



# Indigenous Voice to Parliament Resource Pack



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# Indigenous Voice to Parliament

## Introduction

Sometime between October and December this year, Australia will face a referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. This has come about from the call of the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart, for the establishment of a First Nations Voice to Parliament to be enshrined in the Constitution.

On the following pages there are some documents and reflections to consider as we, as a nation, head towards this historic referendum concerning the First Nations people in this country: a Voice to Parliament on behalf of those who, despite being here for millennia, feel unheard in their own land. Our history is complex, but our rich past must be woven into the fabric of our nation, not forgotten or erased. Our past always plays a part in our present and our future, just as this important decision will also.

Whilst the vote is, on one level, an individual choice, it carries a collective weight that determines decisions being made for the future of our various Indigenous people groups. It speaks to how we are responding to their place in the future of our nation, as they represent the longest continuous culture in all of human history. It also speaks as a measure of the kind of Australia we would like to be moving forward.

The purpose of this information in this pack is not to persuade you on how to vote but to present an opportunity to listen, read, pray and reflect individually and collectively on what we believe is the heart of God in this matter. The issue of the Voice to Parliament is as complex as our history and there are legitimate concerns on both sides of the debate from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices. In order to get a clearer overall picture, one of the best things we can all do during this time is to listen deeply to a variety of voices. It can be difficult to set aside bias and suspend reactions for long enough to understand such a topic more fully, but wrestling to understand these kinds of challenges will always make us a healthier body of people.

As we seek further understanding, and indeed as we engage more broadly on an ongoing basis, we should be prepared to set aside such things as our political 'wiring'. We need to have a prayerful approach that asks, 'Am I prepared to listen? Could I change my point-of-view once I have learned more?' As the first Aboriginal Baptist to be ordained (1968), Rev Graham Paulson says, 'We have to be clear about where we have come from, and what we need to repent of, before we can focus on the future with integrity'.

Victorian Baptists and the BUV have been engaging with this topic for a number of years. At the BUV Gathering in March 1998, an official apology was made to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including a commitment to reconciliation. Then, in 2007, a resolution was passed at Assembly, encouraging every Victorian Baptist congregation to commit to taking practical steps to grow in understanding and relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (see Appendix 1). In 2016, this was tabled again with a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) that the BUV Support Hub created for churches to adopt. This statement was contained in the RAP:

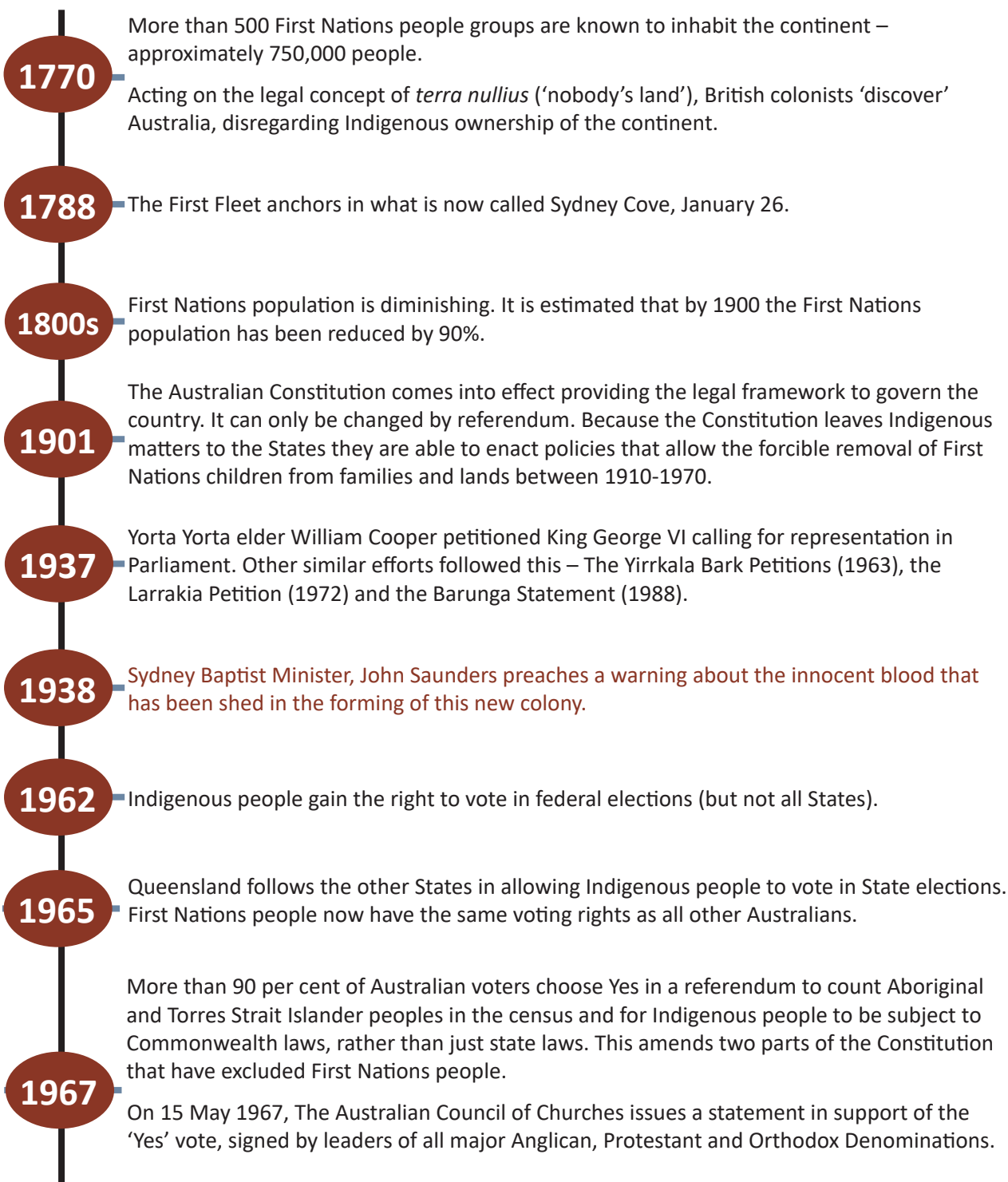
*We envisage a world where humankind is reconciled to each other, to God and to creation. We believe the Christian gospel holds a unique priority for those at the margins of our society and thus emphasise a special effort to reconcile with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and to learn from their deep wisdom of caring for creation.*

It would be fair to say that whilst we still hold to these resolutions and statements there is still much that can be done to fulfil them. Regardless of the outcome of this vote, something still needs to change. The narrative of this country needs redeeming, and we have a Christ-centred role to play by listening more deeply and engaging more fully in the conversation.

There are legitimate moments when we (the BUV) are being 'us' (members and leaders of Victorian Baptist churches) examining who we are and our place in this story. Whilst we have some information from some First Nations people, we don't assume to speak for them or from them. We are listening to others but taking responsibility for us as 'our mob', owning our heritage, our place in society and what we believe is our part at this point in history (see Mark Yettica-Paulson's Intercultural Framework diagram in Appendix 5).

In Colossians 3, Paul urges us (among other things) to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience in all that we do. This is a time for us to 'put on' the heart of God as we reflect what our response should be as the nation gathers to vote. May we hear God's voice above all other voices at this time as we consider what it might mean to have an ancient and lasting voice speak into the hopes of our nation's future.

# History of Australia's constitutional journey with Indigenous Australians



*“The omission of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the nation’s constitution in 1901 has led to more than a century of debate over how best to recognise Australia’s Indigenous people.”*

1970

Rev Graham Paulson (the first Aboriginal Baptist to be ordained, 1968) baptises Gurundji leader, Vincent Lingiari. Lingiari is known as the leader of the Wave Hill walk-off in the Northern Territory which is celebrated as being the beginning of the land rights movement in Australia.

1973

The White Australia Policy officially ends.

1992

The fiction of *terra nullius* (land belonging to no-one) is officially overturned.  
Paul Keating makes historical Redfern Speech.

1993

The Australian Parliament passes the Native Title Act (as a result of the historic 'Mabo case'), creating a framework that recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have rights to and interest in certain land because of their traditional laws and customs.

1995

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) report Recognition, Rights and Reform says constitutional reform is a priority.

1998

The Constitutional Convention supports Indigenous recognition in a new preamble.

2000

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's 'Roadmap to Reconciliation' agenda presented at the Corroboree 2000 calls on the Federal Parliament to initiate and support a referendum to deal with Sections 25 and 51(xxvi) and add recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to the constitution.

