



Indigenous Voice Consultation Wrap-Up Webinar

24th May 2021

This is a verbatim transcript of the webinar. For further information and clarification on the proposals, please review the resources on the Indigenous Voice website

Dan Bourchier:

Yuma, Good morning and welcome to this consultation wrap-up for the discussions around the National Voice, bringing to a close this process but of course continuing on these very important national conversations. I'm Dan Bourchier, and it's great to be with you as your facilitator for this discussion today. And I want to begin by paying respect to the traditional custodians of this land, the Ngunnawal people who have been the carriers of the flames, the stories for tens of thousands of years, and it's their stories, their voices that form such an integral part of conversations here.

Dan Bourchier:

But that of course is the case wherever you're tuning in and listening, engaging around the country, and I pay respect to your Elders in the lands that you're on, to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with us today, particularly the Elders and the current leadership, but certainly a nod to the next round of leaders, the younger people. Leading these conversations across the nation have been Professor Marcia Langton AO who's with us. Yeah, my good morning.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

Good morning, Dan.

Dan Bourchier:

Wonderful to have you along. And of course, Professor Tom Calma, who's here with me on Ngunnawal land. Welcome to you as well.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

Yeah, thank you, Dan. And hi, everybody.

Dan Bourchier:



And I wanted to let you know that we've had more than 600 people sign up to this discussion today, that's adding to the more than 9,000 people that have been engaged in the formal conversations and many, many more than that in informal discussions that have happened in recent months. And I think it's an important thing to note because there has been a whole range of discussions that have been happening, from webinars like this one, right through to face to face discussions and chats around campfires over coffee and the like.

Dan Bourchier:

Professor Calma will give us a bit more detail about that shortly and then Professor Langton will be going into starting the bigger conversation around what was coming out of those, the sentiment, the feel, what we we're hearing from the voices, if you will, from the nation. And if you want to ask questions I'd love you to send those through. There is a box on the side of your computer screen where you can add that. Probably a good time to mention that have your phone switched off if you've got your microphones in fact turned on because you don't want to be breaking up this conversation as cannot so often happen.

Dan Bourchier:

But over the last four months we've been hearing these consultations of the proposals around the local regional voice and a national voice. We've had webinars like this one right now discussing what they could be, what the differences might be, how they would connect and interact and what those interactions could be at the state territory level of government, but of course as an advisor and a discussion point with the federal government but also with the Federal Parliament. This process, as I mentioned has engaged more than 9,000 people through consultation meetings webinars, written submissions, an online survey. And that's just the formal component, many, many thousands more in those additional conversations. It was Marcia and Tom who have been running so many of these consultations so I'm very keen to hear from them shortly about what exactly was said and what was the tone and tenor of those conversations, but just to take a step back.

Dan Bourchier:

And I wanted to give you just a bit of a reminder about what was at the core of this discussion and this consultation. And that of course was around a local and regional voice that would offer a governance structure at the regional level being designed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, local and regional voices could work in partnership with all levels of government on how to improve local services and deliver on community priorities as well.

Dan Bourchier:

The next part or the other component of this consultation has been around a national voice. Now, that would be the advisory to both the federal government but also to the Federal Parliament and it would be made up also of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The national voice could provide advice on national matters that are important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the country. That's just a sense of what were the distinctions that we were being asked as a nation to look at. To find out a little bit more about some of the consultations and just that level of engagement, I want to throw over to Professor Calma who's been looking at that holistically. What have you found?

Professor Tom Calma AO:

Yeah. Thanks, Dan. You mentioned a number of times that over 9,000 people were formally contacted and had input into this process. We suspect it was much larger than that because many of us had conversations in the



workplace, at home, all these informal conversations that weren't necessarily recorded in the official statistics. But what we do know that is that we received close to 3000 written submissions from all over the nation. The majority of those were from non-indigenous Australians but a good number were from Aboriginal and Torres Islander people.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

There were also the surveys, remember the online surveys. We had about just over 1,100 surveys completed and they gave us another reflection about what people's views were. The community consultations were probably the most significant and we actually had 115 community consultations across the nation. We visited 67 different communities and in a number of those communities there were multiple forums. And so in some of them, it broke down that we had men's groups and women's groups segregated. In others, like in Sydney, we had had four or five different sessions to allow for the number of people to come through, so they were very significant across the nation.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

