

## Ngaanyatjarra Council 'Voices'

**Submission to: )** Professor Dr Marcia Langton AM and Professor Tom Calma AO  
Co- chairs, Voice Co-Design Process Senior Advisory Group  
National Indigenous Australians Agency  
Charles Perkins House  
Woden ACT 2066

**Title: )** 'Ngaanyatjarra Council ... 'Voicing' our concerns'

**From: )** Gerard Coffey, CEO, Ngaanyatjarra Council  
Via email

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The Ngaanyatjarra Council believes it is essential that governments hear and are inclusive of Indigenous voices in their decision-making, policy creation, and operations in transparent and accountable ways. This encapsulates our vision for government-Indigenous relations and is a substantial shift from what we have experienced in dealing with governments over the past four decades. We seek to be heard instead of being the usual background noise.

We look forward to forging a closer working relationship with the Federal Government. Our vision is for Ngaanyatjarra Council to have a regional agreement directly with the Federal and Western Australian governments.

### About Ngaanyatjarra Council

The [Ngaanyatjarra Council](#) (Aboriginal Corporation) is one of Australia's largest Indigenous Council's and is based in central Western Australia. We are the principal governance organisation in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, an area the size of the United Kingdom.

Ngaanyatjarra Council represents the interests of about 2,000 people - Ngaanyatjarra, Pintupi, and Pitjantjatjara Traditional Owners (Yarnangu, that is, people from WA's central desert). These people live in the Ngaanyatjarra Council's 12 member communities in areas classed as extremely remote.

The Council is by, for, and made up of Indigenous peoples on the Ngaanyatjarra Land and offers an exemplary model of Indigenous self-determination. Ngaanyatjarra members live, study, work or have other meaningful roles in their communities. We socialise and engage in recreation 'on country'. We have agency in when, where, and how this happens - Ngaanyatjarra people *own* Ngaanyatjarra Council. We employ as many Ngaanyatjarra people as possible and have a strong apprenticeship program creating a local talent pipeline for Council's work. The only services we don't provide for our people are policing and education.

Our current model is robust and has stood the test of time, with the Council having been **incorporated 40 years ago** under the Aboriginal Corporations Act. Ngaanyatjarra Council's programs and businesses turn over more than **\$100 million a year**.

## What the 'Indigenous Voices' proposes for us

Other organisations have made submissions relevant to our region. They are the NPY Women's Council and one of the ten government-run regional organisations called 'Empowering Communities'. There are significant differences between their approaches and ours. To assist consideration, we have referenced those submissions with a focus on the points of difference rather than the commonalities.

The NPY Women's Council focuses on health, social and cultural services covering youth, child, family, aged, disability, domestic and family violence, traditional healing, and a social enterprise. It also runs youth and domestic violence prevention programs on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands.

Meanwhile, the other organisation, 'Empowered Communities', is an organisation that seeks to combine voices from Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands. From an ideological stance, we support the intent of 'Empowered Communities', but not the structure.

The commonality between Ngaanyatjarra Council, the NPY Women's Council, and Empowering Communities is that they are about First Nations people. Superficially, we are all operating from the same 'cultural block'. However, the three organisations significantly diverge in their geographical representation, philosophy, operational range, governance, and, even, views on government policy.

| Organisation                  | Geographical representation  | Organisational aims/goals  | Governance structure  | Sticking points  |
|-------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| <b>Ngaanyatjarra Council</b>  | Only the Ngaanyatjarra Lands (2,000 people living in 12 member communities)<br>The whole area of the lands is variously held under native title and strong leases.<br>Comprises an area of 250,000 sq km | Supports members' development in 'all ways' - health, training, employment, housing, tenancy, housing maintenance, swimming pools, power station, law, justice matters, finance, land management, commercial enterprises ranging from mustering/ selling feral camels and transport services (does not provide policing or education). | Incorporated 40 years ago (in 1981)<br>Wholly Aboriginal owned and operated organisation.<br><br>Accountable to our community members because the council is run by, for, and with community members. | Has distinctive views which don't align with the other two organisations - there are minimal natural affiliations.<br>Strongly believes a region's voice should be based on state, not tristate boundaries<br>A tristate voice would silence, or at best dilute, Ngaanyatjarra community members' voices due to our isolation and small population size. |
| <b>NPY Women's Council</b>    | Tristate, spanning WA, NT, and SA (covering 350,000 sq km)   | Youth, child, family, aged, disability, domestic and family violence, traditional healing, and a social enterprise (weavers).<br>It runs youth and domestic violence prevention programs.  | Led by women's law, authority and culture.<br>Aboriginal women from 25 desert communities in three states govern and direct it.<br>Has been funded to run community services since 1993.              | It excludes 50% of the Ngaanyatjarra people, i.e., men.<br>Has multiple interests<br>Has diverged from Ngaanyatjarra interests/policy positions in the past.<br>Operates tristate, meaning Ngaanyatjarra's WA-only voice is diluted.   |
| <b>Empowering Communities</b> | Tristate, spanning WA, NT, and SA  | A government structure involving voices from Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands as well as other regions.  | Government-formed<br>in 2016 eight regional 'organisations'   | Attempts to represent many Indigenous communities.<br>However, their representation is not beneficial for the Ngaanyatjarra Lands due to fundamental schisms on social policy.<br>Attempts to represent disparate groups/regions   |