2007

Prime Minister John Howard makes a re-election pledge to hold a referendum on constitutional recognition for Indigenous Australians.

*"The problem starts with us. We did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disease and the alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from the mothers. We practiced discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us... As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us".*

2008

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivers an apology in Federal Parliament for the mistreatment of Indigenous Australians.

2010

Prime Minister Julia Gillard establishes the Expert Panel on the Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the Constitution.

2011

Lowitja O'Donoghue, the inaugural chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, declares there is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to change the constitution, stating it would be good "for the nation's soul".

2012

The Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples present its report to the Gillard Government.

2013

Prime Minister Julia Gillard and opposition leader Tony Abbott address Parliament in support of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Recognition Bill.

Liberal MP Ken Wyatt tables a much-anticipated report on progress towards a referendum on Indigenous recognition in the constitution.

2015

Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten host an unprecedented joint summit with about 40 of the nation's most influential Indigenous representatives on the path forward to a referendum. Prime Minister Malcom Turnbull and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten establish the Referendum Council.

2017

First Nations National Constitutional Convention brings together 250 Indigenous representatives from across the country, reaching a consensus on the most meaningful way to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Constitution – a Voice to Parliament (as outlined in the Uluru Statement From the Heart – see Appendix 3)

2022

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announces his intention for a referendum, proposing an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. He states that Australians should recognise "the oldest civilisation on the planet" by recognising it "in our national birth certificate, the Constitution of Australia".

*"We must never feel guilt for the things already done in this nation's history, but we can and must feel responsibility for the things that remain undone. No gesture speaks more deeply to the healing of our nation's fabric than amending our nation's founding charter. We are bound to each other in this land and always will be. Let us be bound in justice and dignity as well."*

## Baptist Union of Victoria Indigenous Reconciliation Journey

Detailed below is a summary of the journey that Victorian Baptists have been on over the last 25 years in support of reconciliation with Indigenous Australians. Because of our deep calling and commitment to love our neighbour, this journey will continue regardless of the decision reached by the people of Australia on the Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum in 2023.

In March 1998, an apology was officially made to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders at the BUV Gathering, including a commitment to reconciliation. The final paragraph specifying:

*“We ask for your forgiveness and commit ourselves to work with you and all other Australians for reconciliation”.*

In August 2007 an inaugural meeting of the BUV Indigenous Action Group was held which became known as Baptist Aboriginal Partnerships (BAPs), who put together a resolution subsequently adopted by a majority of delegates at the Assembly Gathering in October 2007 as detailed below. Practical questions for churches to consider were also included.

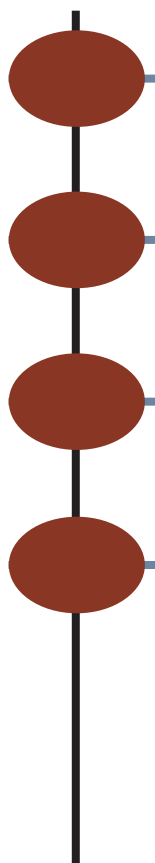
*“In the spirit of the apology and commitment we made to Aboriginal and Torres Strait sisters and brothers at the BUV Assembly in March 1998, this Gathering resolves to encourage every Baptist congregation to commit to taking practical steps to grow in understanding and in relationship with Indigenous Australians”.*

Since 2007, the BUV has provided many resources to Victorian Baptist congregations to fulfill the commitments in this resolution.

Education & awareness - Baptist Aboriginal Partnerships Group (BAPs) held forums in June 2010 for churches wanting to further their indigenous awareness and partnerships and led a well-attended elective at October 2010 Gathering for people willing to learn, grow and take steps toward reconciliation. *Australians for reconciliation”.*

Reconciliation Action Plan - Members of the BAPs approached the BUV Director of Ministries suggesting that a RAP be developed. In 2013, a new Statement of Commitment to develop a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) was signed by the new Director of Mission and Ministries. The RAP Group included consultation from Mark Yettica-Paulson - an indigenous leader and member of Brunswick Baptist Church and Cath Solomon, an indigenous worked supported by the BUV to undertake work with children and youth in Gippsland. The first BUV RAP (2013/ 2014) was launched in late 2013 and promoted throughout 2014 with a RAP Kit including commissioned artwork by Robin (Goma) Conlon. The 2015/16 RAP produced and distributed to all churches – promoted at May 2016 Gathering and through all comms channels. BUV has sponsored Surrender for many years, a justice organisation with a heart for reconciliation with Indigenous Australians.