We also conducted individual consultations with what we call stakeholder groups, the business council, the land councils, and so forth. And we had about 100 of those and that we participated in and they were generally around about an hour's discussion about where we were going, which was pretty, pretty significant. And we covered off on about 1200 people during those discussions. Webinars like this, we had a dozen, 12 of them, and they covered a whole range of topics from the ones that Marcia and I kicked off with talking about what the process was about to working with some very significant groups through those webinars.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

And of course we had all the social media through not only the webinars but through our Facebook page, Twitter and so forth. And almost every day there were interviews in the media that Marcia and I principally led but other co-design chairs also spoke at. So, yeah, look, we're pretty comfortable. We did as much as we could within the four months of consultations that we are invited to participate in and invited the community to participate in. So, yeah, Dan, that was pretty, pretty hectic four months, that's for sure.

Dan Bouchier:

It's certainly been a busy time having been in some of those discussions with you. I know that that's the case. Professor Langton, you've led so many of these conversations particularly in Queensland, the Northern Territory, but also broader stakeholder conversations around the country. What was the sentiment that you were hearing? What sort of things were you being told?

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

Well, I found it very interesting that at many of our meetings the key people from the communities turned up. So elders, people who might be now retired but where the people who established the organisations back in the day, leaders from community organisations, CEOs, board members, as well as people from communities who work in schools, health sector and so on. I thought that the types of people who turned up at the community consultations and the stakeholder meetings gave us a very clear sense, certainly gave me a very clear sense that the right people were engaging with this proposition.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:



These are the people who feel most deeply the lack of representation and they made it very clear that reform in this area is well overdue. So it was pretty clear to me, although I can't give you specific figures, that there's a clear majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who want the voice and who like what we've had to say in our interim report, although they have a number of suggestions and some of them are very important and we're already discussing those. And so people like the principal recommendation about the local and regional voice, and that is, those local and regional voices must be established from the ground up, they must be community-led, and ensure that grassroots and local voices are heard. I think that is the most popular aspect of our proposition.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

And this issue came up again and again, and in fact it became pretty clear in the discussions that we had a situation where people thought, "Well, come on, let's just get on with it. How do we do this?" And myself or Tom would have to say, "Well, we're not empowered to and we're not authorised to talk about the implementation phase but we'll certainly take note of what you had to say." And people are very interested in the implementation phase and they just want to get on with it.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

I'm hearing from people all over the place, "Just do it, do it now. How do we do this?" And it became very evident that there are voices that are not heard and so there's people want more diversity in the way that representatives are chosen or elected, and certainly people like our emphasis on equal opportunity and equity, especially gender equity. And even from the Heart group, that's pushing for the Uluru Statement from the Heart, found our proposition very attractive and made some very useful contributions.

Dan Bourchier:

Thanks, Marcia. Professor Tom, what about you? What were you hearing was the broad sentiments?

Professor Tom Calma AO:


Yeah, look, I think Marcia captured most of them. From mine there was just, I think, a real welcoming, to know that we had the principles that would propose those nine principles which included things like gender equality, inclusivity, transparency, accountability, those sort of principles, empowerment. People found that really attractive and in fact some of the organisations that we met with and who were at consultations felt that they wanted to implement those in their own organisations that they found them really powerful in that.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

I think the inclusivity was an important one because too often people in the communities were expressing that they might not be a member of an organisation and therefore they didn't have a say. And so, Dan, the proposition that we're going to look at different ways of including all members of the community was really welcomed. We met specifically with groups who represented people with disabilities or youth groups. They were really welcomed, the Stolen Generations members were really encouraged by what we're proposing.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

But I agree with Marcia in that a lot of the emphasis was clearly around the local and regional and the engagement of local government Shire councils, which was really, really welcomed because in some places the



members of the community have a say, in others they didn't but there was a big recognition that not all Shire councils are equal and some are very inclusive and encouraging or participating with all members of their communities. In some of the bigger areas they weren't and people were able to compare the differences.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

And we had to say that we couldn't resolve everything, like what Marcia said is quite right, people want to get on with it and they want to get down to the tin tacks of, look at my house. I've got four generations living in my one house. How do we get more housing? How do we get our household repaired? How do we encourage our families to get more involved in these processes? Because there has been a period where people have got a bit peeved and therefore disassociated with a lot of activity. So I think this was really encouraging to go around.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

