

Response to Indigenous Voice Co-design Interim Report

Baptist Care Australia

26 April 2021

About Us

Baptist Care Australia is the national representative body for Baptist community service organisations and their clients in the national policy debate. We work to bring social justice to Australian communities, advocating nationally on issues important to our members.

A core principle in our work is to make sure that the interests and voices of marginalised people are heard when decisions are made that affect them. Our vision is a nation of hope-filled, purposeful people, building communities where every voice is heard. Our advocacy work seeks to help realise this aspiration.

Baptist Care Australia members serve people in aged care, retirement living, those affected by family violence, experiencing homelessness, on low incomes, experiencing relationship breakdown, living with a disability, and affected by multigenerational disadvantage.

Services provided include crisis accommodation, social and affordable housing, out of home care for children, counselling, education, no and low interest loan schemes, and other programs that help people rebuild their lives or live independently with the right support. Aged Care Services include home services (both through the Commonwealth Home Support Program and Home Care Packages), residential aged care and respite. Additional services provided by members include post-acute care with public hospitals, Veterans homecare services and fee for service homecare for clients.

With a combined annual turnover of \$800 million – of which around 80% is attributed to aged care activity, Baptist Care Australia members employ over 10,000 staff and engage with more than 3,000 volunteers annually.

Baptist Care Australia is a company limited by guarantee, a registered charity and a public benevolent institution.

Introduction

Baptist Care Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Indigenous Voice Co-design Interim Report. Baptist Care Australia is an advocacy agency that represents Baptist community service agencies, several of which work alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Many of those programs include an over representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients. Much work has yet to be done to improve equity for Indigenous Australians and it makes sense that they have a strong voice in Australian public policy development.

Our perspective on recognition and reconciliation

Baptist Care Australia recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Australia's First Peoples and respects their cultures, lands, waters, histories, and right to live in a society free of economic, social, and cultural discrimination. We acknowledge and celebrate the deep, abiding pride that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have in their diverse cultures and we place great value in the contributions they make to the wider Australian society.

Baptist Care Australia is committed to the reduction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage and inequality. As a non-indigenous organisation, we do not claim to speak for, or represent the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, but rather look to further our own understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and speak out against the injustices experienced by a large portion of Aboriginal Australians. We seek to walk alongside Aboriginal and other Australians towards a deep, lasting reconciliation.

We believe solutions aimed at alleviating the entrenched disadvantage many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience should be based on principles of self-determination, non-discrimination, respect for human rights, and respect for diversity, cultural appropriateness and safety and community capacity building.

Our vision for reconciliation

Our vision for reconciliation is that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this country will be able to enjoy equality, dignity and respect. We aspire to an end to the racism that adversely affects the daily life of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We commit to actively working towards healing and reconciliation, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to be fully valued, and social inequalities eradicated.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia have experienced trauma as a result of colonisation, including the associated violence and loss of culture and land, as well as subsequent policies such as the forced removal of children. Intergenerational trauma is one contributor to the inequality and disadvantage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience, and we need to recognise the history of dispossession, colonisation and the continuing discrimination faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Importance of an Indigenous Voice

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been discriminated against for too long and they have less opportunities in life than the general population as the Closing the Gap reports have shown year after year. The Federal Government must do more to close the gap in health, justice, and employment and better respond to the needs and aspirations of Indigenous Australians. Now, more than ever, it is our moral obligation to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart called for a First Nations Voice to be enshrined in the Constitution. Baptist Care Australia supports a First Nations Voice to Parliament to be enshrined in the Constitution as a matter of priority in order to genuinely advance reconciliation.

Dean Parkin, Director at *From the Heart*, in his speech at the National Museum of Australia on 17 March 2021 elaborated on why we need an Indigenous Voice today:

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people think of time across generations. What we experience now, is part of a continuum from what is gone before and what is yet to come. We are connected to both past present and future. We are connected in a spiritual sense and also in gritty real-world politics. The political and policy decisions of the past play out in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today.

The latest scorecard recording of these impacts is the Closing the Gap Strategy. Closing the Gap doesn't tell the full story of the hopes and fears, the successes and failures, the optimism and cynicism that ebb and flow through our families and communities. However, there is one story that cuts through to the core of our current challenge and justifies in plain terms, why a voice enshrined in the constitution is our nation's most critical policy reform. Among the announcements of the recently refreshed Closing the Gap Strategy, a new target was set to reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults held in incarceration by at least 15% by 2031. If nothing changes and this projected target trajectory extends beyond 2031 the incarceration rate gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-indigenous Australians does not close until 2093. Look around at every single Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person here tonight - whether they are our established leaders, myself or the brilliant young people - statistically speaking not a single one of us will live to see equality on incarceration. No matter how hard we try. No matter how much talent grim determination we commit the highest ambition our nation's democracy and bureaucracy can muster is to merely break even in 72 years-time. There is no policy area in our nation in greater need of disruption than Indigenous Affairs.

So, when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were finally asked at the back end of a decade long process, what meaningful constitutional recognition meant to us, we delivered the Uluru Statement from the Heart and its call for a constitutionally enshrined voice. We brushed constitutional symbolism aside and reached for a practical structural reform that has a real impact on lives. Our democratic and bureaucratic institutions are passively settling in for the next seven decades. It is logical that we call for a voice that has similar continuity and certainty. Only a constitutionally enshrined voice can hold those institutions to account over the long term.”

Recommendations

In accordance with the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the Uluru Dialogue¹, we urge the Federal Government to:

1. Honour its election commitment to a referendum once a model for the Voice has been settled.
2. Enable legislation for the Voice to be passed after a referendum has been held in the next term of Parliament; and
3. Ensure that the membership model for the National Voice provides previously unheard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with the same chance of being selected as established leadership figures.

Conclusion

It is timely that the Federal Government works with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards constitutional recognition by facilitating a voice of Indigenous people to Parliament. We express our support for Noel Pearson's statement at the National Museum of Australia on 17 March 2021 when he said:

“We see behind us a long storied and unrequited campaign for recognition and justice. Are we destined for this forlorn history to continue for a third century? We are engaged in a phase that represents our best chance to achieve recognition sought by our old people. Australians living today can bequeath to our children a Commonwealth that affords a rightful place to its original peoples. Up until now non-indigenous Australians have told themselves that these 250 years of European history is the only thing that matters to Australia. This is but the blink of an eye of Australia's story and recognition will bridge 65,000 years of pre-colonial history, cultures and languages, with these 250 years.

Let me point out what is incontrovertible. Australia doesn't make sense without recognition. Australia is incomplete without recognition. How could there be an Australia without its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Indigenous Peoples? As long as its Indigenous Peoples remain unrecognised then Australia is an absurdity. A nation missing its most vital heart.”

BCA would be pleased to elaborate on any of the issues raised in the submission. For further information, contact Nicole Hornsby, Executive Director, Baptist Care Australia on telephone 02 6195 3176 or email info@baptistcareaustralia.org.au .

ⁱ The Uluru Statement, 2021, Voice. Treaty. Truth, Uluru Statement from the Heart, retrieved from <https://ulurustatement.org/>