



Social Issues Committee Paper

Some thoughts on the Referendum to Recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice

On 23 March, 2023, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese stated:

“A Proposed Law: to alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

Do you approve this proposed alteration?”

That's the question before the Australian people. Nothing more but nothing less.

And the provisions Australians will be voting to approve, are as follows:

Chapter IX Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 129 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice

In recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia:

1. There shall be a body, to be called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice;
2. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice may make representations to the Parliament and the Executive Government of the Commonwealth on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
3. The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws with respect to matters relating to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice, including its composition, functions, powers and procedures.”

(<https://www.pm.gov.au/media/press-conference-parliament-house>: accessed 12 May 2023)

This proposal – from now on referred to as ‘the Voice’ – is a proposal that has caused significant debate. It is the culmination of a long process, which has covered both sides of politics. From the appointment of a Referendum Council in 2015 by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, through to the Uluru Statement from the Heart (released 26 May 2017) into the work of the Co-design of the Indigenous Voice under the Morrison Government (Final Report released July 2021), through to the current day – the process has been long, and that is not even considering the vast history lying behind such a situation.

The purpose of this paper is to offer some thoughts, from an evangelical perspective, on the Voice. First, we will consider what God’s word says about where we are going, where we have come from, and where we are. Within this, we will recognise certain realities about politics, God’s mob, and reconciliation. Second, we will briefly consider the structure suggested by the Indigenous Voice Co-design Process Final

Report (July 2021). Thirdly, we will consider briefly the essence of some of the ‘no’ and ‘yes’ arguments, at the time of writing.

It is important, too, to understand what this paper will NOT seek to do. The aim of this paper is not to lay out an argument for any particular voting decision on ‘the Voice’.

1. Where we are going, where we have been, where we are: some Biblical points

(i) Where we are going

- God’s word is very clear that all humanity, and this world, is heading in a certain direction. The vision is of a new heaven and new earth, where God will dwell with his mob, and true justice will be served as all sin is judged.
- The description of this gathering of God with his mob is striking – in Revelation 7:9, they are described as being from every ‘nation, tribe, people and language’, and none of these ethnic distinctions have been removed.
- This gathering is possible because of the work of Jesus Christ, who has reconciled God and his people, through his life, death and resurrection (Col.1:15-25).
- This gathering is a new humanity, in which the ‘dividing wall of hostility’ has been removed, and within which ethnic distinction is recognised, but ethnic division is removed (Eph.2:11-22; Col.3:11).
- Such a future is possible only because of true reconciliation between God and humanity – a reconciliation achieved through God’s forgiving grace in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Such reconciliation confronts sin (the attitude and action that says, ‘I am God and God is not’) and evil. Such reconciliation is won by grace and love and selfless sacrifice. Such reconciliation leads to repentance – a complete change in life as humans return to God. Such reconciliation restores people to wholeness. Such reconciliation is costly, costing the very life of God’s Son, Jesus. Such reconciliation creates real forgiveness, that wipes debt clear and restores relationship (see Eph.2:1-10; 2 Cor.5:16-21)

(ii) Where we have been

- This glorious future is so different from both the past and the present. The entrance of sin into the world (the attitude and action that says, ‘I am God and God is not’) (described in Gen.3) broke creation, broke humanity (now judged to death), and broke the relationship between God and his people. Such sin created animosity between people, and people groups (see Gen.4, and Gen.11).
- Into this broken world, God committed to reversing the curse of sin, through the family of Abraham (Gen.12:1-3), of whom Jesus is the great descendant.
- In this broken world, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God reconciles broken people to himself (just look at the many humans of ill-repute in the family history of Jesus in Matthew 1:1-17), and God reconciles enemies to each other (just look at the calling of Matthew in Matt.9).
- Throughout this history, God’s people have been called to care for those unable to care for themselves, those who are widowed, orphaned, the outsider, the foreigner (see, for example, Isaiah 1:17 and James 1:27).

