



The Uniting Church in Australia

Synod of NSW and the ACT - Presbytery of The Hunter

30th April 2021

Voice Secretariat
National Indigenous Australians Agency
Commonwealth Government
Canberra ACT 2600
Email: co-designvoice@niaa.gov.au

Dear Voice Secretariat,

The Social Justice Committee of The Hunter Presbytery of the Uniting Church in Australia make this submission, and thank the National Indigenous Australians Agency for the invitation to respond to the Indigenous Voice proposals.

We endorse and support the submission of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) of the Uniting Church in Australia, and support the Uluru Statement from the Heart which has been endorsed by the Uniting Church in Australia.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart, a consensus statement born out of extensive discussions across our nation and finalised at the Constitutional Convention at Uluru in May 2017, encapsulates the way forward for Australia that is practical not merely symbolic.

The First Nations Voice to Parliament should be enshrined in the Constitution.

The Uluru Statement calls for a representative Voice to Parliament for the First Nations peoples of our country, who are largely powerless and unheard despite having lived in these lands for thousands of years. It calls for a Voice protected in the Constitution, giving it legitimacy and permanency. Over many years Australia has had a range of different First Nations bodies at a national level, and they have all been changed and limited and dismantled by governments who had the power to do so. The First Nations Voice should not be subject to such changes in political whim, but be enshrined in the Constitution.

Local, regional, state and territory First Nations voices should inform the National Voice.

First Nations leaders in our church and in our local communities have highlighted the importance of Voice structures that allow local, regional, state and territory voices to be heard through the National Voice.

Other Mechanisms

We support the statements of our UAICC that oppose a separate 'policy group' on the grounds it diminishes the National Voice and is open to confusion between two groups and even conflict; and support 3-year rotating terms for representatives on the constitutionally enshrined National Voice, with a maximum of two terms, affording consistency and ensuring equity.

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Community Support for Change

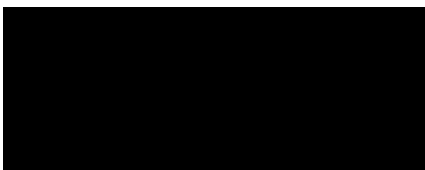
Over the past 8 years our Social Justice Committee has joined others locally in the Hunter in discussions around constitutional recognition of First National people in our Australian constitution. Our local Hunter churches wrote a submission to the Joint Parliamentary Inquiry into Constitutional Recognition in 2015, reporting on our consultations in the Hunter. The key themes of that submission are relevant to this one.

1. **Australian people are ready for change.** There is strong community support in the Hunter for a referendum for Constitutional change in support our First Nations peoples. Many people who have participated in our forums have been shocked and surprised to discover both the racism inherent in our Constitution, and the total absence of acknowledgement of Australia's First Peoples at any point in our nation's foundation document. Many thought these issues had already been addressed. There is agreement the Constitution should be changed as soon as possible.
2. **Practical Recognition is required not just Symbolic Recognition.** People do not want symbolic changes that do not include practical change. They want changes that give self-determination for Australia's First Peoples, and are responsive to First Nations people. Our 2015 submission called for a national assembly of First Nations people, which was subsequently held in 2017 and led to this Uluru Statement from the Heart. We now ask the government to respect and respond to that statement and implement practical recognition in the Constitution through a Voice to Parliament.
3. **Ensure discussions lead to action for First Nations people.** During our discussions in our local community our First Nations brothers and sisters expressed their desire that this process not end in disappointment. They described the repeated processes they had participated in of consultation, proposals, political discussion and then no action. Some felt it was hard to have hope for change. The response to the Uluru Statement from the Heart, and the proposal instead of a voice to government, threatens to again lead to nothing. The recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian Constitution is important and long overdue. In our consultations with indigenous and non-indigenous peoples there is a regret that it has taken so long to correct a severe deficiency in the constitutional basis for our nation.

It is time now for the First Nations of Australia to have a Voice to Parliament, enshrined in our Constitution. And there is support from the wider Australian community for this step.

We will actively work with others to support the full implementation of all elements of the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Yours sincerely,



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