

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 194



Transcript – Nareen Young explains what Australian boards get wrong about diversity and Indigenous governance

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Nareen Young about whether Australia's boards reflect its makeup. Spoiler alert, I'm guessing no and how you can meld Indigenous governance with mainstream governments. Before we start that discussion, I'd like to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we record this conversation today. For me, that is the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation and paying respects to elder's past and present and acknowledging their continuing connection to land to waters and to culture, and also acknowledging that this land was never ceded.

I support the Uluru statement from the heart and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same. Now, let me introduce Nareen. Professor Nareen Young is on the boards of BlakDance, Per Capita, Evolve Housing and she has previously been on the boards of Souths Cares, Diversity Arts Australia, Indigenous Business Australia. She's also on the Indigenous advisory group of National Australia Bank, and the Aboriginal advisory group of insurance Australia group. She's one of Australia's leading and most respected workplace diversity practitioners and thinkers. Influenced by her Indigenous and culturally diverse heritage, Nareen's made a major contribution to awareness and understanding of diversity in Australian business and workplaces and in the wider community. Prior to her work in diversity, Nareen was a trade union official. That's where I met her, and has led to influential and successful diversity peak bodies, the Diversity Council of Australia and the New South Wales Working Women Center. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast Nareen.

Nareen Young 1:38

Hello Helga, how are you?

Helga Svendsen 1:41

Ah, I am awesome. Because I'm having a chat to you.

Nareen Young 1:45

We haven't done this for a long, long time.

Helga Svendsen 1:48

I know I love how the old connections come back to the fore. So thank you. Thanks for being open to the call and catching up in what has been decades. Yeah. So normally, before we talk about how we meld Indigenous governance with mainstream governance, as always, I would love to dig a little bit deeper about you tell me, where were your parents born and you know where your ancestors are from?

Nareen Young 2:14

I do and it kind of makes, I suppose all of that my background has made me love Australian diversity and be a diversity practitioner. So both my parents were born in Sydney. On my father's side, I have what most people would think, Oh, wow, that's so diverse. But I think really quite typical of our generation in that I've got a lot of diversity in my background. So two of my great grandfather's one was from Scotland, and he was my grandmother's father. And my Grandfather's father was from Kumar in Sweden, and he jumped ship. So we've over the last 20 years taken great delight in saying, Yep, were illegal. They were both coal lumpers on the Sydney waterfront, who took part in the 1917 general strike and found work hard to get afterwards. And I don't know if you know what coal lumpers do, but they're they carried the coal on their backs on the waterfront. And so I think they came here as progressives, both of them and you know, my great grandfather, who was the Seafarer, from unionized cultures and environment since when and Scotland. And so I was born on that side into the organized working class and progressive movement. And I'm very grateful for that. And we had a Swedish last name until halfway through last century, and they changed it from young grand to young and that really informed our family and how we view to prejudice and discrimination, I suppose, because there was a lot directed at our family. My grandfather, Duchy Young, was a trade union official for 30 years, and I look back and he was probably the first cowed trade union official, which I find really interesting. So that's on dad's side. On mum's side. Mom was born in Sydney. Her grandmother was born in Redfern, we're not sure if she was Gadigal we're pretty she was Eora of the Eora people, Aboriginal people in the Sydney basin. We know that she was in Ranwich children's home with three siblings. We've only just found out about a boy one, but whose names we don't know and they were removed from their parents. One was sent to a property up in Warren, grew up believing she was Wurundjeri woman and I only know this because I met her descendants some years ago at a conference. So we're Aboriginal descendants on that side on my mother's other side on her father's side. My great grandfather's came from England and they were Jewish. They came from New York, he converted when he was 14. So there's been a whole lot of assimilationism in our family and a whole lot of loss of identity due to Australian assimilationism and, and the way that the colony was developed. So that's really, I think, influenced all of us as

siblings. And my partner, of course, is Irish Australian, through and through. And so our kids take great delight in identifying as Koori / Irish / Swedish Australians.

