



23 March 2021

The Hon. Ken Wyatt AM, MP and the Senior Advisory Group
Indigenous Voice Co-Design Process
Reply Paid 83380
CANBERRA ACT 2601
BY EMAIL: Co-designVoice@niaa.gov.au

Dear Minister Wyatt and the Senior Advisory Group,

Catholic Religious Australia (CRA) is the peak body that represents more than 150 Catholic Leaders of Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life who are resident in Australia. Our religious congregations comprise more than 5,000 Catholic religious women and men. Our members and their lay colleagues work in education, health care and social services and work with many vulnerable groups and individuals in Australian society, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

CRA wholeheartedly supports the call of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* (the *Uluru Statement*) to both Parliament and the Australian people, for a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous Voice to Parliament, that will enhance the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the democratic life of the Australian state.

Whilst we understand that there are many voices and opinions across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, we believe that the process of Indigenous-led regional dialogues amongst Indigenous selected delegates, that culminated in the *Uluru Statement*, was a robust and comprehensive process that commendably upheld the right of self-determination for Indigenous Peoples, allowing them to reach a consensus on the need for a constitutionally enshrined voice, truth-telling and treaty.

As a non-Indigenous organisation, CRA does not feel that it is our place to comment on the proposed models for an Indigenous Voice. Instead, we support the Indigenous demand “Nothing about us without us,” and urge the government to ensure that self-determination is again upheld, allowing for the final model/s for an Indigenous Voice to be selected and implemented in **full consultation** with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

The positive impact of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and empowerment has already been proven many times in the past year, most notably through the co-designed Closing the Gap Agreement, and the responses of the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations during the COVID-19 Pandemic that have kept Indigenous communities safe.

We therefore support the statement of the *Indigenous Voice Co-design Interim Report* (2020) that “the right option will be determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in each region or local community.”

Furthermore, CRA is concerned about:

- (i) the lack of discussion of constitutional enshrinement of the Indigenous Voice in both the reports of *The Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition Relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (The Committee)*; and
- (ii) the prevention of the Co-Design groups from making recommendations on constitutional recognition to enshrine the Indigenous Voice, as per their Terms of Reference.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples ask for a guarantee of the existence and primary function of the Voice as a body that informs legislative processes, not as one that can stop, inhibit or veto legislative processes. For the Co-Design Process to be successful, it is vital that the Voice is safeguarded from any changes in decision by future governments. In their final report (2018), *The Committee* have also stated that “a constitutionally enshrined First Nations Voice would empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to shape the policy and legislation governing their affairs across the longer term. It would provide a First Nations Voice with the independence and permanence to provide frank advice.” Therefore, CRA calls for enshrinement of the Voice in the Australian Constitution through a referendum.

The Uluru Statement has captured the hearts of many Australians and the 2020 Aboriginal Reconciliation Barometer gives some indication that many will support constitutional enshrinement at a referendum. So, we ask our government to take the initiative in leading us to change the tone of the conversation on the Uluru Statement and its request for a constitutionally enshrined Voice, through positive advocacy and education of the Australian public. A constitutionally enshrined Voice cannot happen without your support and we call for a spirit of openness to listen to and join with our Indigenous sisters and brothers in their call for voice, for treaty and for truth telling of our shared past. The time is right.

We invite and call on you, our representatives in Parliament, to take the lead in shining a light that helps us see that acceptance of our First Peoples and multiculturalism are positive realities and that difference and diversity can reveal great wisdom and deepen our unity as a nation. We will all be the richer for this meeting of minds.

Kind regards,



Anne Walker
National Executive Director