

## **Submission to the National Voice Proposal**

### **My main point**

I am writing to express my strong support for the establishment of a permanent First Nations Voice to provide the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to our Federal Government and Parliament on policy decisions affecting their lives. It is my strong view that this Voice should be established through an amendment to the Australian constitution. This places it at the heart of our national identity and offers it greater permanence and protection from changing political winds in the future.

I firmly believe that the establishment of this Voice could be a turning point towards greater reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and progress the healing of the single greatest wound in our country and its national consciousness. Importantly, it represents a critical first step in responding to the Uluru Statement from the Heart and Aboriginal people's gracious invitation to all of us to walk with them into a better future.

Below I say a bit more about why I believe these things.

### **My background and what has shaped my view**

I am not an Aboriginal person. I am a white, 61-year-old male of Irish Scottish heritage born in Paramatta in Sydney. I went to school at a time when education about Aboriginal people was very limited. We didn't know then as much as we know now about the complexity and sophistication of Aboriginal culture and land management practices or the staggering length of time they have been here—now dated up to 65,000 years.

My awareness grew after I got married in my early twenties. My wife has an adopted younger Aboriginal brother. I got to know him as part of the family and our lives and the lives of our children have been connected and intertwined for the past 38 years. He was born in 1966, the year before the referendum vote that meant Aboriginal people could be counted in the census. He was born of Aboriginal parents in the central north west of NSW. He is a Kamilaroi man. Before he was one year old, he and his brothers and sisters were removed by the authorities, so he is part of the Stolen Generation. I won't go into detail, but over the past nearly 40 years he has experienced much pain, trouble and trauma personally and later in the lives of his partner and their children. He has had significant substance use and mental health problems which over the years have increasingly made his life unmanageable, despite his many attempts to address them. He has spent periods in jail as a consequence of actions linked to his drug dependence. But in school after academic testing, his adoptive parents were told his level of intelligence indicated he could undertake anything he wanted to.

I know my brother-in-law has made poor choices that have contributed to his own difficulties and suffering and which have had harmful repercussions for his partner and their children. But I also believe that the trauma of being removed from his family has had a profound impact on his life. His intelligence, insight and perceptivity have in some ways only magnified the pain and torment of that experience. And underneath all lies the dispossession, theft and murder that destroyed the life and dignity of his people and which

shaped the world and the circumstances he was born into, as an Aboriginal person in 1966. This trauma and chronic disadvantage are named in the Uluru statement as a structural problem - "the torment of our powerlessness". I believe that this "torment of powerlessness", the alienation of Aboriginal people from a respected place in their own land and a lack of autonomy and agency to shape their own future, is a major cause of the disadvantage and alienation that Aboriginal people experience and the poorer life outcomes that too often result. I also believe it is a fundamental cause of the tragedy so evident in my brother in-law's life.

### **What I am calling for and why**

My fundamental reason for writing this submission is to appeal to our Federal Government to honour its commitment to hold a referendum on a National Voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I believe this Voice for First Nations peoples must be enshrined in the Constitution of Australia so that its existence and major purpose and functions are safeguarded into the future. Having a Voice to Parliament on the issues that affect their lives is a crucial precondition for increasing the agency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is a further positive step in them taking their rightful, respected place in our nation. It is a step that reflects the pride we should have that Indigenous Australians are the longest continuous human civilization on earth.

Following the wishes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in enshrining a Voice in the constitution is, I believe, the only fitting response to their call for this step in the Uluru Statement from the Heart. This call was borne of a historic consensus from a dialogue with First Nations peoples and bodies that was unprecedented in its scope and representativeness. In a spirit of great generosity and grace, First Nations people have invited their fellow non indigenous Australians to walk with them towards a better future. How can we deny them what they believe is a critical first step in that journey?

I believe the design of the Voice and the precise arrangements for appointing members should be left primarily to Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people to decide for themselves. However, I do think that it would be beneficial if the membership model chosen provides the opportunity for a wide and representative cross section of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to contribute their perspectives. For that reason I favour some variation of the Structural Membership model for selecting members. But the most important first step is for the Government to hold a referendum on a constitutionally enshrined National Voice and that is what I am asking our Federal Government to do.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission and for my views to be considered.

I am withholding my name and address as I want to protect the privacy of my brother-in-law.