

## **Why I'm making this submission**

I'm a retired public servant. As a public servant, it was important through my career that I not participate in public debates. Now that I'm retired, I'm freed from that limitation but I've rarely used that freedom. I'm using it now because this issue is so important. I'm not Indigenous, so a Voice doesn't affect me directly in the way it affects Indigenous Australians. But it's a critical issue for Australia's future, and our sense of nationhood.

## **Why the Voice is important**

The Voice is important for the self-determination of Indigenous people. This gives them greater control over their lives and destinies, as communities as well as individuals.

There are some who criticise the passivity of the recipients of "government hand-outs"; a Voice addresses that by giving Indigenous people the chance to shape their relationship with government and wider society. With this comes with responsibilities as well as rights. It obviously gives the right to be heard. But it also gives the responsibility to use that voice in a considered way; the Uluru Statement from the Heart speaks of a "fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia".

A Voice also imposes responsibilities on the Parliament and the government. While the Voice is a voice *to* Parliament and is not a veto, the existence of the Voice properly imposes a responsibility on the Parliament to explain its response when the Voice speaks.

A mature society does not have to have a unanimous view on everything; it can deal with disagreement. But it treats with respect the views of its members, in particular the less powerful.

## **The Voice must be in the Constitution**

The Constitution is Australia's founding document. Quite simply, Australia cannot be a complete and reconciled nation if our founding document does not recognise Indigenous people as the original owners of this land and give them the right to have a say on matters before Parliament that affect them.

A Voice is not a third chamber of Parliament, nor a veto over legislation – that assertion is nonsense. The sovereignty of Parliament is not threatened because the Voice is a voice *to* Parliament.

An argument has been made that a Voice could initially be legislated and then, when it is seen to be working well and not the threat that is spoken about, it could then be enshrined in the Constitution with overwhelming support. I'm not persuaded by this. First, if the Voice is legislated then the temptation is to leave it at that and not take the next step of enshrining it. And second, if it is legislated, then legislation can be changed by future parliaments and governments. We have seen that so many times before, most notably with ATSIC which was abolished rather than reformed in consultation with Indigenous people.

We need political leaders with the courage to be honest about Australia's history – leaders who can put the case that the Voice is one step towards redressing that past, and that we can then face the future as a mature and reconciled nation. This process of political leadership will be integral to not just the Voice but also to a fuller understanding by wider Australian society of our past, and therefore to the Makarrata process also included in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

### **We mustn't waste this opportunity**

Indigenous reconciliation and recognition have seemingly been spoken about in Australia for all my life – I'm nearly 60 years old, and I was five years old at the time of the 1967 referendum. But so far, it seems that it's only Indigenous people who have been expected to reconcile – white society expects Indigenous people to accept their status in an invader society, and only then can we start talking. So far, everything has been on white people's terms.

Indigenous people have come to us – again – with a way to move this country forward. And given the last 230 years, it's a very modest request. It's now beyond time for us in white society to talk to Indigenous people on fair terms. The Uluru Statement from the Heart gives us the chance to do that – to make “a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood” where “their culture can be a gift to their nation”.

We mustn't lose or waste that chance.