Helga Svendsen 5:54

Oh my god, amazing. I feel like Nareen, even though we first met decades ago, I've already learned more about you in the conversation before we ever gone and now in this part. So people who listen to this podcast may have already heard me say this, but my great grandfather, Sven Svendsen, and jumped ship from the Danish Merchant Navy whilst in Fremantle, and that's how there's been some side of the family came to Australia and like you and my mother arrived as a Jewish refugee. So in the late 30s.

Nareen Young 6:22

for most Australians and there's a whole lot of diversity, I think,

Helga Svendsen 6:27

Oh, really? Yeah, totally.

Nareen Young 6:30

Swedes, Danes are seafarers. There's a lot... Aunty Pat Anderson. Ah, right. Swedish great grandfather, Kristina Keneally she's actually made contact with the Swedes. I've met one of them. At her swearing in, actually, there was one of the Swedish cousins. And so it's not a huge component of immigration. But there's not there's quite a few of us.

Helga Svendsen 7:01

Oh, my goodness. So then there's lots of different cultural ancestry there. Where do you feel like your place or your home is?

Nareen Young 7:12

I'm very connected to Gadigal so I should have said I'm sitting on Gadigal. And that's our traditional lands, if anyone could claim though, are the traditional owners of Gadigal. And because then, the Swedes in the Scots when they came here, lived in Millers Point so on the harbour were very connected to the city waterfront. And then I grew up on Dharawal so down at Cronulla, very privileged to have there on Dharawal, it's magnificent. So I feel very connected to Gadigal. And that's

why our family always obviously lived here, and then absorbed into the Australian working class around Newcastle and then on to Dharawal. And I love Sydney, I think the ancestors have made it a welcoming, diverse place. So in our family, we were always taught internationalism, embracing of everybody, respect for other cultures. And, of course, on that side of the family, respect for Aboriginal culture, and Aboriginal people and the ownership of the land by Aboriginal people on mum's side, they were very fearful people about anything really, leaving the house, my grandmother was dark skinned, so they were very scared about their identity. I consider myself really privileged, but there was a lot of poverty in our family and a lot of hardships. So work is a privilege in our family and the career I've been able to have this really credit to public education

Helga Svendsen 9:05

Oh Nareen I could wade around in this story for the whole time, but I'm also really going to talk about the topic so I'm gonna segue.... do Australia's boards reflect its makeup and how can we meld Indigenous governance with mainstream governance? Where should we start?

Nareen Young 9:22

Okay, so I spent the women on boards period of Australian feminism, the Anna McFee, who was my good friend who she was a conservative liberal and I'm not, then she used to refer to it as their human once they discovered their human rights to sit on a board, which I always thought was very entertaining. That period of Australian feminism, I think I was one of the only people who spoke out on it because I didn't consider it an appropriate thing to be considered a human rights issue. I had a view and I hold onto this and would like to hear it promoted more that if we were going to put all of these public resources, the resources of the Human Rights Commission, blah, blah, blah, into women on boards, we needed to have some expectation of what they're going to deliver. So we can't just say, it's a good thing for women to be on boards, regardless of who they are and what their beliefs might be. If we're going to promote women onto boards. We want them to deliver pay equity, they have a responsibility to deliver flexible workplaces to deliver equitas workplaces, for women and gender diverse people and people from culturally diverse backgrounds. So I think we went about all of that Asar sorry, probably shouldn't have said that, but went about it in a way that was just about the principal and didn't talk about any of the fundamentals. And that period of Australian feminism meant that we weren't even allowed to talk about multiculturalism, right. So I kind of get irritated because in the period before that, when, for example, I was running the working Women's Center, we did talk about multiculturalism, and there was some acknowledgement of intersectionality. But during that period of the absolute, white-ification, of Australian feminism, and the focus on the C suite, and women on boards, there was no discussion or recognition of intersectionality, which, you know, drove people spare. And I think that culturally diverse people in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were very much othered class wasn't allowed to be mentioned. It was very difficult. So we're now in a policy environment, from what I can observe where we are allowed to talk about those things, we are allowed to talk about our intersectional identities, I have heaps, for example, and I think lots of Australians do I think lots of Indigenous Australians do. And particularly Sydney, I don't know much as much about Melbourne, but lots of mob here are very diverse. So I think we're

