



19 April 2023

Joint Select Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice Referendum  
Parliament of Australia  
PO Box 6201  
Canberra  
ACT 2600

Email: [jscvr@aph.gov.au](mailto:jscvr@aph.gov.au)

Dear Joint Committee Members

The [St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia](#) respectfully acknowledges and accepts in full the Uluru Statement from the Heart written by our First Nations Peoples.

On behalf of the Society in Australia, National Council acknowledges the generous spirit embodied within the Uluru Statement from the Heart and accepts the gracious invitation to all Australians to walk with our First Nations Peoples for a better future.

We do so because only constitutional enshrinement will guarantee that First Nations Peoples will have an enduring say and ultimately improve First Nations lives.

The Society acknowledges and respects our First Nations Peoples' cultures, lands, waters, histories, and rights to live in a society free of economic, social, and cultural oppression.

The Voice is a historic new beginning for our nation and a new way forward.

Yours faithfully

Mr Mark Gaetani  
**President of National Council**

## **SCHEDULE 1**

### **RE: Constitution Alteration (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice) Bill 2023**

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia welcomes the opportunity to prepare this submission in support of the Constitution Alteration Bill 2023.

The Society is a lay Catholic charitable organisation that comprises over 45,000 members and volunteers and 6,000 employees and provides on-the-ground assistance across Australia. Our members and volunteers support those in need by giving them a hand up so that they can forge ahead and change their destinies and local communities.

Our aim is to improve the health, wellbeing, stability, resilience and social connectedness of those we assist. The Society takes a strengths-based approach by listening to people, building relationships, respecting their wishes, providing support and helping them recover their dignity. We have done this in Australia since 1881.

Although the Society is not a First Nations organisation, many of those we assist identify as First Nations Peoples and there are many First Nations People in our 51,000 volunteers, members and employed workforce. We are also committed to providing employment and procurement opportunities for First Nations peoples and businesses.

We have advocated for constitutional recognition for many years.

In 2000, the Society developed *Seeking a Shared Spirit*, a social justice paper in support of Indigenous Reconciliation following on from Pope John Paul II's apology to Australia's First Nations peoples.

The Society supported Constitutional Recognition in [2013](#) in response to the 2012 Constitutional Recognition Bill. This support was reiterated in [2014](#), in response to the 2014 Senate Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

In [2021](#), the Society's support for The Voice was outlined in response to the Australian Government's Indigenous voice co-design interim report. And in 2022, the Society reiterated its position in our Federal Election Statement, [A Fairer Australia](#).

The Society supports the Uluru Statement from the Heart and was proud to stand alongside six leading faith-based social services charities on the Day of Engagement in Canberra supporting the Voice to Parliament being embedded in the Constitution.

The Society's position also aligns with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council's commitment to "standing in solidarity with the Uluru delegation by echoing calls for substantial Constitutional reform based on a foundation of spirituality and subsidiarity."<sup>i</sup>

In summary, we support:

- the Voice being an independent advisory body empowered to make representations to the Parliament and the Executive Government on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- members of the Voice being selected by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples based on the wishes of local communities by such means as the Parliament specifies
- the Parliament being empowered to enact legislation about matters relating to the Voice, including its composition, functions, powers and procedures

We note that:

- While the constitutional nature of the body and its expertise in matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would give weight to the representations of the Voice, those representations would be advisory in nature.
- The constitutional amendment confers no power on the Voice to prevent, delay or veto decisions of the Parliament or the Executive Government.
- The constitutional amendment would not oblige the Parliament or the Executive Government to consult the Voice prior to enacting, amending or repealing any law, making a decision, or taking any other action.

We urge the Committee to recommend the Bill be passed. We do so because we believe a Voice “enshrined in the Constitution” optimises empowerment, self-determination and subsidiarity.

Better outcomes will only be achieved when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are able to “live in dignity, to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions and to pursue their self-determined development, in keeping with their own needs and aspirations” as set out in the United National Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

On a visit to Alice Springs 35 years ago, Pope John Paul II stated that “what has been done cannot be undone. But what can now be done to remedy the deeds of yesterday must not be put off till tomorrow.”

**“Tomorrow” is now today.**

**On behalf of National Council**



Mr Toby oConnor  
**Chief Executive Officer**

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<sup>i</sup> The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council. 2017. Response to the Uluru Statement from the Heart. Accessed at: [http://www.natsicc.org.au/assets/final\\_draft\\_uluru\\_statement.pdf](http://www.natsicc.org.au/assets/final_draft_uluru_statement.pdf)