Church Resources - From 2016 Reconciliation Resources were included on the BUV Social Issues / Justice website page. BUV also worked with Australians Together to develop resources.

Event Support - From 2018-2023 the BUV has promoted and supported NAIDOC Week and National Reconciliation Week with church resources distributed and promoted through BUV Bulletins and website.

Sponsorship - For many years, the BUV has sponsored Surrender, an organisation with support for Indigenous Australians at its heart. In 2023, Surrender hosted an indigenous debate on The Voice.

Issue Discussion & Discernment - In 2023 Consultation forums were facilitated on the Government's proposal to introduce an Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

## Understanding the basics

The proposal for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament involves a change to the Australian Constitution. The Australian Constitution can only be changed by referendum. A referendum is a vote by Australians over the age of 18 on a specific change to the text of the Australian Constitution. For a referendum to be successful, it requires what is known as a double majority. This means a majority of voters nationwide, plus a majority of voters in a majority of States (four out of six) must approve the changes.

*(Source: Changing the Australian Constitution through referendum -www.humanrights.gov.au)*

The Voice to Parliament proposal is based on years of work and public consultations done by previous governments culminating in the [Indigenous Voice Co-design Process Final Report](#) to the Australian Government.

According to the Australian Government website [Indigenous Voice \(niaa.gov.au\)](#) the Voice will be an independent, representative advisory body for First Nations people. It will provide a permanent means to advise the Australian Parliament and Government on the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on matters that affect them.

A concise video overview of The Voice to Parliament proposal is presented by Jack Latimore: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEFUvIOj-gs>

*(Source: The Age, Jack Latimore – Indigenous Affairs journalist)*



At a Press Conference held on 23 March, 2023, Prime Minister Albanese outlined the proposed wording for the proposed referendum. [Click here to watch as Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announces proposed Indigenous Voice to Parliament question wording — ABC News](#)

The referendum date is yet to be set but it is expected to be between September and December 2023.

The process still requires some activity as Parliament is yet to meet and debate the final pieces of legislation necessary to facilitate the vote. However, on 23 March, the Parliament unanimously passed through the Senate the legislation for provisions of the vote – the referendum machinery bill, ending a long and sometimes tense debate on the rules that will govern the Voice referendum later this year.

Legislation will be introduced with the below wording on 30 March and a joint parliamentary committee will be established which will have time to consider any submissions that are made, and this will be put to a parliamentary vote in June. This parliamentary process allows room for the question itself to be altered prior to a referendum, however Prime Minister Albanese has made it very clear that the relevant advisory groups have so far worked long and hard to arrive at this wording.

The referendum question:

**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? Yes/No**

In addition to this question the following information has been provided as a proposed new chapter for the Constitution:

**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:**

- **There shall be a body, to be called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice;**
- **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;**

- **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.**

And in addition, there are Design Principles (still requiring Parliamentary approval) that will guide The Voice.

Following are these Design Principles of the Voice to Parliament agreed by the First Nations Referendum Working Group:

- The Voice will give independent advice to the Parliament and Government
- It will be chosen by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People based on the wishes of local communities
- It will be representative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, gender balanced and include youth
- It will be empowering, community led, inclusive, respectful and culturally informed
- It will be accountable and transparent
- It will work alongside existing organisations and traditional structures
- It will not have a programme delivery function
- It will not have a Veto power

One of the biggest challenges ahead of a referendum is ensuring voters have the information they need to cast an informed vote. In the coming months we can expect the government to circulate basic information on the Constitution, Australia's system of government and the referendum process.

## Some current views around 'The Voice'

We are aware that this issue is topical and dynamic and that some of the information contained in this pack will change as the year progresses. We encourage you to keep an eye on updates at: [buu.com.au/voicetoparliament](http://buu.com.au/voicetoparliament)

We are also aware that at this current time there are a range of thoughts and opinions on both sides of the Yes and No from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people regarding the Voice to Parliament.