(iii) Where we are

- We live, as God's people now, between these two bookends.
- As God's people now, we are to live as a reconciled people, within whom there is no racism nor discrimination based on ethnic distinctions (see Eph.2:11-22).
- As God's people now, we are to have a concern for those less fortunate than ourselves, those who are the persecuted, the oppressed and the dispossessed (see above).
- As God's people now, we are to be both obedient to the political authorities placed by God (see Romans 13 and Matthew 22:15ff) as well as participants within the political process (see Acts 16:35-40).
- As God's people now, we have the gospel message of true reconciliation which is to be taken to the world (see Matthew 28:16-20).

All that being said, there is a fairly large 'paddock' within which we can participate in the debate, and referendum, on the Voice. We would be hesitant to say that there is a clear Biblical mandate to vote only 'yes' or only 'no'. Under political authorities instituted by God to bring temporary order into a broken world, under the eternal king, Jesus, we have a large amount of godly flexibility and room to debate and vote on this topic. What we don't have is a mandate to pervert or silence the good news of Jesus and the reconciliation he brings, to create violent disagreement over these matters with brothers and sisters (and other citizens), and to bring the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus into disrepute. Moreover, God's people are called to express unity in the good news of Jesus, and to forbear with each other in patience and kindness (Col.3:12-17).

2. Suggested design from the Indigenous Voice Co-design Process Final Report

Under the Morrison Government, the Indigenous Voice Co-design Process delivered a Final Report that explored, through widespread consultation, the possible structures of an Indigenous Voice. The Final Report delivered a model that had two parts: Local & Regional Voices, and a National Voice (the Executive Summary provides the most accessible outline - <https://www.niaa.gov.au/news-centre/indigenous-affairs/indigenous-voice-final-report-now-available>).

In essence, the Final Report recommends a network of Local & Regional Voices, linked in with existing Indigenous policy-delivery units/bodies. These Local & Regional Voices are to be locally defined and organised and structured, through a series of established guiding principles.

Through selection by/through these Local & Regional Voices, a National Voice will be established which will 'have a responsibility and right to advise the Parliament and Australian Government on national matters of significance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' (Final Report, p.19).

Each State and Territory will have a set number of representatives on the National Voice, with extra 'remote' positions established for Western Australia, Northern Territory, Torres Strait, Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. In all, there will be 24 members of the National Voice.

This National Voice will be enshrined, as can be seen in the opening comments from the Prime Minister, in the Constitution as the recognition of the First Peoples of Australia.

3. A limited summary of supporting ('yes') and opposing ('no') arguments

In essence, this section will give a very brief and focussed summary of some of the concerns of both the 'yes' and 'no' camps. In doing this, we recognise that any ink on paper in summary of arguments is instantly dated. This is an encouragement to any thoughtful reader to go and seek out the alternative arguments, and examine them theologically.

(i) 'Yes'

- The key essential argument for the 'yes' vote is the history of the dispossession of the First Peoples, and the need for recognition of their existence in the national Constitution as the central means by which both healing and reconciliation, and effective and tangible policy delivery on the ground, can be achieved.
- Behind this argument lie a number of hopes and expectations. The structures suggested aim to provide First peoples an opportunity for a 'say' in policy development and delivery. Such a 'say' is to be in the context of the vastly different and divergent situations First Peoples now live in.
- The placement of recognition alongside (inseparably intertwined with) the National Voice aims to concretely recognise the right of First Peoples to participate in policy decisions and delivery relevant to them, and their interests.

(ii) 'No'

- There are several key essential arguments put forward in opposition to the National Voice.
- First, the inextricable connection between Constitutional recognition and this form of policy-advice body is seen as constricting and unhelpful. The argument is that Constitutional recognition is good, but must it be so linked to the National Voice?
- Second, to place such an advisory body in the Constitution is seen as inflexible and constraining – even from a First Peoples' perspective, this can be seen as perpetuating their subjugation to white structures.
- Third, will such a step actually deliver real policy outcomes on the ground, especially across such a vast variation in circumstances and with the possibility of disenfranchisement of certain groups?

4. Conclusion

We think that there is a large amount of room for godly and biblical difference on this question – and there are solid and faithful biblical arguments for both sides of the debate.

Whilst the aim of this paper has not been to outline a particular vote on ‘the Voice’, it is important to hear this paper’s call to consistent and diligent and humble prayer for not only ‘the Voice’ Referendum, but also the future of God’s mob, and how we navigate such tricky and possibly divisive processes.

The Anglican Diocese of Armidale Social Issues Committee
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