleague of mine at La Trobe University had her career-defining grant scotched. The title of her project, which was held up in the conservative press as a target for ridicule for its academic pretension and triviality, was "Writing the struggle for Sioux and US modernity". Seemingly, the project was not 'in the national interest' – a new criteria that current Education Minister Dan Tehan has promised to introduce into the ARC application process. But as Haake's peers well knew, her research expertise is in the state removal of indigenous peoples, as well as their historic resistance to forced removal. In a nation where 'the stolen generation' is still one of our most scandalous stories, how is it not in our interest to understand international policies, implications and legacies?

Perhaps the story that Haake had to tell was not too irrelevant to qualify for funding, but too dangerous. Gideon Haigh called Birmingham's political intervention "the new censorship", all the more chilling because it threatened to lead to self-censorship among grant-reliant scholars.

Australian academics, artists, publishers and producers — whether they be making, books, music, drama, cinema or art and craft — must have the support to tell Australian stories. This is a crucial role of government.

Because how we remember the past, and why who we remember and the way we remember them matters.

As a nation — lead by governments elected by the people for the people — we need to challenge our comfortable assumptions about who and what makes history.

And together we need to change the tired, toxic, armoured and bullet-proof certainties about what makes us Australian.

I welcome the opportunity to expand on my responses before the Senate Inquiry or provide a reading list of my published articles to further elaborate on my submission.

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