### Links to Indigenous Voices reflecting both 'Yes' and 'No' on The Voice:

- [Raising Indigenous voices on a Voice to parliament – The Age](#)
- [What are Aboriginal people saying about the Voice to Parliament? - ABC News](#)

### Political Campaign websites for the 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns:

- Yes - Aust Govt Voice website <https://voice.niaa.gov.au/>  
From The Heart <https://fromtheheart.com.au/>
- No - Recognise a Better Way <https://www.recogniseabetterway.org.au/>

### Proponents of the 'Yes' campaign believe:

- that Indigenous Australians should have a means of expressing their views on matters of concern to them and that those views should be listened to
- that many of the 'No' concerns can be addressed
- it is a step in the right direction
- it gives appropriate acknowledgment to First Nations people
- the ramifications of not doing this will have a deeply felt impact in our nation
- that the Voice has strong support from both the Indigenous and

migrant communities throughout Australia. “We recently had a major conference, 800 delegates and organisations attended. Overwhelmingly, without dissent, there was support for the Uluru Statement and for the Voice referendum. No-one raised this other issue,” chair of peak migrant body, Carlo Cali told ABC News Breakfast.

[Indigenous Voice to parliament: Detail isn’t needed, but some explanation would help - The Age](#)

[Two overwhelming reasons to vote yes to an Indigenous voice - The Canberra Times](#)

**Some of the current ‘No’ concerns raised are:**

- it could mean that First Nations people are seen to be ceding sovereignty
- it doesn’t have enough weight
- that the ‘Voice’ will not do any more than any other previous body has been able to
- not enough information made available to the public by the Government
- that this will introduce ‘race’ into the Australian constitution

[Greens Senator and Indigenous Leader, Lidia Thorpe expresses her concerns – The Australian](#)

[Yindindji Nation - Video on Sovereignty and Treaty](#)

# Answering some key questions raised through the BUV Consultation and Discernment Process

By Wiradjuri man, Rev Canon Associate Professor Glenn Loughrey - Chair, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglican Council

## **What power does the Voice to Parliament have?**

- It is not a third chamber or an addition to the House of Representatives and Senate.
- It cannot veto and does not have the capacity to say, 'you can't do that'.
- It cannot make any laws or decisions that the Government is then obliged to implement.
- It IS an advisory body that can advise Parliament and Government from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective.
- It CAN only say to them, 'here are our comments and our advice on this piece of legislation' or 'we think you need to think about this in a better way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' or that 'there's an alternative way'.

## **Why does it need to be enshrined in the Constitution?**

Enshrining The Voice into the Constitution allows our people to look further than the three-year electoral cycle. We can begin to plan on processes that resolve those kinds of issues discussed in the Closing the Gap program, over a long period of time.

There are no quick fixes, The Voice will not provide a quick fix, but it will provide us the opportunity to look down a long view and begin to get past the constant changes in Governments which stop us from successfully dealing with any of those major issues.

A lot of the money goes into those changes, restructures and shifts, and consequently doesn't get down to our people. By having this locked into the Constitution it allows us to have a long-term view and we can go 'yes, this is where we're going' without disruptions and upheavals. Governments will then

get used to that idea, be less scared of that idea and be able to make long-term planning for themselves and ultimately save money.

The Government asked in the Referendum Council in 2015, ‘how would Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people like to be recognized in the Constitution?’ and we said, ‘We want to be heard for what we’ve said.’

It is important that any advice be listened to early in the process so that we’re not coming to legislation that already exists and realizing that changes need to be made and then have to go back and rewrite the whole legislation. We want to get it right first, if we can and if the advice goes in early, it gives everyone a chance to work it through together.

### **But not all Indigenous voices are in favour of The Voice – Why?**

This should not be an obstacle. Bear in mind the polls suggest that over 80% of Indigenous people are in favour of The Voice. But we don’t expect everyone to agree, which is true for pretty much everything else in society. This continent doesn’t represent one group of Aboriginal people, it is made up of 100s of varying nations and The Voice will do its best to represent all those nations as The Voice to Parliament. Different experiences will mean different responses. And those that aren’t in favour have that right to express their own opinion.

### **How can I be expected to vote for something when I don’t know all the detail?**

The process of deciding to add a Voice to Parliament is a principle – and although there is some detail when you look at the proposed structure, the finer details are still to be worked out.

