



VICTORIAN WOMEN'S TRUST

“For the last 114 years, Australia's founding document, the Constitution, has been silent on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Excluded from voting, and from participating in the convention debates which led to the drafting of the Constitution, the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were silenced by the framers of the Constitution.

While there is no constitutional recognition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, that silence will continue. The absence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from the Constitution makes silent and renders invisible the world's oldest continuing culture.”

– Ken Wyatt AM MP, Chair's forward, Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 2015ⁱ

We endorse the *From the Heart* campaign's call for a National Voice

In 2011 the Victorian Women's Trust (VWT) made a submission to the Joint Select Committee's Inquiry. We wrote, “if you create a better world for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, all Australians benefit”. This still rings true today. April 2021 marks 30 years since the release of the Final Report following the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and VWT is motivated to support the *From The Heart's* advocacy to the Indigenous Voice Co-Design Process for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution to advise the Parliament and Government on legislation and policy that have an acute and particular impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There is still much unfinished work to do on this issue and we must all keep pushing for change. As the Director of the *From the Heart* campaign, Dave Parkin, stated in a submission to the Co-Design process, “A Voice enshrined in the Constitution is a fair, practical and safe proposal that will unify our nation.”

In supporting the *From the Heart* campaign, VWT:

1. Calls on the Government to honour its election commitment to a referendum once a model for the Voice has been settled.
2. Calls for enabling legislation for the Voice to be passed after a referendum has been held in the next term of Parliament.
3. Calls for a membership model for the National Voice that ensures previously unheard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the same chance of being selected as established leadership figures.

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VWT also notes that while there have been six government processes examining the question of constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the past decade, the Uluru Statement from the Heart is “the most proportionately significant consultation process that has ever been undertaken with First Peoples”ⁱⁱ and must not be a squandered opportunity.

Our organisation

Established in 1985, the Victorian Women’s Trust is an organisation whose vision is to achieve a world where women, girls, and gender diverse people take up all of life’s opportunities with respect, safety and dignity.

Throughout our 36-year history we have worked side by side with Indigenous women in creating a better nation including:

- Being in partnership and sharing offices with Aboriginal organisation Koorie Women Mean Business (KWMB) since 1994. We continue to leverage off this sustained and positive relationship by finding other means to inspire others to work together in the pursuit of justice for Indigenous Australians.
- Currently we have two Sub-Funds that grant exclusively to Aboriginal organisations and another that supports educational and leadership opportunities for Aboriginal women.
- In 2012, VWT invited eminent USA anti-violence campaigner Dr Jackson Katz to Melbourne where he took part in an unprecedented partnership initiative between the Trust and KWMB which resulted in *The Iramoo Zone*, in which some thirty Indigenous male leaders in family violence prevention participated in a highly successful masterclass with Dr Katz as a part of our *Be The Hero!* program.
- In 2018, VWT produced a documentary film with Stu Mannion, *Letters Across the Desert* which featured interviews with celebrated historian Sue Taffe and a vast array of archival photography. *Letters Across the Desert* captured the powerful partnership between Mary Bennett and Shirley Andrews as they jointly advocated in support of the rights of Indigenous Australians in the early 20th century.
- In 2019, VWT and KWMB hosted a community event with the Victorian Treaty Advancement Commissioner Jill Gallagher about the process, what treaty looks like, and what it means for Victorians.
- On 16 October 2020, VWT, along with Trish Bergin, Professor Kim Rubenstein, Hon Mary Delahunty GAICD, Dr Nikki Henningham, Kerry Wilson, Tanja Kovac, Ruth McGowan OAM, Nicolette Snowden and Professor Clare Wright OAM made a submission to Members of the AEC Redistribution Committee on the naming of the proposed new federal electorate in Victoria following the 2021 redistribution urging the Committee to name the new electorate after an Aboriginal woman in light of the fact that only 5 out of 38 Federal Electoral Divisions in Victoria (13%) are named after women, and provided a list of 34 possible women to the Committee.
- ‘Warrior Woman Lane’ was established in November 2020 thanks to the collective efforts of the Lisa Belleair Family, City of Melbourne, KWMB and Moondani Balluk. VWT was pleased to play a supporting role in this important community project stemming from VWT publication *Women in the Life of the City*.

Conclusion

“The committee acknowledges that recognition in the Constitution will not end racism in Australia, nor will it be a solution to the serious problems faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, constitutional recognition will be a vital step towards reconciliation and give a voice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a Constitution better aligned with a modern Australia.” – Ken Wyatt, 2015ⁱⁱⁱ

“An invitation was issued to the Australian people three years ago at Uluru and support is growing. If not now, when? When our voice is protected in the Constitution from the vagaries of ideology and party politics, we will be heard, and we can have a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia.” – Professor Megan Davis, 2020^{iv}

By accurately highlighting our past – the history and role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our Constitution - we can better unite our future.

In one of VWT’s early major public initiatives in the late 1990s, *The Purple Sage Project*, we drew on an inspirational statement by Gungarri Elder, Ethel Munn:

If Australians are to live together and share the country, there is the need for a ‘miracle of ears’! We need people to listen and actually hear what is being said.”^v

The VWT hopes this campaign by *From The Heart* for constitutional change is successful – and generates a groundswell of support on the road to change so that Australia can have a ‘miracle of ears’ and use them to listen to our First Nations Voice.

Endnotes

ⁱ 2015, *Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: Final Report*, Commonwealth of Australia, June, i.

ⁱⁱ 2021, Submission to the Co-Design process, *From the Heart*, 10, accessed online 25 March 2021, <https://fromtheheart.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Interim-Voice-Co-Design-report-From-the-Heart-submission.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ 2015, *Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: Final Report*, Commonwealth of Australia, June, vi.

^{iv} Davis, M 2020, 'The Promise of an Australian homecoming: What would make an acknowledgement of country more welcome', *The Monthly*, July, 11.

^v 1998, *Purple Sage Project book*, Victorian Women's Trust, 23.