

## **THE VOICE OF THE VOICELESS**

**31 January 2023**

My appeal to vote “Yes” to the Indigenous Voice is not a political appeal as such, but an appeal to the innate goodness of humanity. I express my heartfelt hope, wish and prayer that Australians will eventually come together as one on this question.

For too long our first peoples have had to endure the voice of the non-indigenous. We have not always spoken or acted well. We have imposed solutions to what clearly are complex issues with little success. I was very disappointed with the stance of all who very early in the debate declared their hand. I believe it was mistake to not support the Indigenous voice to Federal Parliament. Australia needs all parties and independents to sing from the same hymn sheet. If not, then I believe our first peoples will have once again the door slammed in their face.

Since my appointment as the Catholic Bishop of Townsville in 2017, I have taken my time in trying to understand some of the challenges that our indigenous peoples continue to endure. My heart is broken because I have seen much suffering. I note that the Closing the Gap report shows only four priority areas are on track, but also identifies that targets are going backwards in children’s school-readiness, adult incarceration rates, suicide rates and child removal rates.

These are facts. Will supporting the “yes” vote to the Voice be able to change all this? Well, this question alone is not easy to definitively answer yet. I would have thought that the Voice would enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to give advice to the Federal Parliament about laws and policies that affect them through a consultation body. As I understand it, the final structure and process of the body will be determined by parliament, if the referendum is passed.

I therefore stand with those who believe that the Voice over time will help close the gap and empower local indigenous communities.

The non-indigenous must stop its “we know better” approach and engage our first peoples in a way that formally gives them recognition and then simultaneously empowers them to bring health and healing to our brothers and sisters. I am sickened by the vitriol of some of our politicians at a time when every single one of us should be playing our part in embracing the first inhabitants of this land.

I speak from my heart and invite others to do the same.

**Most Rev Timothy J Harris**  
**Bishop of Townsville**