And, look, it was well-supported and I've got to recognise that it was welcome that this was a co-design process and that it was being led by Aboriginal and Torres Islander people although we were supported by the National Indigenous Australians Agency who did a great job of helping to facilitate our activities, but we as Aboriginal and Torres Islander people led it. Marcia and I did a lot of the consultations but we also had other co-design members doing this, either co-chairs or just members. And in all of our consultations we endeavoured to have male and female members of the co-design groups present and actively participating.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

And so I don't think Marcia and I did any together, we did it quite separately in the communities across the nation. But we're always supported by other co-design members. And, look the interest from Shire councils was really, really interesting and local governments. And having mayors there and having... And these are not just indigenous Shire councils, these are mainstream local government associations wanting to get involved as well as state government. So, yeah, look, it was an important and really encouraging process.

Dan Bourchier:

I want to open this up to both of you, that it strikes me that so much of what you both have been discussing and hearing was around values, about being heard, being listened to. Something that keeps coming up of course is the question of trust in politics, in the governance structures. I want you both to weigh in on this. Marcia, I want to start with you first. Was that something that you were hearing that there were questions around whether the government, whatever persuasion that is, could be trusted to listen to these voices but then to enact it and not scrap it down the track?

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

It's a very important question and it did arise repeatedly I think at every meeting that I went to. But it's important to understand the context. It would be too glib and superficial to say that there's a lack of trust in governments but I think the situation is more complex than that. What we have is possibly far too much pointless engagement with various levels of government. If you look at the last part of our interim report I think we list 140 different types of representative or advisory bodies.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:



And wherever you go, there are people on these advisory bodies or are involved as board members or staff of community-controlled organisations, or other types of service organisations run by NGOs and even governments. And all of them are dependent on government funding and to a large extent government policy even if they have developed their own policies they work within our government policy context. And so therefore they're used to working with governments, but at the same time they ask the question, "Well, how do we know that our government, even if this is set up... That our government isn't going to come along in the future and shut it down like they did with ATSIC?" So that question came up at I think every meeting I attended.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

And our answers were, and my answers were this, we have no guarantees. Of course governments can do that at any time, and we're not authorised under our terms of reference to go beyond our terms of reference but we will certainly note your concerns about this potential for instability, for our government to shut it down as a very serious concern in our final report.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

But I think the overwhelming response to these discussions from people who attended the community consultations and the stakeholder meetings was, "Well, we don't have any choice but to try because the policy settings are wrong in so many instances. Policies are coming down from the top and not from the ground up and there are so many urgent issues we have to get right." Like youth incarceration in juvenile detention systems, children in out-of-home-care, housing, as Tom said, housing is a high-priority issue for so many people and I could go on and on. Services for people who live with disabilities is another issue that came up frequently. And people want to have a say on policies and getting the policy settings right and they want to have a say now.

Dan Bouchier:


Tom, I wonder if you want to add into that, but also in this broader question around trust.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

Yeah, look, I think there is trust but there's also frustration. My last community consultation was up on Thursday Island last week, might have been just the week before. But what they told me there was that there were 37 different Commonwealth and Queensland government agencies coming into the community. And every day on the aircraft that came in there were different agencies in there, and there was the expectation that the community would come together and have another conversation and then walk away and nothing ever happens. And so they were very buoyed and encouraged by the thought that the local and regional discussions would be ones where we do pull all these agencies together and work with the community in a co-design process to identify priorities from the community's perspective and then look at ways in which that can be addressed in a meaningful way.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

And so that that was very encouraging. So they wanted to really pursue that and just the whole issues of who controls housing as an example and who controls the repairs to houses. And people are talking four and five years that they're still waiting for windows to be fixed and everybody just duck-shoves it to somebody else's responsibility and there's no empowerment of the community to get involved because it's not their accommodation. That's just one example. But there was a common one across almost every consultation that



we went to and the whole concept of having three and four generations of people living in the same house because there's nothing else available is just going to compound unless we really take it seriously as a nation.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

But I think people really when we talked about the sovereignty of the Australian Parliament and that they are a sovereign entity themselves, that we can't tell them what to do, we can only work with them in partnership, I think they got it. And they recognise that today's environment is a little bit different to what it was, the political environment, to what it was 15 years ago when ATSIC was about and that we are moving towards a much more co-operative relationship with governments. And as we encourage them, and we said this in the report as well, is that this is about a partnership, a meaningful partnership that we all have to work together on this.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

