HOW WILL WE FEEL AS A NATION AFTER WE VOTE?

ening. We never seem to do it
ough, in private and public
scourse, online and in person. Don't
e acknowledging inconvenient
s. Constantly talk over the othered
ern day Tower of Babel, that toxic
, scorn and righteousness. But
e in listening. "When people talk,
letely," Ernest Hemingway said.
le never listen." From listening
erstanding; it's generous and
As someone once pertinently said:
isten" has the same letters as the
t". The takeaway from any work of
erberates is emotion, how it made
so it is with listening. How will we
tion, after we vote for The Voice?
we like to feel?
e is all about listening to the people
best. And with The Voice vote – the
tant question our nation has faced
epublic poll – loud voices are
the thinking. Again. And how we
ve reverberations for generations to
round us the shrill forces of racism,
edness and winning for the sake of
kicking up the dust of confusion.
t, what is fiction – it's hard to
the opposers opposing for the
f opposing? To win, just that, like
gaslighters who need to be
a sense of control over others. It's
actic fine-tuned by Donald Trump
abusive and manipulative.
of the politics for the good of the
dvance us as a modern, pluralistic
nt democracy? To show the world
istening to the mighty Voice from
ous Australians, that we're giving
spect of our listening. I want good
ut good by nature is quieter. Like
c, the impetus for indigenous
in the constitution will be lost for

HEAR, HEAR

INFIGHTING AND MESSAGE-CONFUSION KILLED THE REPUBLIC IDEA

generations if we don't say yes. It was, arguably, infighting and message-confusion that killed the Republic idea, not the merits of the idea alone. The message was scrambled, strategically, by John Howard, and it feels like the very loud and fractious forces of fearful conservatism are going down that path again. The possibility, a soul-flinch for the nation in the days after the vote. A soul-flinch where we'll hang our heads in shame at how small-minded we are, as a collective.

I look at the tragedy of Alice Springs unfolding before us as a nation and think, the whitefellas aren't listening enough. They're still talking over the blackfellas with their paternalistic we-know-best attitudes. In terms of the white settlement of Mparntwe, on Arrernte land, it was ever thus. Tragically.

Do the white people in power really know best, with all their Band-Aid solutions? How could they? What arrogance is that? It's a refusal to listen writ large.

The proposal for an indigenous voice advising our parliament is about the grace of listening. It just makes sense to me. I'm so sick of the whitefella attitude of "this is what has to be done, this is how to fix the situation". By not listening, over generations, we're implying that the indigenous voice has nothing worth saying or adding to the situation – and how shameful is that.

How would failure on this vote be seen around the world? Of course the narrative would be reduced to its simplist parameters: Australians are racist. Mean-spirited. Odd. Tortured by their past and unable to embrace it in a mature way. The perception would be that we're afraid of listening, because that's what The Voice is – a mere voice for the rest of us to listen to. How will it make us feel, as a nation, if it doesn't pass? Embarrassed, ashamed, small, I'd hazard a bet. Listening is not about not shutting ourselves off, but opening our hearts.

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Q&A

ANTHONY CAVANAGH, CEO, 57

You are the CEO of Ganbina, a Shepparton-based organisation that has mentored hundreds of Indigenous kids, helping them to achieve better education outcomes and employment and fulfilling lives. What was your own upbringing like? My dad was a violent alcoholic and one day my mum, who is Indigenous, bundled us all up and we just left. I was 10, and the oldest of the three kids. By the time I started high school mum had gotten into drugs – they'd taken over her life. One day she just walked out on us and she didn't come back. We were abandoned.

What did you three kids do? We came home from school and she just wasn't there. After about four days my brother called our grandparents and then the police became involved and it became a really messy situation. My brother went to a boys' home, my sister went to foster care and I went to a community care place.

That must have been incredibly traumatic. It was. I spent a decent period of time being homeless, living with my grandparents and couch surfing. I now walk past these laneways in Melbourne in my suit and I'll glance down them and remember sleeping there in a box. It was a terrifying time... I'm sorry I'm getting a bit teary... when you don't know where your next meal is coming from and it's cold and wet... it is very painful recalling this period of my life. I ate food off the ground. I begged for money. I stole fruit from the Vic Markets. You do what you have to do to survive.

How did you survive? I had some very good friends who looked out for me – as did their parents – and I had my grandparents, who were good people. School for me was a refuge, as was sport. I threw myself into school and sport and graduated Year 12.

How did you get into social work? I did some labouring jobs after school and worked in a biscuit factory. I knew I needed to earn money to survive. At the age of 22 I got the opportunity to work in a boys' home and that led me to where I am today.

How do you think your upbringing informs who you are now? About six or seven years ago I saw my father for Father's Day. I wished him happy Father's Day and as I was walking away he said: "I've never been a real father to you." I turned and said, "You've been a father to me in ways you'll never know." What I didn't say is that what he taught me was how not to be a father and how not to be a man. He taught me not to harm kids. He taught me not to be a drunk. He taught me the need to love and care for my own children and my wife. In him I saw the man I didn't want to be.

HE TAUGHT ME HOW NOT TO BE A FATHER

And what about with the work you do, mentoring Indigenous kids? I know where many of them have come from. I've been there too. I know that if we can put opportunities in front of them, and help and guide them, we can make a huge difference. I broke the mould of disadvantage with my own daughters – they went to university and have good jobs and mortgages and marriages and they are amazing young women. And that's what we try to do at Ganbina, support kids from an early age as they transition through school and guide them into happy, prosperous lives. I know that with a little bit of guidance and support – I had my grandparents, who were amazing people, teachers and the friends of parents – you can achieve great things.

GREG BEARUP