

# **Submission on the proposed National Voice and Local and Regional Voices to Parliament and Government**

**Peter Murphy**

I have been participating in the debates and campaigns about justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples since the 1970s and realise that this is a very difficult process and that it has been frustrating First Nations Peoples for a long time.

The current proposal for a Voice to Parliament arising from the 2017 Statement from the Heart is another opportunity to find a way forward that is positive for First Nations Peoples and for the whole Australian society. I know a majority of Australians want to see progress on this initiative, but at the same time I can see that it also being frustrated.

It is hugely disappointing that the Coalition governments of Prime Ministers Turnbull and Morrison have rejected the core proposal from the Statement from the Heart for a Constitutional Referendum to embed the Voice to Parliament in our national political system.

I believe that this call for a Referendum should be pursued until it is achieved, because this is the pathway for the majority of Australians to affirm their desire of a just relationship with the First Nations Australians. So whatever happens with the Morrison government, that objective should be pursued until achieved.

The proposal for Voice, Treaty, Truth from the Statement from the Heart is already a big compromise with the Liberal Party because it would maintain all the existing racist provisions of the Australian Constitution, and still the Liberal Party has said that the proposal is asking too much.

The race powers in the Constitution demonstrate the great cultural obstacle to genuine equality in relations between the First Nations Australians and the descendants of the colonisers, and in particular the relations with those powerful interests in land and resources who do not want to acknowledge the fundamental injustice of dispossession, whose benefits they enjoy.

So whatever happens with the Voice proposal, I strongly support further constitutional change to remove the race powers, and I believe that a wholly new constitution based on fully democratic principles and the rights of First Nations Peoples is necessary and must be pursued.

With regard to the details of the proposals from the Co-Design Process, I believe that the Voice needs clear authorisation from First Nations Peoples through elections, and I think any appointed members of the National Voice would undermine its authority.

Likewise, the Local and Regional Voices need to be legitimised by a clear process of election. The proposal is good in its recognition of variation across regions and the need for the people to completely win the Local or Regional Voice, but that should not exclude an election process.

The strong assertion of the principle of gender equality in the Voices will also legitimise the Voices and give them more authority in the difficult work ahead.

Both the National and Local / Regional Voices must be properly funded to be able to carry out the two-way functions of consultation and advice that are proposed.

One question is should there be more or fewer Regional Voices in the 25-35 range. My instinct is to say more, the full 35, to help ensure that as many voices as possible are heard.

In conclusion I strongly support the basic principle that the Voices are not to duplicate any other existing organisation or to be engaged in service delivery or to be a gatekeeper to communities and existing organisations.

The truly innovative idea from the Statement from the Heart is the political role proposed for the Voice. It isn't a parliament, it has no control, but it is a representative voice speaking to policy and law, something Australia has not achieved so far.

We will achieve the Voice, sooner or later, and there should be no limit on its aspirations for First Nations Australians.