



A Voice from the People to the People

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have inhabited, lived, worked, and cared for the land we call Australia for more than 60,000 years. This gives them a deep, complex and unique relationship with our country and a particular lens through which to view it. We latecomers, however, rarely take the opportunity to learn from this rich tradition.

In the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples came together and from “the torment of (their) powerlessness” called for a First Nations Voice to be enshrined in the Constitution. This wonderful statement was offered as a gift to the Australian people with an invitation for us to walk with them. This week we remember the Apology to Indigenous people and reflect on the pain, powerlessness, and sorrow experienced by generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly the Stolen Generation.

In response to the Uluru Statement, three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander committees, under the leadership of Professor Marcia Langton and Professor Tom Calma, worked on a process to give Indigenous peoples a voice to Parliament and government on “proposed laws, policies and programs impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.” In recent weeks with little fanfare and, regrettably, almost no media coverage, this very important Interim Report was launched.

The Report is complex and detailed, reflecting the enormous amount of research, consultation, and work that has gone into the first phase of this process. In essence, the Interim Report provides possible mechanisms for Local and Regional Voices to be heard on policies and services which have a direct impact on the lives of local people and for a National Voice to provide advice to Parliament and government on ideas, problems, and legislation affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The process is designed to be a dialogue “where the appropriateness of policy and its possible need for change should be negotiable.”

Accompanying the Interim Report is a discussion paper, and Australians are invited to read it and make submissions. The genuine desire of the co-design committees to be consultative and hear the voices of all Australians is evident throughout the document. The Uluru Statement from the Heart is a moving and earnest appeal to all Australians irrespective of race, colour, or creed to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and enable their voice to be heard across the nation and in the institutions, which provide the laws and policies underpinning our daily lives.