



Submission to the Indigenous Voice co-design process

The Australian Democrats strongly support a First Nations Voice proposed by the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

As Professor Marcia Langton says, the only way to overcome the terrible disadvantage experienced by First Nations is to involve them in the decision-making that affects them. This simple yet profound idea speaks volumes about our disregard for the agency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait people since Englishmen took control of them and their land.

Those in power must listen and learn, respect and follow advice, drop the adversarial talk, suspend suspicion, and swap self-satisfaction and superiority for humility and good faith. The Voice would be a mechanism for Indigenous peoples to formally speak with those in power through resourced and structured channels that cannot be ignored.

The top-down approach has done nothing but fail First Nations. Disempowerment and despair are the big killers.

We cannot be a confident, mature nation by denying the past – the massacres and displacement, the culture destroyed. It can't be undone but it can be reconciled and we can agree to stop doing more of it. Agreement-making on equal terms is a must.

A voice to the parliament is a small thing to ask for and First Nations Peoples have been patient and generous despite the many knockbacks and the many years to get to this.

We think it's important that the Voice is heard by the full Parliament, not just the Government. The Senate is more representative of the people, more inclined to thorough exploration of the issues and to take the time to listen. It's more transparent too. It would be a mistake for the Voice to be heard behind closed doors, to be filtered and watered down by ministers who think they know better. Let's all listen in and be persuaded by the arguments, get a greater understanding of the problems and solutions.

The prospect of including the Voice of First Nations in the Constitution is attractive but perhaps we should wait and see how it goes – not so we can ditch the idea but so we can refine it and achieve the highest level of public support for the referendum, so it can carry the day with exuberant support and so it will not be undone.

The Uluru Statement of the Heart says 'With substantial constitutional change and structural reform this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australian nationhood'.

And so be it.

Lyn Allison

Australian Democrats President and former Senator for Victoria

28 April 2021

lallison@democrats.org.au