

In support of the proposed changes to the Constitution

I am a resident of Tasmania who wishes to add my voice in support of the changes to the Constitution that the government has proposed to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. It is an opportunity for the Australian people to accept the generous invitation contained in the Uluru Statement from the Heart to begin to address the roots of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage and create a future of which we can all be proud.

The essence of the proposed changes is twofold. First is recognition of our First Nations peoples and their sovereignty over Australia for more than 600 centuries. Second is a commitment to consult with their representatives about government legislation, policy and programs that affect First Nations communities. These commitments will form the basis for the development of legislation that will specify, among other things, the composition, functions, powers and procedures of the representative body to be known as The Voice. To ask the Australian people to make these in-principle commitments by way of Constitutional amendment prior to specifying the operation of The Voice is the sensible course. To do otherwise, as has been suggested by the Opposition and others, would be simply to put the cart before the horse!

Moreover, constitutional experts including Robert French, Kenneth Hayne, Anne Twomey and George Williams have endorsed the government's approach as constitutionally safe. It involves giving The Voice the power to make representations to the parliament and the executive government on matters affecting First Nations people. It implies that the government of the day will pay attention to the concerns raised and seek to improve legislation, policy and procedures wherever possible. Experience has shown that when First Nations people are listened to on issues that affect them, program outcomes are improved. It goes without saying that improvements are sorely needed. As a wealthy country we must do better in a wide range of areas affecting First Nations people, including health, life expectancy, housing, education, employment and incarceration rates, to name just a few.

As has been outlined in the referendum question, once the Australian people have agreed to the proposed change, detailed legislation on The Voice will be drafted and debated in the parliament. That legislation will be subject to change over time as any problems are identified and innovative approaches are proposed. There will be ample opportunity at that time for those who have cast doubt on The Voice to propose improvements in its design and operation.

I believe that there is widespread support in the community for this important and overdue amendment to our Constitution. Support for the amendment within First Nations communities is reportedly in excess of 80%. The alteration, in essence, is a simple proposition - an invitation to walk with our First Nations brothers and sisters towards a better future for all Australians. I wholeheartedly support the government's formulation of the question to be put to the Australian people later this year and I am happy to provide further support to the committee's deliberations.

Sincerely,
Michael O'Halloran