But I think people were encouraged by that but there was still the cynicism that it could be shut down, which is fact. It could and there's nothing, be it in the constitution or be it by legislation, they have their different impacts and that was explored at many of the consultations. So, yes, it's a wait and see, but people did express concerns that are we going to go through a process just for the sake of it? But I think they are pretty encouraged by the... Once we got into discussions there's a penny dropping, things like giving everybody the opportunity to participate is something that people have been excluded from, especially if they're not a member of an organisation or if they don't come down to the government meetings whenever they're called. But looking at a different way of going about business was really supported.

Dan Bourchier:

Yeah. And I guess that point about the discussion that something needs to happen and that if this is the way for it to happen then perhaps that's the avenue. Marcia, one of the other areas that came up I understand is around the membership structure, the numbers into the national voice, what were you hearing on that front?

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

Yeah. I went to some pretty remote places as did Tom and other members of our Voice Co-Design committees. I have to say that the conditions that I saw in the remote and rural communities have deteriorated quite dramatically since I was last in some of those communities 10 years ago. And it's very obvious to me that the poverty and the overcrowding in the housing has dramatically increased, and also there's been a change in the way that government officials do business with these communities. And people said very loudly and clearly that they want government officials to talk to them but also listen and come back and attend to the problem. They don't want to be consulted for the sake of consultation, they want somebody to hear them and to do something about these problems.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

I think it's dawned on everybody that the only way forward is for people to do it themselves. And so people were so keen on more remote representation to address these disparities, especially in outcomes in remote Australia, and greater representation generally to represent the diversity of our communities. People were a bit challenged by our proposition that each state and territory would have only two members to represent a whole state or territory.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:



There were quite a few points made at many of the meetings I went to. I mean, obviously in Queensland but also in the Northern Territory by people from the Torres Strait Islander diaspora, living on the mainland. And they were concerned that they might be excluded from representation in the areas where they now live and also excluded from Torres Straits representation by the Torres Strait Regional Authority. They felt that they were in a lose-lose position and they want their issue of... Well, the fact is the greater majority of Torres Strait Islanders now live on the mainland in Queensland, particularly in the Pilbara and also in the Northern Territory and in smaller numbers elsewhere in Australia.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

Of course, another one that came up regularly was about youth representation. I heard from one of our best and brightest epidemiologists that 60% of our indigenous population are under the age of 23. And so when young people spoke at meetings they made the very obvious point that they need greater representation in the system and I think that's right, I would have to agree with them. And we heard some wonderful young people speak about their needs. And, yeah, I think attention to the issues of the majority of our population, the youth is well overdue.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

Now, of course a huge number of written submissions raised the issue of constitutional enshrinement. It didn't come up much in the meetings that I had in communities or even in stakeholder meetings, but it was raised in a large number of written submissions. And so for instance, you can see some of these submissions online, the Cape York Institute's submission, the Central Land Council, the Jawun submission and many others. Now, we can't make any recommendations about constitutional enshrinement but of course we will acknowledge the receipt of those submissions and summarise their content in our final report.

Dan Bourchier:

Tom, that's where I wanted to go next with you as well, constitutional enshrinement, did that come up at the discussions you were having on the ground?

Professor Tom Calma AO:

Not in the remote areas or even in regional areas, in the cities, the big cities they did. And, yep, there was a bit of a campaign, but that's important to recognise that everybody has the opportunity to have a say and we encourage that. I think there was, the issue that I tried to tease out a few times was if we're talking about constitutional enshrinement, what comes first? Do you go through a legislative embodiment or do you go through a referendum first? In some we had some advocates who were saying, "Yep, we go to a referendum first and take the chance on that one. If it gets up, it gets up, if it doesn't, it doesn't, at least we've had a go."

Professor Tom Calma AO:

But there were others in that same group that said, "No, too risky. We want to go get something first and test it." And even in the submissions they didn't reference any sequencing. A few of them did but most of them just said, "Constitutional enshrinement." Yep, that's not from our side of it. That's not opposed, it's just a matter of when that might go to a referendum. And there were the examples of... They talked about the '67 referendum, "Yep, great. We had plenty of support." The most important one, but then they talked about the '99 referendum on becoming a republic, and that people went in pretty confident but it was lost and 20 plus years later it hasn't re-emerged as an issue.



