

## SUBMISSION ON THE INDIGENOUS VOICE CO-DESIGN INTERIM REPORT

### Edmund Rice Centre for Justice & Community Education

The Edmund Rice Centre is a community and faith-based non-government organisation committed to the pursuit of social and environmental justice in Australia and internationally. We are pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission regarding the newly-released co-design models for a Voice to Parliament reflecting the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.

It is good that the words “young and free” have been removed from the national anthem. However, the replacement phrase that Australia is “one and free” is an aspiration rather than a statement of fact. Historical narratives of swaggies, drovers and the soldiers going into battle have favoured the dominant non-Indigenous version of Australia’s history, and ignored the centuries long truth of this continent and the treatment of its First Nations Peoples.

When history is viewed through the eyes of Indigenous Australians it is clear Australia is neither ‘*young and free*’ nor ‘*one and free*’. Up to 80,000 years of spiritual and physical connection to this ancient land is the precise opposite of the word ‘young’; and the Indigenous experience of colonisation does not accord with any accurate notion of being ‘free’. In fact the opposite is true. The historical experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was characterised by dispossession, massacres, displacement to far-flung reserves. And to this day, ongoing disproportionate levels of incarceration and deaths in custody remain a reality for Indigenous Peoples in Australia, indicating that it is incorrect to describe Australia as “one.”

Australia’s First Nations Peoples are the custodians of the world’s oldest continuous living cultures. Despite the dispossessions of history, they have survived. They have worked to restore land, language, aspects of culture, and to re-unite families with their children. This is an amazing human achievement that a reconciled nation could revere and celebrate. But Australia is not a reconciled nation.

For over a century Australian Governments have too often implemented policies that have been imposed without adequate consultation with First Nations People, that have been short-term, and that have been regularly changed whenever the party of Government changes. This has meant that the aspirations and needs of First Nations people, their dreams and hopes for their lives, have been relegated to secondary importance to the views and policies of Governments.

Our unreconciled nation now has an opportunity to change this.

First Nations representatives have offered the nation a way forward. The *Uluru Statement from the Heart* is truly a peace offering. It invites all Australians to reflect deeply and see what is at the heart of this land, and what is at the heart of being Australian. First Nations People invite us to journey with them to see and understand both the beauty of this land and all its peoples, the deep spiritualities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and their unique connection to the land - as well as the suffering and loss that history has visited upon them. Australia will never be a whole nation unless and until these things are understood by all who call this country home.

The Voice to Parliament the Uluru Statement calls for does not represent a third chamber of Parliament. Rather, it is an invitation to the Australian people to address the ‘unfinished business’ of history, to tell and embrace the truth of history, and begin to put it right. It is the first step on the journey to a better future for Australia and all its people. Finally.

Put simply, the Uluru Statement is a call from Australia’s First Peoples to be consulted about decisions that impact on their lives - in the spirit of the old maxim “nothing about us, without us”. It is a call for the Government to commit to a First Nations Voice to the Parliament that is enshrined in the Australian Constitution and supported by all Australians voting ‘Yes’ at a referendum.

Legislation alone will not suffice. To endure the Voice needs the protection of the Constitution so that it cannot be simply de-legislated by an incoming Government.

To adequately embrace the hope that the Uluru Statement offers the nation it is essential that three key steps are taken:

1. The Australian Government must honour its election commitment to a referendum once a model for the Voice to Parliament has been settled;
2. Enabling legislation for the Voice must be passed after a referendum has been held in the next term of Parliament; and
3. The membership model for the Voice to Parliament needs to reflect the diversity of First Nations Peoples and ensure that those previously unheard have the opportunity to be included and involved.

A Voice to Parliament enshrined in, and protected by, the Constitution is fundamental to beginning to address the unfinished business of this nation’s relationship with its First Peoples. Embracing the Uluru Statement in its fullness is fair, just, practical and safe.

It is a necessary and essential step whose time has come.

The place for making a submission is the website <https://haveyoursay.voice.niaa.gov.au/>