

NATSICC Submission to the Co Design process

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) is made up of members that work on the ground level in our communities, serving in faith and embodying the core tenants of our beliefs – mutual respect, equity and love for one another. Catholic Faith and Culture call us to reach out to those in need and strive for justice and peace. It is from this place that we are proud to provide our Submission regarding the recently released co-design models for a Voice to Parliament. We make this Submission from our own hearts and from within the limitations of our Constitutional and Parliamentary knowledge.

We are called to support our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Brothers and Sisters that came together from the 23-26 May 2017 at Uluru. They provided a roadmap to the Australian Government directly from the hearts and minds of Australia's First People. We place our trust in their efforts – something the Australian Government has so far failed to do – and echo their following recommendations:

1. The Government must honour its election commitment to a Referendum once a model for the Voice has been settled;
2. Enabling legislation for the Voice must be passed after a Referendum has been held in the next term of Parliament;
3. The membership model for the National Voice must ensure previously unheard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the same chance of being selected as established leadership figures.

The logistical complexities of the Co-Design process and the associated legal and governmental terminology has meant that many of the stakeholders with which we have consulted have felt distanced from the process. NATSICC acknowledges that these complexities are necessitated by the nature of the proposals and the need for any decisions to be constitutionally sound. Resultantly, we found that several of the communities with which we consulted were not fully engaged with the process. We also acknowledge the work of those that have provided the co-design process for discussion.

Many people have stated that they need to see the ways in which any Voice to Parliament will help ensure that they have food for tomorrow or that their young son or daughter will make it home safely that day. This sentiment is a strong statement in and of itself and needs to be at the heart of any design and proposal. Will the process build the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to achieve self-determination? Will this design empower people to share their thoughts? Will this proposal help people live longer and happier, fulfilled lives?" All these are simple questions with difficult answers.

In 1986, then Pope St John Paul travelled to Alice Springs to meet with and address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Just under 500 kms away from the birthplace of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, he challenged the Catholic Church, and by extension Australia as a whole, when he said:

'You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.'

St John Paul II's words lifted the hearts of all those people who assembled in Blatherskite Park that day because he acknowledged the rightful place of Australia's First Peoples in this Country. He signaled that the responsibility for effective dialogue and conversation lies with both the voice and the listener and openly challenged those in decision making positions to accept and receive our contributions. Thirty five years later we are making that very same argument. Historically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices have been consistently loud, but despite the volume, very few people seemed to be receptive. NATSICC calls on the Parliament to be receptive to our new voice.

Regardless of the arrangement and componentry of the Voice, mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that the voices of our people are heard. We will even forgo the 'joyfully' referred to by St John Paul II and will instead accept respectfully, attentively, and genuinely.

Subsidiarity, a core principle of Catholic Social Justice teachings, acknowledges that those closest to an issue are best equipped to address and understand that issue. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led organisations are working tirelessly in every State and Territory to improve the lives of our people. These groups must be utilised by the Voice on both National and Regional models to inform the decision-making processes. Clear avenues for discussion and input into decisions by the organisations and people involved directly in communities should form a key component of the Voice. To further the application of Subsidiarity, the membership of the Voice should be considered against a selection criteria that is focused on life experience, cultural knowledge and a commitment to social justice in this Country rather than purely academic achievements.

Key points to summarise:

- The outcomes of any design or process must be a tangible improvement to the lives of Australia's First Peoples
- The Parliament needs to make a commitment that the Voice to Parliament be heard
- The Voice must be empowered by legislation to protect their independence and ability to speak truthfully and strongly on issues
- We believe that people in Australia have good hearts and that we need to appeal to the National sense of giving everyone a fair go to ensure that the Referendum is passed
- Existing organisations should be utilised to inform the Voice
- The membership of the Voice should be considered against a selection criteria that is focused on life experience, cultural knowledge and a commitment to social justice in this country rather than purely academic achievements.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Catholics we place our Faith in the inherent good of the Australian people to make an informed and compassionate decision when the time for the referendum arrives. We call for the Uluru Statement to become the foundational document that its authors intended, and we call for a commitment from the Australian Government to listen to our Voice and in turn ensure that Australia becomes the country that we all want her to be.