Dan Bouchier:

So is that a risk about if it fails that it might not come back up?

Professor Tom Calma AO:

Yeah. The government won't have the appetite to do anything. And so, look, as Marcia said, our terms of reference was in response to the first recommendation of the parliamentary joint select committee and that was to come up with some models for government to consider on how a voice might operate, and that's what we're going to do. Once there final report's in, the government will respond to the second recommendation and that was how to be implemented through legislation or referendum. So ours was very specific and I think we did justice to that and made it a very inclusive process. So, yeah, it was good.

Dan Bouchier:

I want to talk more about next steps in a moment. And before that we've got a heap of questions that are coming through so I'll put those to both of you shortly. But I guess just to round out some of the things that were coming up, Marcia, around the flexibility that the voice that would need to be able to do both things, to be something that people connecting from the grassroots level through the national level but also that does what the government and the parliament needs, our reactive responses. But also around this point around broader consultation in an ongoing way around how these sorts of bodies would be shaped and could be shaped.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:


Well, that's the big question, isn't it? And as I say it's not in our terms of reference but some of the discussions were very, very interesting. And I have to say there is compared to 2004, that was the last time we saw a national representative body in legislation. The types of discussions now and the understanding of the issues are so mature and sophisticated. I hope I live long enough to see this out because it will be fascinating. People are very clear and very organised in many regions and know what they want to do. They might be very well organised on customary grounds, say Arnhem land where you have clan corporations and homeland resource centres and a very active traditional life with ceremonies, meetings of elders, and so on.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

And I think that it was clear to me in all those communities that people know exactly what they want to do and how they want to organise it. They don't want elections, they know what meetings they need to have. In other areas people were not so sure but then some leaders spoke up and said, "Well, look, we've done this before." And the big difference is now is that you have native title corporations, prescribed bodies, corporate land councils, community-controlled organisations, community service organisations. You have elected members of parliaments, the state and territory parliaments as well as the Federal Parliament. And so many people are volunteers in our communities. All the elders are because they'll lose their social security benefits if they get paid. So the number of elders who dedicate their time to improving their communities is just remarkable.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

And I would say that the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people volunteer their time to the betterment of our communities. And then you have, I think, a lot of experience now with what works and what doesn't work and how to run an inclusive meeting. It was just absolutely wonderful to be in regions where people conduct meetings respectfully, not all areas are like that. Unfortunately, in some areas you have this



political culture of abuse and screaming at meetings and resistance to anything that's perceived as a government proposition. I found myself explaining in one or two areas that what we're putting to you is not a government proposal, this is a proposal that was designed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and that we are alltogether putting this to government.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

And some people have become so alienated from the whole political process, they can't see any positive steps forward. And so it was wonderful to see that the majority of people have now reached a point where they've refined their meeting procedures and their tactics for community inclusion and have a really good understanding of what works and doesn't work. And I think that all of that is going to stand us in good stead in the implementation phase.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

And I think the other one that was pretty common is that the recognition that in many communities, both in urban and remote, there needed to be a bit of healing done amongst our own organisations. We needed to work a bit better together within the organisations. And the whole idea of the voice is that we can... And people were pretty happy with the idea that the local and regional didn't impact on existing bodies, that they would still do their own thing.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

But they also recognise that there's a lot of value in working closer together within organisations to have the impact and to be able to go with one voice to the state government, particularly, so they can be heard because at the moment it's the interest groups, be it on justice, health, education. Some housing groups, they'll go and talk to the state government but they don't necessarily represent all the people within a group. So looking at this I was quite surprised how many communities were communicating with their constituents who weren't living in that community but they were members.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

And the Torres Strait is one example. We also had it when we were in some of the other regional areas that people are using the internet to have meetings and to broaden their reach. And that's I think the real encouraging thing, is that we can't live in into the past and what might've gone and happened with ATSIC time is a very different environment now. And we talked about the three and a half thousand Aboriginal businesses that are out there that are generating billions of dollars back into the Aboriginal communities and a very significant group that we don't hear enough about and recognise their contributions.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

CDP was, that's one of the biggest issues and I'm sure people would be very encouraged to see that at the last budget the minister indicated that by 2023 they're going to have re-looked at CDP. And because people still want CDEP, the old one, where they were much more active in their communities. And so we've lost a bit of ground, but as we pointed out this was a great opportunity now where the community can come together and inform and influence the way governments develop policy, and that's what it's about.

