



The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council

Indigenous Voice represents a significant stride towards empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) expresses our support for a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous Voice to Parliament. We acknowledge that the Indigenous Voice represents a significant stride towards empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in addressing the deep-seated inequities prevalent in numerous social, economic and health indicators. **By working in tandem with truth-telling, a robust First Nations Voice will serve as the bedrock for the journey towards reconciliation.** This journey may encompass treaties, sovereignty, and various opportunities that the First Nations Voice can explore and advocate for.

In 2017, the Council endorsed the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which has a Voice to Parliament as a fundamental tenet. The broader Catholic Church followed that lead by endorsing the Uluru Statement during the historic Fifth Plenary Council of Australia held in 2022.

As people of faith, we firmly believe in the inherent dignity and worth of every individual. A constitutionally enshrined Indigenous Voice supports and promotes this belief by providing a platform for consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples on a local level.

NATSICC upholds the principle of subsidiarity, in line with Catholic Social Teaching, 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, aligning with the principles of social justice and human dignity.

Proverbs 31:8-9 states: **“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”**

The Indigenous Voice represents a powerful and necessary stride towards rectifying the systemic and historical injustices endured by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For far too long, our voices have been marginalised and our rights disregarded. Despite our ancestral connection to this land spanning over 60,000 years, our presence is not acknowledged in the Constitution. It is imperative that we are actively involved and consulted in the decision-making processes of this nation, particularly on matters that significantly impact our lives. **Our inclusion and representation are essential for genuine progress and the pursuit of justice.**

Pope John Paul II stated in his address to Aboriginal people in 1986: "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."

A constitutionally enshrined Indigenous Voice is a way for Indigenous Australians to make their contribution to the life of the nation and to have that contribution joyfully received by others.

By enshrining a Voice, we would be following the call of Pope Francis, who reminds us that respecting Indigenous Peoples and cultures "demands the constant and active involvement of the local people within their own culture". Through the Indigenous Voice, we will be facilitating the constant and active involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australian culture.

Within the Catholic Church, that involvement has been ensured through the trust and collaboration evident between ourselves, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. **It is a model that could provide lessons for the Indigenous Voice.**

Pope Francis, speaking about the Amazon region, explained that when we make resolutions that affect the Traditional Custodians of the lands we inhabit, "we should do this in the first place with the [Indigenous]. They are not just another party to be won over, or merely another individual seated at a table of equals. **They are our principal dialogue partners, those from whom we have the most to learn, to whom we need to listen out of a duty of justice, and from whom we must ask permission before presenting our proposals.** Their words, their hopes and their fears should be the most authoritative voice at any table of dialogue ... Otherwise, the result would be, once again, 'a plan drawn up by the few for the few'."

Those selected to form the Indigenous Voice must be grounded in their communities and have a strong sense of their community's needs. We encourage the Government to consult with First Australians to ensure that proposals are respectful, inclusive and equitable. It is important that the needs of all Australians are considered.

We acknowledge that people of goodwill who care for First Nations Peoples can come to different conclusions and form differing opinions from the same information. We must accept these opinions and respect each other's rights to express them.

However, we offer these comments to encourage Australians to consider the benefits of the Voice to Parliament for helping to achieve reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

We urge all Australians, including our Members of Parliament, to engage in respectful and constructive dialogue on this issue. By working together in a spirit of solidarity, we can create a more just and equitable society for all.