in a policy environment where we can now name that Australian boards really aren't very diverse, they're pathetic. And we need to talk in a policy sense about how we change that. But what we want to see represented and my view is, obviously, I'm going to say this, that the broad gamut of the Australian community in terms of diversity should be represented. And that includes class. So class as diversity dimension DCA are talking about it less.

Helga Svendsen 12:50

I had Lisa Annese on the podcast last year talking about the class at work report and what that meant for boards.

Nareen Young 12:56

She's a bit cool, isn't she and she sits down. So I can honestly say that she is a very excellent woman. And one of the reasons I was very happy for her to succeed me is that she's from the same class background as mine. She's working class from the Southern Shire. And so DCA talking about it. I'll be talking about a lot more this year. And we need to start nailing class, I found that last period of the human right to sit on a board period of Australian feminism very difficult in terms of its refusal to acknowledge class, and its motivation came from a place of utter and absolute privilege.

Helga Svendsen 13:38

Absolutely.

Nareen Young 13:40

I mean, I could not agree more. It set us back a really long time. And I did my usual Helga, as you know, and set it and copped a lot of crap. But, you know, I've never regretted it. And everyone's starting to think about it. And there was a lot of very allytype, white, middle class feminists, and they weren't even allowed, they weren't even given permission to talk about it. So we're in a different policy environment, and it's exciting, and it's new, and we've got to take advantage of it.

Helga Svendsen 14:16

So then, if we think about, you know, Indigenous governance, and I was interested when we, you know, we're talking about the topic and melding Indigenous governance with mainstream governance. Tell me more about what that means to you?

Nareen Young 14:28

So I have spent the last 20 years trying to explain to mainstream Australia around Indigenous people on work, that Indigenous culture is not second class white people. Indigenous culture is not inferior. It is not romantic. It is not. I was really funny. I was at a barbecue the other day and this woman started having this long pontificating at great length on Indigenous family structures and relational cultures, and sitting next to me and having this conversation as if I wasn't there kind of thing. And like trying to break down those assumptions about who Indigenous people are and what Indigenous cultures are. And I think there are Indigenous governance experts like Michelle DeJong and Robynne Quiggin, and Jason Glanville, and all of the people who have worked so hard to formalise recognition of Indigenous government governance in Indigenous organizations, but I think, one of the keys around the voice and the reset, I suppose, around how we can utilise Indigenous culture as the basis for how this place operates. So I'd like to see a lot more Indigenous people on boards, who can share knowledge around Indigenous governance and bring Indigenous attributes and governance, around accountability, around community notions of accountability and decision making to Australian boards.

Helga Svendsen 16:19

So much in there. So I'm hearing that Indigenous governance has that kind of element around community accountability, accountability and community accountability.

Nareen Young 16:28

Well, and I'm not an expert, but I've spent a long time listening to experts.

Helga Svendsen 16:33

What else would you say you're not in? You're not an expert. But what are the other elements that you see around Indigenous governance?

Nareen Young 16:41

I'd say really serious consideration of representation. I think the union movement wasn't that different. Actually, in these terms, I think I was trained as a union official to take very seriously the the manner of your representation, accountability, and who you represented, and that you were there to represent them you won't about souls, and I have observed over many years, that Indigenous governance, that the framework around Indigenous governance is very similar. So it's about representation and genuine authenticity of representation and thinking about who you represent and how you do that. And fundamentally why you do that rather than yourself. And the other thing about whole women on boards debacle, I think was that it was incredibly individualistic,

and was about, I deserve a place on the board on a board. Well, yeah, we all probably do. But some people can't even get enough to eat. So why do we want to be on boards? Well, I want to be on boards, because I think I bring to them, life experience of value set. But really importantly, a whole lot of career experiences that have given me experience in how I think governance should operate

Helga Svendsen 18:15

Yeah, so that connected to purpose?