Professor Tom Calma AO:



And so it's not the bureaucrats in Canberra or the ministers, God forbid, who are determining what's best for us and that we're now into a co-design, a thinking mode now with governments. And through the Close the Gap Campaign, which was really the kick-starter in 2008, post-ATSIC, where we started to see this build and it's really becoming inclusive now. So that addresses I think this frustration about governments but there's not necessarily a lack of confidence in governments.

Dan Bourchier:

I want to get into some questions. Tom, I'm going to start with you first, when you accepted appointment as a co-chair under the governments... Well, restrictive terms of reference. This question says, "Did you have any expectation of the kind of responses that you'd receive?"

Professor Tom Calma AO:

Well, I think firstly terms of reference are always described as restrictive because you wouldn't have terms of reference if it was open-ended. But look, I came in with a very open mind, I was very encouraged. I was heavily involved in the formation of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples that I thought was really our body. But I was keen and very pleased that Marcia was to be a co-chair because we've done a couple of things together now. And we had a big say in who the other members of the senior advisory group, co-design group were, so that was really, really encouraging.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

But I had an open mind. I thought the terms of reference gave us enough opportunity to really explore what we needed to, and they weren't prescriptive in the sense that they wanted some models and they wanted us as Aboriginal Torres Islander people to lead it and to inform government. And so you couldn't ask for anything better.

Dan Bourchier:


Marcia, by extension of that, another question. Were you surprised by the overwhelming majority sentiment of the written submissions in favour of the Uluru Statement of the Heart, and specifically for constitutionally enshrinement of an indigenous voice to parliament?

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

No, I wasn't surprised at all. But the problem is I wish that there had been more attention to our actual report and to our terms of reference and more feedback on what we're actually saying. So most of them simply repeat what we already know. And of course that's important and not to in any way disrespect that, but I was looking forward to some more substantial feedback on our actual proposition. And on that the accusation is often made, oh, well, why are you consulting with non-indigenous people? Shouldn't this be owned completely by indigenous people? Well, the problem with that proposition which would be wonderful in an ideal world is that the parliament is made up of a majority of non-indigenous people and we want this legislated. We have to convince them, which means that we have to talk to them.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

And so Tom and I together have done... Oh, I don't know how many stakeholder meetings, Tom, but it must be an excessive 20 or 30 now with the major associations and organisations. We've also spoken to



parliamentarians. And I think there's a lot of quiet support for what we're proposing... Excuse me, especially from parliamentarians who serve in those large rural and remote electorates because they themselves know how difficult it is to get around their own electorates and represent all of those views.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

And it was pretty clear to me in speaking to those sorts of parliamentarians that they want this voice for the very same practical reasons as we do, to get those voices heard and to get the problems dealt with. So talking to people like that is vital to making this work. And there are a few other questions in the Q&A here that I'd like to be able to address, but I think you'll find that we have in fact answered them all in our final report... Well, sorry, in our interim report and in the online documents.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

And also in the consultations there were groups, be they groups of Aboriginal people or non-indigenous people who were vehemently opposed to an enshrined constitutional voice and they made it really clear that they would be opposing it, and it wasn't just non-indigenous Australians there was indigenous Australians as well. So yeah, look, we'll report on all of those as we see it, but as we were received. So it's not a lay down. And if you look at any of the blogs after every time we put in an op ed or others made comments you'll see that there's a really undercurrent of opposition to the referendum. Not that that's going to worry us, we'll put it in as we saw it and heard it.

Dan Bourchier:

Tom, another question that's come through, why will this new body succeed when ATSIC and Congress didn't?

Professor Tom Calma AO:

Yeah, well, there are two different bodies I think. And ATSIC, we know that went but at the time of ATSIC there was one party that had the majority of people and a strong majority in both the House of Representatives and in the Senate and therefore they could push issues through. Nowadays with the hung parliaments you've got far less opportunity for that. Part of the problem with the National Congress was that it was a very good structure but when the government took the decision to not fund it, because we constructed it so that it was a company limited by guarantee, governments couldn't shut us down.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

And they didn't shut us down, we took the step of going into voluntary administration because we were running out of money and we weren't able to attract money. So we took the responsible position there, but governments never shut us down. But under this new regime it depends on how our governments respond to our final report in the way that they look at implementation as to how it might be structured. So, yeah.

