



**Submission to the Senior Advisory Committee on Indigenous Voice
Federal Parliament of Australia, Canberra**

From Initiatives of Change Australia

Initiatives of Change, an international NGO operating in 60 countries and with Special Consultative Status with the United Nations through ECOSOC, has an 80-year record of enabling trust-building and community transformation in situations around the world. Its mission is to inspire, equip and connect people to address world needs, starting with themselves.

Historical Background

In Australia, *Initiatives of Change Australia* (formerly Moral Re-Armament, or 'MRA') has, since its registration in 1956, been guided by, and has directly supported, prominent Aboriginal people whose moral stature and leadership have made an impact on our national life, including:

- Margaret Tucker, MBE, founding member of the Australian Aborigines League, and the first Aboriginal woman to serve in the Commonwealth Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs (1968). MRA assisted Margaret to write her autobiography, the first by a member of a Stolen Generation;
- Harold Blair, Aboriginal tenor and activist from Queensland;
- Reg Blow, NAIDOC Person of the Year 1995, Advisor to the Premier of Victoria;
- Galarrwuy Yunupingu who spoke at an MRA international conference, in Switzerland, 1971;
- Dr Jackie Huggins, at lofC conferences in Sydney (2004), Uganda (2005) and various lofC forums since.

At the same time, political leaders on both sides of Federal Parliament have interacted with Aboriginal people at lofC/MRA conferences and workshops, including:

- Hon. Dr K E Beazley, from 1953 onwards, motivated by his moral convictions impacting land rights, health and education;
- Hon. Philip Ruddock, Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Reconciliation, speaking in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Brisbane and Switzerland;
- Hon. Malcolm Fraser, speaking at the lofC centre in Melbourne;
- Hon. Kevin Rudd, at the lofC international conference in Switzerland in 2012, with Aboriginal activist/academics.

Hearing the 'Voice' through truth-telling

From all these interactions, IofC Australia understood the primary importance of hearing and responding to the authentic 'voice' of First Nations people, their stories and experiences. At an MRA conference at Melbourne University in 1981, Dr K E Beazley said, 'Two things characterise Australia's race relations in the past: an absence of gentleness and an absence of listening. We always "knew" what was best for them.' This basic cultural attitude has to be turned around.

Currently, IofC Australia is embarking on a three-year program of 'truth-telling and truth-hearing' forums, in partnership with First Nations people – *truth-telling* about past histories and present realities matched by *truth-hearing*, a willingness to listen to the voices of First Peoples, to respond rather than react, to be vulnerable rather than defensive. At its heart it will be a process of deep listening, in the spirit of '*Dadirri*', to the voice of truth that speaks within each person. A core principle of IofC is absolute honesty. Experience has taught us that no trust can be built without it.

Recommendations for establishing the 'Voice'

Therefore, at this critical moment in our national life, the Board, the staff and the volunteer network of *Initiatives of Change Australia* affirm that establishing **an authentic, independent and enduring First Nations 'Voice' at the heart of Australia's national life** is crucial for our national cohesiveness and our true identity as a people on this ancient continent. In short, recognising and hearing the guidance of a First Nations 'Voice' is critical to us finding a sense of our Australian 'soul'.

Specifically, through the Indigenous Voice Senior Advisory Committee, we strongly urge the Minister for Indigenous Australians and the Federal Government of Australia to ensure the following conditions:

1. To be '**authentic**', the Voice must include **a representative cross-section of all First Nations people**: the elders and traditional cultural authorities, but also women, youth, from the outback, the bush and cities, those with a leadership profile and those unheard/unrecognised. We support recommendations of the Committee for 'a flexible principles-based framework (to) guide and support all Local and Regional Voices', with 'elections held for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to elect National Voice members directly'.

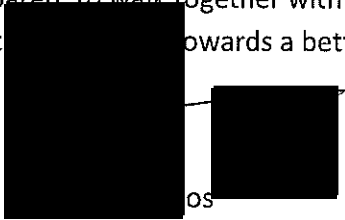
2. To be **'independent'**, the Voice should be legislated to **guide and advise Federal and State Parliaments** -- *not just* the governments of the day -- as well as local and regional Councils.
3. To be **'enduring'**, the Voice *must* be **enshrined in the Constitution** beyond the influence of successive governments to alter or abolish, which has been the fate of nearly all representative First Nations bodies – from the Australian Aborigines League in 1935 through to ATSIC and now the Congress of Australia's First Peoples. Each in turn has been subjected to a process of patronising benevolence, neutralising, discrediting and systematic dismantling.
4. Furthermore, in order to be heard and respected by all Australians, the 'Voice' must become part of our national fabric **through the clear consent and will of the Australian people**. Therefore, it is essential that establishing the Voice must be put to a vote through a referendum. The current Federal Coalition Government must keep its 2019 election promise that the decision of fundamental recognition would be taken to a referendum. Now that the proposed details of the Voice have been defined – thanks to the work of your Committees – recognition of the First Nations' presence must be given substance through a Voice accepted and legitimised by a majority of Australians.

Simply legislating for the Voice without a referendum is to deny the Australian people our part in responding to this moral call at the heart of our nationhood. All polls and surveys, even the most conservative, indicate that support for Constitutional change *with* a Voice to Parliament has climbed from 44 to 56 per cent in three years, with some polls showing support as high as 81 per cent (*analysis by ANU's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy research, November 2020*). We call on governments of all backgrounds to move in tune with this growing national trend and, through clear bipartisan political leadership, to ensure that this generational constitutional decision gains a wholehearted endorsement.

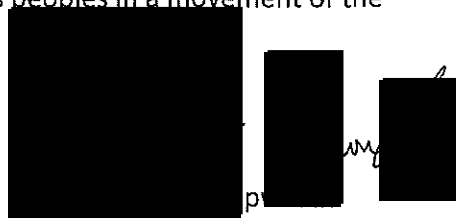
5. The arguments for 'practical reconciliation' overlook the evidence of 30 years of reconciliation which, despite significant investment, have barely begun to 'Close the Gap' in realistic terms. **A new relationship of genuine co-responsibility can only work effectively when an authoritative Voice of First Nations peoples is taken seriously both by parliaments and current governments.** Why would senior First Nations leaders – those who were mandated with bipartisan agreement at the 2015 Kirribilli meeting to hold a national consultative process – trust a process of co-responsibility with Government when their specific recommendations from that once-in-a-generation consultation, distilled in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, were summarily dismissed and ignored? The Constitutionally-enshrined and empowered Voice is the means and price of co-responsibility.

6. This is **a moment for Australia to take a step towards maturity** as a people and a nation, a step as significant and decisive as in 1967. We the Australian people *are* prepared 'to walk together with First Nations peoples in a movement of the Aust towards a better future'.

Signed:



Chair of the Board of Directors



Executive Officer

Initiatives of Change Australia

29 April, 2021