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Submission to the Indigenous Voice Co-Design Group

Prepared by The Snow Foundation

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The Snow Foundation strongly believes that the Indigenous people of Australia must have a fair go at improving their own future, and that Australia as a nation will be richer and more complete as a result.

That is why we are calling for:

- 1. an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice protected in the Constitution;*
- 2. a referendum to be held BEFORE legislating the Voice; and*
- 3. a model for the Voice that ensures representation of a wide range of Indigenous voices, not just established leadership figures.*

Who we are

The Snow Foundation was founded by brothers Terry and George Snow in 1991. Our purpose is to create opportunities and strengthen resilience for a more caring and inclusive community where everyone can thrive. Geographically, Canberra is our main place, along with key regions (South Coast and Sydney) where we listen and respond to the communities' needs across a range of cause areas. Our national support is focused on social justice issues and supporting social entrepreneurs.

Over the past 10 years, we have become drivers behind key social issues at a national scale, like Indigenous health (crusted scabies, rheumatic heart disease), marriage equality and economic justice.

To date, we have committed more than \$6M to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, education and support programs. We have seen time and again, that community-led programs, where those who are affected are leading the solutions to their own problems, can and will be successful.

Maningrida is an excellent example of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and community-led solutions are successfully tackling some of the highest rates of rheumatic heart disease (RHD) in the world. Traditional owners, doctors, the school, the health clinic and Malabam Health Services are all working together to educate children and families about RHD using educational materials in traditional language and local metaphors. In 2018, following an extensive and ongoing educational program across the community, Aboriginal health workers, specialists and nurses screened 620 children's hearts, diagnosing 32 children with RHD (two-thirds had never been diagnosed before) and three children required emergency open heart surgery. Two years on, the children are being treated regularly and on their way to healthy hearts.

Recommendation 1: An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice protected in the Constitution.

It's time for recognition

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lived in Australia for over 60,000 years. Yet they are not recognised in our Constitution and have virtually no say on the matters that affect them.

A chance to improve living conditions and outcomes for Indigenous communities

Despite much effort and money spent, living conditions and outcomes for Indigenous people remain much worse than for non-Indigenous people. Baseline data for the Closing the Gap targets 2020 indicate that Indigenous people have significantly lower life expectancy, are behind in all early development indicators, have lower school completion and employment rates, are over-represented in out-of-home care and prisons / juvenile justice centres, and are twice as likely to die by suicide.

Guaranteeing a Voice for Australia's First Nations people in the Constitution will provide a basis for Indigenous people to take ownership of the challenges they face and the solutions that will improve their lives.

Widespread public support

An Indigenous Voice has widespread support among the Australian public – in 2020, 86% of the general community think it's important to establish a representative Indigenous body, and 81% think it is important to protect that body within the constitution (Reconciliation Australia – 2020 Barometer).

Recommendation 2: A referendum to be held BEFORE legislating the Voice.

It is important to first hold a referendum and enshrine the Voice in the Constitution, rather than legislating it without a referendum.

A national conversation

A referendum will engage the Australian public in a conversation about our past, present and future.

Legitimacy and stability

It provides legitimacy and authority to ensure that the Voice is heard.

It also gives it stability and flexibility, enabling it to speak the truth without fearing for its existence.

Recommendation 3: A model for the Voice that ensures representation of a wide range of Indigenous voices, not just established leadership figures.

The design for the Voice must ensure that previously unheard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the same chance of being heard as established leadership figures. The work of the Co-Design Group has started this important process.

Conclusion

There is widespread support and momentum for a First Nations Voice protected in the Constitution.

Now is the time to extend the fundamental Australian value of a 'fair go' to First Nations communities, so that all Australians can be proud of our history.