Dan Bourchier:

Marcia, next question is, there's a great concern that most of the focus goes to the metro areas as opposed to regional settings, which I guess is why you've both spent so much time in regional, very remote parts of the country. I wonder if you would see a change as a result of this model, acknowledging that that was quite a focus of your report and the materials that you've put out as well.



Professor Marcia Langton AO:

Well, you only have to go to a few remote communities to see and understand pretty clearly what... the problem is. And the problem is that the resources, the media, the access to the internet, the access to social media, the access to governments, representatives to government officials are the privilege of people who live in the urban areas and people in the rural and remote areas are denied that ease of access and their voices are not heard, to put it very simply. Their concerns are not heard.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

You'll find out if you read, if you have the time to read, the dense reports that come from committees of inquiry and such that when did you ever hear the mainstream media raise the issue of overcrowded housing as the most urgent health priority, as the most urgent social determinant of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? Well, you didn't. You see?

Professor Tom Calma AO:

Yeah. But in saying that we went to every major capital city, we went to outer regional, inner regional centres, as well as remote and very remote. So in the 67 locations that we went to I think we had a great coverage of Australia and nobody should feel that they didn't have the opportunity to participate because it was all complimented by the surveys and the written submissions and stakeholder meetings. So, yeah, a very broad coverage.

Dan Bouchier:

Yeah, Tom, the next question is, has the feedback made you optimistic about the next steps? And we'll get into those next steps in a moment.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

Oh, sure. Look, I'm always really energised by going in and hearing what the community has to say. We've got a very engaged Aboriginal and Torres Islander population and people want to get more engaged. But there is a frustration that we are just advisors and the next steps is really what counts. But yeah, look, people are keen and we've got a very strong youth interest out there that governments need to be very aware of and we see that wherever we go. And I think there was also in quite a number of the consultations I went to where elders were encouraging youth to have a say and recognising that this is a body that's going to really work for them, because there's some time off before it all gets implemented. And so yeah, encouraging youth to get involved is really important.

Dan Bouchier:

Yeah. Marcia, same question to you. Has this made you feel optimistic about the next steps and the future?

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

I used to say that I was optimistic, now I think I have an interesting mix of optimism and pessimism. I'm optimistic about the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to start cracking some of these wicked policy problems and policy implementation problems. So despite the annual misery fest of the Closing the Gap reports, it's actually quite evident on the ground in some places that people have done a great job in closing the



gap in the more granular levels of, say, education, or even some health outcomes. And these are not reported in the big statistical mashup that you get in the Closing the Gap reports.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

And even while there are severe housing problems, incarceration problems, family violence problems, I've got to say that the leadership gives me great optimism. And by leadership I mean all of those people who pull their weight, including young people who are running voluntary youth groups, they were pretty impressive. And the women's groups, the strong women's groups in the communities that I went to and the emergence of women mayors in the Queensland Aboriginal councils and the Torres Strait council.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

I met with women mayors, they're great leaders, they're doing a mighty job, more strength to them. It's good to see those old gender barriers breaking down. I'm very optimistic about that. I'm less optimistic about people in the centres of power, the mainstream media, the politicians, the government officials, understanding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander world. If we need to do anything else it is actually to get them to understand us more, not from Twitter or social media, or newspaper columns, but actually to engage on the ground and hear people out.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

Yeah. And I think... Well, you were going to go into implementation in a minute, but I guess the key thing is that I think we can be optimistic. We've now got the national cabinet of the prime minister and chief ministers and premiers who are sitting down that worked with the Coalition of Peaks on the Closing the Gap targets, they're developing up a new relationship with them on those matters. But then that then opens the door for the bigger issues in indigenous affairs to be heard at that level.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

And when we first formed the Close the Gap Campaign, what the former pollies told us was that you had to get to the COAG level or the national cabinet level, elevated to that level where they see indigenous affairs is important. And I think that's what's happening and our process is just making it a little bit more inclusive of those who aren't members of peak bodies and looking at those other issues that aren't necessarily covered through the Closing the Gap targets.

