

8 February 2023

Statement from the Bishop concerning the Voice to Parliament

Dear Friends,

A gracious invitation from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of our land, known as the [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#), is a call to all Australians to create a better future together. It asks all Australians to walk together to build this better future by establishing a First Nations Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Constitution.

I want to affirm my support for a change to the Constitution to recognise Australia's First Nations peoples and to enable a Voice to Parliament. I am thankful that faith leaders from across the country have strongly endorsed this walking together to a better future together.

The pursuit of reconciliation and justice is fundamental to being followers of Jesus. On this journey of reconciliation Christians can lead by example. Jesus' way is one of truth, justice, love and hope. Only together and with the deep listening called for by the Statement from the Heart, together with prayer, lament, and collective action for justice, can we build a strong reconciled Australia.

This year has been described as the most important year in the 235 years since the First Fleet. There has never been a settlement with the indigenous peoples of Australia – they were never afforded that dignity and respect – yet now we have the opportunity. Recognition is foundational to reconciliation, and with the forthcoming Referendum we have the opportunity to say yes to recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution and give them a voice in their own affairs.

There is a shameful gap between the health, education, employment, housing and justice of indigenous Australians compared to other Australians. Life expectancy at birth for indigenous Australians was 71.6 years for males and 75.6 years for females in 2015-2017, compared to 80.2 and 83.4 for non-indigenous males and females respectively in the same years. The indigenous child mortality rate is twice that for non-indigenous children (141 vs 67 per 1000,000 in 2018). I use this health gap as an example, but it is strongly influenced by huge disparities on numerous social determinants.

By listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about what works to help close the gap, governments will be better informed to develop policies that make a real difference to the health, education, employment, housing and justice of our First Nations Peoples. I know from my own experience of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a health professional that when they have a genuine say in the design and delivery of policies, programs and services that affect them, better life outcomes can be achieved.

Some have asked for more detail about what a voice to parliament might look like and how it will work. Yet a referendum to change the constitution is not about the detail – Parliament will decide how the voice will operate. We are simply being asked to vote on an important principle – to recognise our First Nations peoples in the Constitution. One thing we do know is that the voice to parliament will be advisory only but will ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are heard on matters that affect them.

Recent disinformation and misinformation surrounding the voice is concerning. It undermines public discussion about the real issues and lowers the quality of the debate. Yet in a world that is increasingly divided we have an opportunity for all Australians from all political persuasions to come together and speak as one by voting for this important change to our Constitution.

I am glad that the Voice to Parliament has the overwhelming support (over 80%) of First Nations people. Australia's National Aboriginal Anglican Bishop, The Right Rev'd Chris McLeod, is one of them. With Bishop Chris' permission I quote him here:

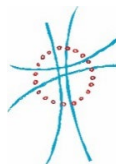
There is a text from the Old Testament that has been sitting at the back my mind as I have been praying over 'Constitutional Recognition of First Nations Voice to Federal Parliament'. The scene follows Elijah's rash act of bloodlust in the killing of the Baal prophets. Not surprisingly the tables have been turned on Elijah and he is on the run. Amid his self-justification and self-pity for his actions, a voice comes to him; 'a still small voice': '...and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice' (1 King 19: 12 RSV). Taking time to listen to the 'still small voice' puts Elijah's life back on track, having been derailed by his own bloodlust, unwise actions, and the revenge of others. The ability to hear the small voice is something that was at the heart of the ministry of Jesus. The ignored and marginalised found someone who listened to them ... The wisdom of listening is a forgotten art, lost in the competing sound of many voices ... Largely, in my view, ... as a nation we have not been very good at listening to the small and often silenced voices.

I urge Anglicans on the North Coast and all people of goodwill to take this opportunity to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our Constitution. It is a great privilege to live on Bundjalung country on the beautiful North Coast of NSW. The Bundjalung, Gumbayngirr, Arakwal, Yaegl, Githabul, Dunghutti and Birpai peoples here have a rich history and culture and I look forward to continuing to learn from them as we walk together to build a better future. In the time leading up to the Referendum I invite you to join with me in using the prayer printed overleaf. It was written by one of our indigenous clergy in Grafton Diocese, The Rev'd Lenore Parker, a Yaegl Elder, and it appears in our Anglican Prayer Book (p. 218).

Yours in Christ



Dr Murray Harvey
Bishop of Grafton



I acknowledge the Bundjalung, Arakwal, Yaegl, Githabul, Gumbayngirr, Dunghutti and Birpai peoples, the traditional custodians of the lands on which the Diocese of Grafton is based.

I pay tribute and respect to the elders of these nations and peoples, both past, present and emerging, acknowledge their continuing connection to the land and waters, and thank them for their protection of the mountains, hinterland, waters and coastline since time immemorial.

God of holy dreaming, Great Creator Spirit,
from the dawn of creation you have given your children
the good things of Mother Earth.
You spoke and the gum tree grew.
In the vast desert and dense forest,
and in cities at the water's edge,
creation sings your praise.
Your presence endures
as the rock at the heart of our Land.
When Jesus hung on the tree
you heard the cries of all your people
and became one with your wounded ones:
the convicts, the hunted, and the dispossessed.
The sunrise of your Son coloured the earth anew,
and bathed it in glorious hope.
In Jesus we have been reconciled to you,
to each other and to your whole creation.
Lead us on, Great Spirit, as we gather from the four corners of the earth;
enable us to walk together in trust from the hurt and shame of the past
into the full day which has dawned in Jesus Christ. Amen.

From *A Prayer Book for Australia*, The Anglican Church of Australia Trust Corporation ©1995