Nareen Young 18:19

Yeah. And, you know, at some point, you can meld that. And this isn't I'm not saying this is an Indigenous governance touch point, that connection to purpose is really important.

Helga Svendsen 18:32

Absolutely. Interesting. So, from your board experience, from the boards that you're on, what have you seen in terms of that melding or?

Nareen Young 18:42

Okay, so, BlakDance? Well, Carl McGrath was the chair and we remade it. Dan Bourchier, is now the chair. And it's just a pleasure to be on. And we set up a Cultural Council of Elders to refer to around for everything we did. We took our cultural governance and structures, an obligation to implement that really seriously. We took our communication styles and general consensus approaches really seriously. We had to restructure and I've done that a lot of times now, as a CEO or a board director, we took our responsibility to restructure in a manner that buffeted cultural governance standards really seriously so I've absolutely loved her. Souths Cares, a completely mainstream organisation, but we've Indigenous in place and an Indigenous constituency, and the leadership of that organisation, Nick Pappas, who's the Chair of South's more like the larger club, and like Sully, who's the CEO, I've never seen respect for Indigenous people and cultures, like those two, and drawing on it, and learning from it, and just going with community and what community needed and needs, I'm not on their board anymore. So I've been very fortunate in working in both of those environments. And learning from like, Nick, like a rugby league dude has been a rugby league be like dude for a really long time. And watching how he deals with things and learning so much from that,

Helga Svendsen 20:31

Ah Nareen, so many wonderful things in this conversation and the time has flown by. I'm wondering, what are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Nareen Young 20:42

Oh, that's scratch most Australians. And there's a lot of diversity. You know, your story is probably pretty similar to my except, you don't have an Indigenous element and you probably much more Jewish. That was the end when my great grandfather converted. When he was 14. That was the end of us being Jewish, which is pretty sad. That assimilationism robbed us all, I think, so many cool things, from respect for Indigenous people and culture, to respect for other forms of diversity. Clearly, nobody had as bad as Indigenous people. But other people had it pretty shit as well, that centering Indigenous voices and culture in this place would be really beneficial. Doesn't matter how, how we look at it, that the new policy environment we're in lends itself to an examination and an inclusion of Australian intersectionality, which is really unique. And that's really cool. And that we need to work on board diversity.

Helga Svendsen 21:49

It's just a few things in there. Yeah, and is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Nareen Young 21:59

Oh, Desert Island Discs. It's been a show for, I think 70 years on the BBC. And I reckon it's the best podcast going because they have all that, do you want to hear some excellent dorra's, as blackfellas say, did you ever watch I'm sure you do, because we all do. Did you ever read Bridget Jones's Diary? Okay, so what's the name? Fielding, who wrote it? Went out with a number of human rights barristers, and guess who Mr. Darcy is modelled on her ex boyfriend Kier, Starmer.

Helga Svendsen 22:41

Oh my goodness.

Nareen Young 22:44

I know which I found out on Desert Island Discs. I'm a big fan of Desert Island Discs, you find out and the music's great, and I've a bit of a music head. So it kind of reminds you to listen to all of the excellent music that we can access.

Helga Svendsen 22:59

Totally awesome. All right. We will make folks will make sure there's a link to that in the show notes.

Nareen Young 23:05

Okay, cool. Thanks.

Helga Svendsen 23:07

Oh Nareem, thank you so much for being here for sharing. And I look forward to catching up at some stage in person in Sydney and catching up on more.

Nareen Young 23:16

Okay, thanks, mate.