Dan Bourchier:

And there's a lot more questions that go to those very issues around the borders and how representation might work across those borders, different issues at different levels. We have run out of time, though, but I wanted to round us out with this last couple of minutes that we've got left by talking about what happens now, the future, and where to from here. Tom, I wonder if you might want to lead that part off.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

Okay. I think the big challenge, well, one of the big challenges is really engaging with the states and territories and the local governments because a lot of this success is going to hinge around the local and regional structure and that relationship that they're going to have with the constituents within their states, looking at issues like whether we have an election or nominations for state representatives.



Professor Tom Calma AO:

The other that many people were very encouraged by and it was proposed is that follow something like happened under the National Congress where anybody interested in wanting to be a representative put in a one-page expressions of interest and an imminent independent panel would assess and determine the membership. That makes it much more inclusive, that had some work. But our challenge now is to go through all these reports and decipher all the community consultation feedback and come up with a final report that we're targeting as of early July to have completed and go to the government.

Dan Bouchier:

And, Marcia, from your perspective the next steps here, that report that will be handed to government in the next couple of months, then what?

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

Well, I'm very hopeful that either in this term of government and now that there's been a suggestion that there'll be an early election, perhaps we should be looking to the next term of government, that our final report would be adopted and that draft legislation would be tabled in the parliament. And it's at that point that we need the support of all Australians to provide the legislative means for local and regional voices and a national voice to both parliament and government for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people so that we truly have a say in our own affairs. If you asked me what did I want for Christmas, that's it.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

And to recognise that if government picks it up and says let's run with what we're proposed like they did with our interim report, it'd be nice if they accepted everything in the final report. But that's going to kick-start a whole lot of co-design. Things like how many regions do we have? How do we work within regions? And so there'll be another range of consultations and you'll pick this up in the interim report, anyhow. We've said this in there which was the next step and that is the co-design. And that's working with communities, and both not only the federal government but the state and territory governments and local governments have all got to be involved in that co-design process.

Dan Bouchier:

And just to give you a bit more detail, that you can go and have a look at the more than 2,200 published submissions on voice.niaa.gov.au. There's also as you've heard this afternoon, that interim report, there's also lots of breakdowns of looking at that information in a range of formats to make that really easy and accessible to understand, and that's all there at the website. And just in terms of those next discussions, well, the senior advisory group I understand is meeting today, they're going to continue to meet over the next couple of weeks. They'll be looking at all of those submissions, all of the information that's coming from the more informal but just as important consultations and discussions across the country. Also, all of your questions that have been coming in on this forum and those others, and the whole range of information that's been provided that we're writing that report, handing it to government.

Dan Bouchier:

And, well, I'm certainly now I'm hopeful of seeing that at some point down the track when the government decides to, if they decide to release that. But if that's the case all of those details will be at voice.niaa.gov.au.



But as you've heard from Tom and Marcia, this is not the end of the discussion, in fact, this is just a comma before a whole range of other conversations that are going to happen, and that those of course will be happening all over the place. If you want more information you can go to voice.niaa.gov.au.

Dan Bouchier:

Thanks you very much for joining us on this webinar today. And I want to thank very much the panel who have done... Well, who have been leading this charge. Professor Marcia Langton AO, thank you so much. Wonderful to have you along.

Professor Marcia Langton AO:

Thanks so much, Dan. And also many thanks to Tom as usual and the wonderful people from the National Indigenous Australians Agency. You've helped us so much.

Dan Bouchier:

And thank you, Tom, Professor Tom Calma AO as well. Great to have you along, and both of you leading this charge, this very important conversation.

Professor Tom Calma AO:

Yeah. Thanks, Dan. And look, can I recognise those 160 plus people who are participating in this webinar today? It's so important that we get informed and we make an informed decision, and that's what we're hoping for. And the more work that each of you can do to talk to your local constituents to make sure that they understand what this voice process is about and so they witness their opportunity to have a vote in the parliament that they'll come and be informed and be supported, because I've heard the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Islander people and they know that we're interested in a partnership and having a fair and reasonable say in our future.

Dan Bouchier:

Well, thank you both so much, and again, thank you for joining us. Do keep checking out the website for any information there, there's plenty. But for now though, yarra, good afternoon.