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Dear Co-Design Body

Submission to Co-design process

I am a non-Indigenous Australian, the son of parents who came from the USA to Australia in 1969. I have lived all my life in the inner cities of Sydney and Melbourne, but I have travelled widely in Australia and overseas. My professional work is as a mediator, negotiator and teacher of these skills (self-employed). I was once a lawyer, in the early days of the Native Title Act, and I have maintained an interest in issues of justice and (re)conciliation since my teenage years. Some of my work now is with Traditional Owner groups here in Victoria. I am an active member of the Uniting Church, a parent, and a musician.

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

The Uluru Statement from the Heart is an extraordinary achievement. A consensus that emerged out of deep listening and strong debate, from people representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across this vast continent. It must be accorded the highest level of respect by anyone who seeks to understand "What are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people saying? What do they want?". Beyond that, its content is extraordinary. While public attention has focused on (some of) its more political demands, it also speaks to the heart of Australia. I'm not going to repeat it here, but I urge all decision makers to read it again, and again, slowly and carefully - as our study group at church has done, as people of goodwill across the country have done.

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

A Voice to Parliament, as proposed and as is emerging through the co-design process, is a vital measure for ensuring Indigenous views are heard by our Federal Parliament. It's not an attempt to "take over" or even "take power"; it sensibly recognises that the Parliamentary democracy we have will continue to be how decisions are ultimately made. But it does help re-balance the fundamental relationship between First and Second peoples in this country to say: that elected body must **listen** to what the First Peoples are saying. Not necessarily to agree, but to listen properly and through appropriate, formal, accountable channels.

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

It's essential that we listen to what Indigenous people say, regarding the matters that affect them. For over 200 years, we haven't done so, not seriously, and the results of that approach are appalling. The principle of Self-Determination is widely acknowledged in international law; I also think of it as being an extension of a basic aspect of human psychology: the need for autonomy, agency, control over our own lives.

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

For this reason, I strongly believe the Voice **must be enshrined in the Constitution** - not just in legislation. I am confident the Australian public will support this, if they understand clearly what is being proposed (and what isn't – such as the ludicrous "third chamber" idea). Once the design is refined, it should be put to the Australian people with **strong advocacy from all major parties** for its adoption.

Other thoughts regarding the design

Regarding the details of design, I believe it's more appropriate for Indigenous people to comment - it's to be their Voice, after all. I don't have a strong view on its size or composition, except to note that there is such a diversity of Indigenous perspectives that it may be better to err on the side of larger (more representatives from each area or group) than smaller (only one or two). This diversity includes older & younger, men and women, traditional owners and Stolen people, urban/rural/remote, well known and less known.

Yours sincerely,
Shawn Whelan