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From afar, the Voice debate is not our finest hour

Australia could lose the moral high ground to speak out on issues on the global stage if the Voice referendum is defeated.

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Explaining the [Voice referendum \[https://www.afr.com/topic/indigenous-voice-to-parliament-6fos\]](https://www.afr.com/topic/indigenous-voice-to-parliament-6fos) to Japanese colleagues is tricky. Finding the Japanese words to describe the issues facing Australia, not to mention what the First Nations people are facing, has me stumped.

My old Kenkyusha dictionary tells me the word for referendum in Japanese is *kokumin-tohyo*, a vote by the nation's people. That helps, but then when I delve into issues such as a majority in most states but not in the territories and what such a constitutional amendment might look like the eyes of my interlocutors glaze over.



A sign outside the NSW town of Wilcannia. [Justin McManus](#)

Braced for what I imagine is an even more complicated conversation, one about the actual reason for the referendum and what a Voice to parliament might mean, I sense I am on safer ground. My audience nods saying, "surely that will get up, won't Australians agree to support a Voice to parliament for First Nations people?" Maybe, more likely not.

It seems that having the conversation in Japan, in Japanese, as complicated as that sounds, is easier than having a conversation in Australia today, where emotion and tension runs rife.

One of my concerns about the Australia-Japan relationship is how little is written about modern Japan in Australian media and vice versa. This little *Postcard from Tokyo* [<https://www.afr.com/topic/postcard-from-tokyo-lni2>] is my own attempt to give insights into contemporary Japan. Normally, I would welcome a deep dive into matters of Australia by a Japanese media outlet.

As I witness these dark days from afar, I long for a media blackout. I don't want Japanese media reporting back the racist and mean-spirited debate I see happening at home. Nor do I want Japanese people to have to live through the toxic commentary and personal attacks many are enduring. It isn't our finest hour. And it isn't a good look.

I have raised concerns about what I see as racism bubbling to the surface in our so-called multicultural society in Australia and how this might appear to the Japanese. I am quickly shot down. People say, "but Japanese are racist" and "well, they haven't exactly embraced a multicultural society" and "what have they done for the Ainu people".

Moral high ground at risk

But surely, how one country grapples with its history shouldn't dictate how we justify our own. I suspect we might lose the moral high ground to speak about a range of issues if we vote No. Will we still have a soapbox to stand on when it comes to calling out human rights issues in foreign lands, when we have denied the rights of our own people? History will tell.

What is the potential impact of a No vote to our Japanese partners?

Will it impact global capital flows? With our lithium, rare metals and the current investment appetite? Probably not. Does a No vote mean Japanese tourists would view Australia as less than friendly in terms of a destination? Honestly, they only see what we show them and that is mostly kangaroos, beaches and the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Tourists will give us a tick of approval. Does a No vote mean Japanese start-ups think twice about partnering with their Australian counterparts? Doubt it. But this is not the point.

Surely, the No vote is something we simply cannot risk, for all the right reasons and more. Conversely, imagine what a Yes result would say to Japan, a monocultural society that hasn't dealt with its own indigenous people. Imagine.

Japan has plenty of voices to listen to. Ours is a small one, but don't we want the Voice to be an inclusive one? We should take this chance to move on from our past, to embrace a future in which Indigenous Australians can have a say in policies that affect them. Ensuring that Indigenous Australians have a Voice to parliament is the greatest statement we can make to Japan, to other countries in our region. Then we can get back on our soapbox.

Modern nation

When I first came to Japan, over 40 years ago, many people questioned me about the White Australia policy. They also asked me whether it was true that Father Christmas surfed his way to our shores with presents on his surfboard and also whether there were more sheep than people. I understand the obsession with wildlife but the constant references to the White Australia policy had me wondering what everyone was reading.

At 17, I barely knew anything about this policy. It turns out Japanese high school students all learnt about the White Australia policy as part of the curriculum. It was in a textbook they all studied. Abolished by Whitlam in the 1970s, this policy, one built on exclusion and fear, ignorance and racism, was taught to young kids in Japan until the mid-1990s. Japanese of a certain age still raise it with me.

I hope that on October 14 we take a positive step forward, one that shows Japan, and our other partners in the region, and more broadly, that we are a modern nation capable of recognition, inclusion and fair-mindedness.



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