



The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council

Committee Secretary
Joint Select Committee on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice Referendum
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Committee,

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice Referendum

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Select Committee on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice Referendum. Our submission comes from a place of deep spiritual connection to culture and to our Catholic Faith.

We acknowledge that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice is a significant step forward in empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to address the inherent inequity in numerous social, economic and health benchmarks, but it is not the sole solution. In concert with Truth Telling, 'The Voice' is laying the foundation for the path to Reconciliation that may include Treaty, Sovereignty and/or other opportunities that a strong First Nations Voice may discover or champion.

129 (i) there shall be a body, to be called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice;

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice must be enshrined in the Constitution to provide certainty and stability. Previous iterations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation to the Government have been abolished, changed or lost funding and this underscores the critical need for a more permanent and effective mechanism for Indigenous input into decision-making processes.

The constitutional establishment of 'the Voice', combined with the principle of subsidiarity, represents a significant departure from past approaches, which often failed to adequately recognize and respect the agency of First Australian communities. Subsidiarity is a principle of Catholic Social Teaching that compels us to realise that the people closest to, and most affected by, the issues are the ones best placed to address them, with the help of the Government. From the experience of the Council, programs that genuinely embrace the principles of subsidiarity when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are the most effective.

Key Comments:

The constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is an unquestionably positive proposition that NATSICC hopes is embraced by Australians without hesitation.

The fact that Australia is the custodian of the world's oldest continuing culture should instil in us a profound sense of pride and inspire us to build upon the notion of a Great Southern Land, augmented by new arrivals from other lands and our Elders of all cultures that call Australia home. It only makes sense that this pride manifest itself within the Australian Constitution through the recognition of Australia's First Peoples.

The wording of the proposal is true to the wishes of the Uluru Statement authors, which itself was the result of extensive consultation and discernment by and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

129 (ii) The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice may make representations to the Parliament and the Executive Government of the Commonwealth on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;

No Government in Australia's history has been able to provide effective solutions to the challenges that are faced by Australia's First Peoples. By acknowledging and valuing the inherent gifts, dignity, and knowledge embodied in the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, the resulting programs and policies will likely be more pertinent, cost-effective, and efficacious.

Key Comments:

- NATSICC upholds the Principle of Subsidiarity as a fundamental framework for developing policies and constitutional reforms that benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In this regard, 'The Voice' serves as a mechanism that can bridge the gap between intentions and implementation.
- By creating a structure that is suitable and effective, communities can provide decision-makers with invaluable advice and solutions derived from their lived experiences. This approach recognizes and affirms the inherent dignity, value, and worth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples by involving them in the decision-making process and listening to their voices.
- We assert that the Voice should not be limited to whom it can make representations so that it may have a positive impact on policy, service delivery and but also that the public should be satisfied that representations will not hinder or delay the normal functions of Parliament, ministers and public servants.
- The resulting body - the 'Voice' - should be afforded all reasonable resources and expertise to ensure that its members are empowered to produce accurate, effective and quality representations that represent their communities.

129 (iii) the Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws with respect to matters relating to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice, including its composition, functions, powers and procedures.

The Principle of Subsidiarity is again a pertinent Catholic Social Teaching when considering 129 (iii). Our Parliamentarians are charged with the responsibility of representing the people and we must trust, and hope, that they are doing so effectively. It is fair that the details of the establishment and function of 'The Voice' falls into the responsibility of the Parliament.

From a Catholic and First Nations perspective and a platform of subsidiarity, NATSICC endorses and supports the current draft of the bill. However, NATSICC also urges the committee to consider other submissions containing different phrasing, in order to ensure that the community has a meaningful role in the legislative process and to increase the likelihood of successful passage.

