

Kim Houghton

Dear Co-Design Body

Submission for Co-design process

I am a late middle-aged white Australian, who was born and grew up in Hobart at a time when it was accepted that Aboriginal Tasmanians no longer existed, despite some last ditch efforts by colonists to 'save the race'. I grew up seeing Aborigines as historic curiosities, and I clearly remember a sculptural diorama in the Tasmanian Museum showing an Aboriginal family around a campfire which was symbolic of the demise of a primitive lost race.

When I was 15 I travelled around Australia with my family and was deeply moved by the poverty dominating the indigenous communities we passed through.

I've lived in many other places in Australia and overseas since those early experiences, but have not developed any particularly close relationships with indigenous people - I think I've been too much of an urban person for that. So my support for the call for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament does not come from first hand experience of Indigenous peoples' current struggles, more from a concern about the deep injustices that have been heaped on the First Australians, and respect for the work they have done to reach consensus on the Voice. I have practiced as a community mediator and conflict resolution facilitator, and so have some idea of the extent of the work that has gone into the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the effort to reach consensus across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders of the need for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

*Why do you think the Uluru Statement from the Heart is important?*

The Uluru Statement from the Heart is the result of Indigenous Australians doing themselves what they have been asking governments (state and federal) to do for decades - consult widely and deeply on a way forward for the next steps in national reconciliation. The fact that the participants were able to frame a clear and powerful consensus view is testament to the skills they have in listening and reaching agreement, and to the absolute necessity and indeed urgency of setting up a Voice.

*Why do you think it's important to enshrine the Voice to Parliament in the Constitution, rather than include it only in legislation?*

It is vital that the Voice be enshrined in the Constitution, as this is the most effective way to guarantee longevity. A legislated consultation process would be subject to the whims of the government of the day, and our political history shows that Indigenous issues are often used as a divider in 'wedge politics' games. The only way to avoid the politicisation of a voice for Indigenous Australians is to accept the approach designed through the Uluru Statement and enshrine a Voice to Parliament in the Constitution. This also validates the enormous efforts already invested by Indigenous leaders. For a white dominated government to think that 'we know better' and offer a different pathway would be yet another example of the patronising dismissal of Indigenous leadership in this country's history.

*How could a Voice to Parliament improve the lives of your community?*

Enacting an Indigenous Voice to Parliament will help me, the people I live with and

work with by providing a way forward with reconciliation. It will give us all confidence that the Australian system of government acknowledges the need to hear Indigenous voices, and enshrines a system to make sure this continues in perpetuity. I have been working for over 25 years professionally to support economic development in regional Australia, and Indigenous voices are notably absent from this field. A Voice would give a clear pathway for Indigenous aspirations and concerns about social and economic development to be heard.

*Why is it important for Indigenous people to have a say in the matters that affect them?* Indigenous people have had no opportunity since colonisation to determine their own destiny. Their resistance was not only overcome but negated. Their land management and cultural practices were forcibly erased, despite the thousands of years of sophisticated learning. They have been taken from their families with the full support of successive governments, and even today most policy affecting Indigenous people is designed and implemented without their involvement. The ease with which governments of the time dismissed the Uluru Statement was awful, an example of politics being used to reinforce the status quo while citizens make a well reasoned call for change. Acting on the united call for a Voice would be a significant milestone in Australia's history in enabling Indigenous views to be heard.

Continuing Indigenous deaths in custody, ongoing failures to 'Close the Gap', high rates of incarceration, low (but thankfully rising) levels of education, and entrenched unemployment and minimal economic development in indigenous communities all show that we are still a long way from reconciliation. Adopting a Constitutionally enshrined Indigenous Voice to Parliament is a critical step in restarting a meaningful reconciliation, and addressing the systemic barriers still facing First Australians.

Thank you,

Dr Kim Houghton

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