



30 April 2021

Re: Interim Report to the Australian Government: Indigenous Voice Co-Design Process

Reconciliation Victoria is the statewide body promoting reconciliation across Victoria. This means that we promote deeper understanding, respect and justice for and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. While our work focuses primarily on the 97% of Victorians who are not Aboriginal, as it is non-Aboriginal people who need to take responsibility for driving reconciliation, our work is guided by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voices.

Indeed, we believe that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voices must be part of true reconciliation efforts which is why our not-for-profit organisation is led by a First Nations CEO, is supported by a Board with three positions guaranteed for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander members, one of whom must be a Co-Chair, and is guided by a Cultural Council of First Peoples. We believe that this structure is essential to amplify, consider and heed the knowledges, experiences, and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. We urge the Australian Government to do the same.

We thank the Indigenous Voice Co-design Groups for their efforts so far and we support their aspirations. We believe that it is essential for the Australian Parliament and Government, as well as Local and Regional Governance structures, to seek, hear and listen to advice from an Indigenous Voice which directly speaks to matters that are significant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. In particular, any policies and laws that impact the daily lives of First Nations people. Great damage has been caused in the past by not doing so.

Whilst there have been previous First Nations representative bodies offering sound expertise to the Australian Government, the lack of certainty about their continued existence has meant that their knowledge has been too easy to dismiss. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) is but one example of a First Nations representative agency which was dismantled. For there to be trust and confidence that a Voice to Parliament will not meet the same fate, it is imperative that a Voice to Parliament is enshrined in the Constitution. We understand that the Terms of Reference for the Indigenous Voice Co-design Interim Report deliberately did not include Constitutional enshrinement. It is difficult to maintain faith in this process when such a core element is missing. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have clearly asked for constitutional enshrinement and it is an ask that is deserved.

We urge for the Voice to Parliament to not only be enshrined in the Constitution, but also to be appropriately funded. Financial resources cannot be redirected from existing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander programs such as those in Education and Health. These two provisions are the only way to truly strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement, to truly ensure full trust and participation in this process, and to truly progress genuine reconciliation efforts. The Voice needs to be able to withstand changes of government, and arguably the only way to do this is to enshrine it in the Constitution and properly fund its efforts. A constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament would also assist in addressing the current levels of distrust that exist between First Nations people and the Federal Government.



In Victoria we have seen that important initiatives can be implemented by first establishing a strong representative body. The First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, and their nation-leading work on Treaty and the Yoo-rrook Justice Commission, demonstrate that substantial national leadership in establishing a strong Voice to Parliament will embed a foundation and framework for future actions on Treaty, truth-telling and justice.

As the Victorian peak body for reconciliation, we seek to articulate and amplify the aspirations and well-argued desires of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. We must be forthcoming that the call for Voice, Treaty and Truth brought forward by the Uluru Statement from the Heart does not have universal support in community. Diverse views are part of meaningful community engagement and democratic processes.

Therefore, Reconciliation Victoria acknowledges that the Indigenous Voice Co-Design Process, and indeed our own submission, may not suit the needs and beliefs of every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person in Victoria. It is clear however, that First Nations Peoples across the state echo principles of and for sovereignty, justice, and self-determination so it is our hope that Reconciliation Victoria's Voice to Parliament Submission is read with these values in mind. We come to our view from our close work in reconciliation for almost two decades, with a wide cross-section of the community, including Aboriginal organisations and businesses, our network of almost 30 Local Reconciliation Groups, and our own Board and Cultural Council of First Peoples.

Diverse opinions and views will continue to strengthen the reconciliation movement. This is a nuanced space but there is a core principle that we can all agree on - the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples need to be guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices. A constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament provides this irrefutable voice at the table and means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are consulted, heard, and guide the meaningful change that we all aspire to see.

Yours sincerely,

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