

NCCA STATEMENT – ULURU STATEMENT FROM THE HEART and VOICE TO PARLIAMENT

Giving strength to the voice of our First Peoples

The National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) is committed to the churches working together for justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and for the healing of our peoples. We believe that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, nurtured and sustained by God for tens of thousands of years, are celebrated at the very heart of what it means to be Australian.

We support First Peoples through affirmation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and focused indigenous ecumenical advocacy informed by our Indigenous Christian leaders.

Reverend John Gilmore, President of National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), is a joint signatory to the Open Letter from Australia's leaders of major religious organisations to federal parliamentarians on 22 February 2023. The letter calls for support of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament as requested in the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Australia's lands, skies and waterways will always belong to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The historic dispossession of their land is painful for Australia's First People and unsettling for all Australians. It has led, at times, to acrimony and polarisation.

The moving and rich 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart concludes with an invitation:

We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

Can we say 'Yes' to this invitation and walk together?

The Apostle Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, has some guidance for Christians when he writes: *If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.* (1 Corinthians 12:26) There are seasons for both experiences. However, one's desire to celebrate must not ignore the reality of another's suffering.

We join our Indigenous brothers and sisters in their longing for an Australia where the pain and hurt of so many years is, in time, healed and we are all renewed.

In joining together with other religious leaders of Australia's major faith groups in an Open Letter to Parliamentarians in February 2023 and in a Joint Resolution on the 5th Anniversary of the Uluru Statement of the Heart in May 2022, NCCA's endorsement of the three requests of the Uluru Statement follows attentive listening to the voices, experiences and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander Australians and our commitment to work for justice for First Nations peoples.

The Constitution Alteration (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice) Bill 2023 is to amend the Australian Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

This Bill is about recognising and listening.

We need to go back to Australia's founding federal document, the Constitution, and give recognition and a formal role in government to Australia's First Peoples. It is a just and reasonable path towards unity, reconciliation, and the healing of our nations.

Secondly, we have stated in our Open Letter to Federal Parliamentarians (2023) and in the Joint Resolution (2022) that NCCA supports the constitutional amendment establishing a Voice to Parliament and executive government.

There has been much work done on these matters over the past two decades, most commissioned by the Australian Government and undertaken by Indigenous and constitutional experts. We support their agreement, as expressed in the Uluru Statement of the Heart, that structural reform in the relationship between the Commonwealth Government and First Nations Peoples must start with constitutional establishment of the Voice.

NCCA also agrees with Indigenous leaders and other experts that this proposal will effectively respect parliamentary supremacy and uphold the Constitution, while empowering Indigenous communities with a Voice in their affairs.

Should the constitutional amendment be successful, it will be the Parliament that codifies the representation of the Voice and the nature and extent of the consultation of the Voice with Parliament and executive government. It is the Parliamentarians that can ensure that the First Nations Voice is consultative and its advice is non-binding. It is the Parliamentarians that can ensure that the Voice would have no veto power.

NCCA will continue to walk with our Indigenous brothers and sisters on the journey from Voice through to Treaty and Truth (Makarrata) requested in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

The aspirations of First Nations Peoples are for an equitable relationship between First Nations and the people of Australia. NCCA supports change where it brings healing, wholeness, reconciliation and unity for our nations.

Constitutional recognition of the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice is the first step on the pathway for a fairer, more truthful, and better reconciled relationship between First Nations and the people of Australia.

ENDS – 14 June 2023