

Sharni CHAN

[REDACTED]
Gundungurra and Darug Country
Hazelbrook, NSW
Australia

Dear Co-Design Body

Submission to Co-design process

I am a non-Indigenous woman who was born on Wiradjuri Country in Wagga Wagga and now lives and works on Gundungurra and Darug Country in the Blue Mountains. I am a Research Fellow, I work in child protection research and currently investigate therapeutic approaches for children and young people with abuse and neglect related trauma.

Why do you think the Uluru Statement from the Heart is important?

The Uluru Statement from the Heart is an important document that clearly articulates the aspirations Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from across Australia for self-determination. I cannot imagine a more powerful thing than the gathering of so many diverse language and cultural groups uniting behind this task in common cause, and I cannot imagine that any other group of people in history could have achieved what the authors of the Uluru Statement have achieved, against all odds. The Statement is yet another example of the generosity of spirit, the strength, resilience and commitment Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to show towards their own peoples and the good of the whole country.

Why is it important for Indigenous people to have a say in the matters that affect them?

At a very basic level, it is a human right for Indigenous people to have a say in the matters that affect them, recognised in international instruments that Australia is signatory to. Non-Aboriginal people have had more than 200 years of control over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and where has this brought us? In the earliest days this included large scale massacres, exploitation, widespread cruelty, sexual assault of women and sexual abuse of boys and girls, denial of language and culture, separation of generations of children from the love and protection of their families. This was tantamount to genocide. Today Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples face the highest rates of incarceration, child removal into out of home care. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are locked out of secure housing due to racism and discrimination in health, education and employment, the ongoing impact of Stolen Wages, Aboriginal women face high levels and more severe levels of violence, and Aboriginal people are still dying in custody. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities face disproportionate and worsening impacts of unmitigated Climate Change. These problems can only be solved if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have control over their lives, their Country, their kin and communities. Within their communities they have over 65,000 years of knowledge and experience of how to live well in this country - to raise up strong children, to care for Country. Despite state sanctioned attempts at genocide and ongoing institutional and interpersonal racism, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to survive and resist colonisation. Against all odds they have produced some of Australia's best artists, brightest intellectuals, actors, musicians, athletes, psychologists, writers, community and public health professionals. Their contribution to the Australian

community is disproportionate to their numbers relative to the non-Indigenous population. It is long overdue that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were in control of matters that affect them via a First Nations Voice to Parliament protected by the Constitution and a Makarrata Commission to supervise agreement-making (treaty) and truth-telling.

How could a Voice to Parliament improve the lives of your community?

A Voice to Parliament would improve the lives of people in my community in quite specific ways. I will provide one small example which I think reflects the broader issue of why we need Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices enshrined in Parliament. I live in a bush fire affected area. For 200 years Gundungurra and Darug people have been prevented from caring for Country, burning Country. The cumulative result has been wildfires, destruction of bush and animal habitat, loss of animals, houses, community trauma. If Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a voice in Parliament, we can start to implement Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander solutions to problems that we cannot solve without their cultural knowledge and experience. I used the example of caring for Country with Aboriginal fire practices, but we need this expertise to improve our health care and education systems - to learn how to live together and live well in this country, to support families and grow strong children, look after our old people and live a good life. We need a Voice to Parliament so urgently, while we still have the old people with us who can share their knowledge, tether their young people to 65,000 years of ancestral wisdom and in doing so ensure cultural continuity of how to live well in this country.

Why do you think it's important to enshrine the Voice to Parliament in the Constitution, rather than include it only in legislation?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people deserve a durable voice that can only be protected through Constitutional change. Legislative change is too vulnerable to the whims of racism governments.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission.

Yours sincerely,
Sharni Chan