

A REFERENDUM FOR AN ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER VOICE



This year all Australians will be invited to vote on whether we should recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our nation's Constitution.

It is an opportunity to consider changing our constitution in a way that will honour and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians. To make this change meaningful and practical, we will be asked to support an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament to ensure First Nations people are heard on the issues which impact their lives and communities.

A Voice to Parliament is the first of three calls in the Uluru Statement from the Heart - an invitation from First Nations people to all Australians to help build a better future. A Yes to the Voice is a crucial step toward the work of treaty and truth-telling.

Why is a Voice needed?

Indigenous Australians have been calling for meaningful change for many years. An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament will create a constitutionally enshrined pathway for First Nations people to provide advice to Government on what works for their communities, leading to well-informed, practical solutions to overcome disadvantage in areas such as health, education, justice, housing and jobs.

Since 1967, there have been five different legislated forums set up to advise the government on Indigenous policy, all of which have been abolished by successive governments. If a Voice to Parliament is enshrined in the Constitution, it cannot be abolished without significant public scrutiny through another referendum. It will ensure Governments of the day hear from First Nations voices on the issues that directly impact the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

How will a Voice work?

If the Referendum is successful, the next step is for Parliament to design the model for what a Voice to Parliament will look like.

This allows for Parliament to consult communities, then review and debate the legislation, before

approving its final shape – a normal process for any new laws introduced to Parliament.

Despite some claims there is not enough detail, there are comprehensive reports setting out the design principles for the Voice. We already know that the Voice will be independent, chosen by First Nations people and be representative of First Nations communities.

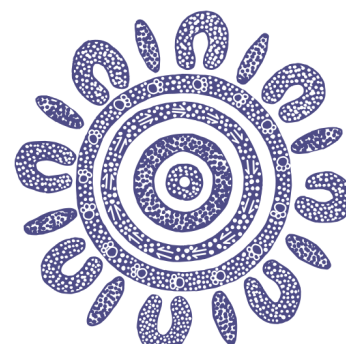
The proposed Constitutional amendment given to us to consider before the referendum states that the Voice “may make representations” to Parliament and the Executive Government.

The inclusion of Executive Government (cabinet and Federal Governments) is critical to ensure First Nations voices are heard at the time laws and policies are being developed. The Voice will have no veto power and will have no role in passing legislation. This is the distinct difference between a Voice ‘in’ Parliament and a Voice ‘to’ Parliament.

How will it make a difference?

A Voice will ensure the Government has direct advice from First Nations communities, which will lead to better laws and policies, better investment and ultimately better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The Voice will not create division but enable greater cooperation and understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to acknowledge First Australians and their deep spiritual ties to this land. It will create a pathway toward treaty and truth-telling. It will unite all Australians and shape the future for generations to come.



WHY THE UNITING CHURCH SUPPORTS A VOICE?

Our Covenant

Acknowledging the difficult history of this nation, and our own part in the colonisation of First Nations people and their lands, the Uniting Church formally entered into a Covenant relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) in 1994. The Covenant is an ever-deepening commitment to walk together as First and Second Peoples, working and praying for a fuller expression of our reconciliation in Jesus Christ.

What the Bible says ?

As Christians, we believe all humans are made in the image of God and should be equally respected, included and supported in society (Genesis 1: 26-27). In the Good Samaritan story (Luke 10:25-37) Jesus teaches us that the two greatest commandments are to love your God, and to love your neighbour as yourself. In John 10:10, Jesus says he came so that all might have abundant life. The New Testament Epistles give Christians the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5: 18) and of pursuing peace with everyone (Hebrews 12: 14).

As Christians, we are called by God to seek reconciliation in all things. This includes righting wrongs of the past and restoring relationships between First and Second peoples in the Church and in this nation. In following Jesus, we work for practical and meaningful change that ensures all can live life abundantly.

What the Uniting Church has said

Informed by our Covenant commitment, and having heard from UAICC, the Assembly Standing Committee in March 2023 declared its support for the proposed change in the Australian Constitution to recognise an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament. The Uniting Church sees this referendum as a crucial step toward the full expression of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and its ongoing invitation to seek treaty and truth-telling.

In 2009, the Uniting Church endorsed the Revised Preamble which changed our own constitution of the Church, a step we felt necessary because it says something about who we are and who we want to become. The referendum gives us a similar opportunity to say something about who we are as a nation by embedding recognition of First Nations people in our constitution.

One of the key acknowledgements in the Preamble is that First Nations people encountered the Creator God long before colonisation, and that as a result, First Nations people have insights into God’s ways. We are enriched in our faith by listening to these insights.

The Voice is an invitation to the nation to listen to and be informed by the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in developing policies and laws that will make a meaningful difference.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Start a Conversation

One of the biggest things you can do to support a successful referendum is to begin a conversation with the people around you. Here’s some starting points you might consider:

- Have you read the Statement from the Heart and considered the invitation to all Australians?
- What have you heard about an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament? What do you think about it?
- What have you heard about the referendum this year and how it will happen?
- Share what makes you passionate.

You might like to invite someone within your congregation to share their insights into the need for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament.

Find out more:

- For more information and resources from the Uniting Church, including our statements and FAQs: [uniting.church/voice](https://www.unitingchurch.org.au/voice)
- Volunteer with Yes23, and check out their helpful Conversation Guide: [action.yes23.com.au/](https://www.action.yes23.com.au/)
- Lead a study on the Statement from the Heart: <https://www.justact.org.au/first-people/actions/>
- Listen to the 2023 Survival Day message from UCA President Rev Sharon Hollis and UAICC Interim National Chair Rev Mark Kickett which references the referendum: <https://www.vimeo.com/788863001>
- Find resources provided by the Government <https://www.voice.gov.au/>

