

NLC Opening Statement – 23 November 2022

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Aboriginal people are citizens of Australia but--unlike most Australian citizens--Aboriginal people do not enjoy the same democratic franchise as other Australians.

It is a fact of history that Aboriginal people were barred from voting in Federal elections until 1962.

In other words, for the first 60 years of its existence, the Australian Federation carefully, deliberately and actively disenfranchised Aboriginal people.

It should come as no surprise then, that in remote parts of Australia today, Aboriginal people have the unenviable record of both the lowest rate of voter enrolment and the lowest turnout on election day. This is the same across all levels of government.

And in remote parts of the Northern Territory, these rates are the lowest in the country.

How such a shameful state of affairs can be comprehensively addressed is something this inquiry needs to focus on.

The Northern Land Council represents the interests of more than 50,000 Aboriginal people across the Land Council's 7 regions but we are not funded to deliver civics education. We are not funded to fix this problem. The NLC will of course continue to work closely with the AEC.

We are here today because the agencies that are resourced and mandated to actively manage the electoral roll and deliver targeted education and public awareness programs have obviously, self-evidently and shamefully failed.

If they say they have used their "best efforts" then they need to do better. This situation cannot be allowed to continue.

Of all of the gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people that need to be closed, that of civic engagement is almost certainly the least well-known, the most ignored and poorly funded.

Like so many other gaps, it is an ongoing legacy of this country's colonial history.

It is incumbent on this Committee to bear the burden of this shameful failure of democratic governance that sees tens of thousands of Aboriginal people excluded from the very system that purports to represent all of us.

The Northern Land Council commends to this Committee the grave task of inquiring into and recommending the way and means by which the legacy of this electoral gap can be slammed shut once and for all.