We believe that the approach adopted by those other two organisations would effectively *not* give the people of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands a voice and that tristate solution to finding representative Indigenous voices are not the way forward. Policies driven across state borders, let alone three states, are too complex and tend to be ineffective. It is difficult to deal with a State, and the Federal Government - dealing with four governments is even more difficult. Combining our organisation's perspective/views/voice with those of the other groups would, in practice, silence the voice of Ngaanyatjarra people, the very community we, as a council, represent.

To have Ngaanyatjarra Council's voice mediated through a tri-organisation bloc, including NY Women's Council and Empowering Communities, would significantly curtail our ability and opportunity to:

- Be active and equal participants in Australian societies, and
- To maintain Ngaanyatjarra Lands' community members' cultural traditions, which are embedded in the way the Ngaanyatjarra Council operates.

### **Our recommendations**

To ensure the Ngaanyatjarra people have a representative voice to governments, our voice needs to be undiluted, in other words, *direct*.

Ngaanyatjarra Council wishes to build on its strong position to ensure governments hear the voice of our remote and disadvantaged region. The Council *is* the voice for Ngaanyatjarra Lands. It has been for 40 years and is widely accepted as so doing. In this time, we have worked with multiple Australian federal governments under a series of 10 prime ministers. However, our experience in dealing with governments is that no one is listening - we are not heard. The proposal to create 25 to 35 artificial Indigenous groups, including across state borders, would further exacerbate this problem.

There are, however, remarkable parallels between how the Ngaanyatjarra Council operates and the intent of the [Local and Regional Voice proposal](#). That proposal seeks to create a regional-level governance structure that's community designed and led; advises all government levels about regional issues; partners with governments about community needs and delivering local priorities; plus offers local views to the National Voice to feed into national issues.

Ngaanyatjarra Council can tick 'yes' for each of these attributes. We are doing this now, but the issue is, we need a shift in government to ensure our voice is heard, taken into account, and, where reasonable, acted upon. Ngaanyatjarra Council does not have confidence in the Voices Co-Design process unless it leads to real change in governments' capacity to take on board, to hear Indigenous voices, and to respond to them. There is a real risk that distilling voices from 500 Indigenous clans into a collection of regional groups would effectively nullify authentic Indigenous voices rendering them meaningless, allowing governments to claim that they have 'consulted' Indigenous people.

### **A call to shift the onus**

We believe governments need to look at themselves to build upon their capabilities, then revamp their processes to improve how they listen and 'hear' Indigenous voices, what capacity they have to respond to those voices. The onus should not be on Australia's Indigenous communities to negotiate among themselves to create new flexible structures to coalesce and embody local and regional voices that feed into government-demanded artificial constructs. Such demand requires each separate Indigenous organisation to bring on board in-house experts on policy and consultation to ensure their voices are heard. It is a cost that few Indigenous organisations could bear. It is also essential to consider if the government is asking any other minority group in Australia to combine their voices into artificial constructs of a limited number. Why then impose this on our country's First Peoples?

Suppose the government looks to the rich tapestry of existing Indigenous organisations. In that case, it will find that, like Ngaanyatjarra, each has a structure with in-built flexibility and strengths, honed over time, for its needs. For example, our narrative is empowered thanks to Ngaanyatjarra community

members owning and driving our organisation. To then have to blend our voices with those from other organisations is an extra skillset, money, and time-hungry process that we, as an Indigenous representative organisation, simply cannot entertain. This takes us away from our core business of directly supporting, empowering, and being an Indigenous community.

We maintain that any representation proposed for the Ngaanyatjarra Lands needs to be area-specific and 'voiced' by the Ngaanyatjarra people, not grouped with other service providers with differing views and limited Ngaanyatjarra interaction. We maintain our Council speaks for our people; no more, no less.

The practical outcome for us would be a **regional agreement** between our Council, and state and federal governments would allow our authentic, representative voice to be heard on behalf of our community members. Ngaanyatjarra Council and its communities operate under significant difficulties due to our location in a remote desert of Western Australia. We do not believe that requiring our region to work tristate would enable effective engagement with governments.

Thank you for considering our submission.

*Ngaanyatjarra Council ... Be country, for country, on country, are country.*