The trade and tax laws are a great example. All the details regarding trade and the paying of taxes are not enshrined in the Constitution. For example:

*Section 51: Legislative powers of the Parliament*



*The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws for the peace, order and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to:*

*i. trade and commerce with other countries, and among the States;*

*ii. taxation; but so as not to discriminate between States, or parts of States;*

In the same way, the details on the mechanics of The Voice are to be left to Parliament to decide. The details for how it functions, who is represented and how they are elected is then to be legislated in Parliament, which of course contains its own democratic checks and balances.

### **We've had things like this before and we've spent so much money. They don't work, why is the Voice different?**

First, I would say that the five bodies we've had before weren't ineffective. They have all done good work. The problem was they weren't locked into the Constitution, they were legislated. Then, when Governments changed, and ideologies changed, we lost those bodies over time. All the work that has gone before has been leading up to this moment, in order to ensure that the Voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, is upheld no matter who is in Government.

### **What will change for Indigenous people?**

This will be a landmark for Indigenous people – it is the first step of hope in what we know will be a long-term journey around a circle of voice, treaty and truth telling, leading toward genuine reconciliation, equality, and relationship with all Australian peoples. As the Uluru Statement from the Heart states, 'We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.'

### **There are many other minority immigrant voices who would like to be heard, why should Indigenous people have precedent?**

First peoples are First Peoples, not immigrants. They suffered through a time when Australia had a White Policy, when the nation was seeking to create a 'whites only' population. First Nations people will bear those scars and the ramifications of that for a long time yet. Although that policy started being dismantled in the 1960s it was only officially renounced as recently as 1973. Immigrants arrive here and benefit from a land from which First Nations people were dispossessed. We have a connection to the land that we believe, if heard and understood more fully, can benefit all those who dwell on this continent.

### **How does listening lead to reconciliation? Who do we listen to?**

Listening is vital to this process. Listen to us. And listen to the majority of tribes and nations who signed the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

One of the things I find when I'm doing presentations, that generally when I come to the Q&A section, people make statements, they don't ask questions because they haven't heard my voice. Everyone in this process can help by learning to listen and allow your critical thinking to help you understand what is and isn't right. The Government asked in the Referendum Council in 2015, 'how would Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people like to be recognized in the Constitution?' and this is what we said. We want to be heard for what we've said - you asked us how we would like this to work, so here we are.

## Reflections from Baptist leaders

### **Mark Yettica-Paulson**

*Mark is a Chief Director of Super Native Unlimited & Indigenous Queensland leader who specialises in cross cultural collaboration. He is an Intercultural Leadership specialist from South East Queensland and North East NSW regions. Mark is from the Birrah, Gamilaroi and Bundjalung peoples.*

Mark is a Baptist and the son of Rev Graham Paulson (first ordained Aboriginal Baptist Pastor in Australia) and has worked with the BUV on many projects over several years. Mark reflects in this video on some of the issues and ramifications of the vote.

<https://vimeo.com/792469688/0ec75a7a56>



## Rev. Tim Costello

*Rev Tim Costello AO is Exec Director of Micah Australia, a Senior Fellow for The Centre for Public Christianity and Director of Ethical Voice. He is also an Advocate for Alliance for Gambling Reform.*

*Tim reflects here briefly on two of the current concerns, detail and race.*

Currently there are two major issues of concern being raised in the public regarding the proposed referendum for the Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

Firstly, the issue of Race. There are concerns that an Indigenous Voice elevates one race (Indigenous over others) with special allowance being given on matters that affect them only, thereby undermining equality in the constitution. Unfortunately, the Constitution was written with race assumptions built into it, although some were removed in the 1967 referendum. However, the Northern Territory Intervention (2007) violated the Racial Discrimination Act (which was suspended for the intervention), thereby showing that those race clauses still in our constitution (Section 51(xxiv)) can override anti-discrimination law. If the NT Intervention had been directed at all people in the NT (not just Indigenous peoples) it would not have been racist, but by targeting Indigenous communities only, it showed that there are still (and therefore already) issues to do with race inherent within the current Constitution. The Voice doesn't add the issue of race.

Many conservative voices opposed to The Voice are raising this issue of race as their objection. Some are citing US Baptist Minister, Martin Luther King, and in particular his I Have a Dream speech that asks for his "children to be judged by their character not the colour of their skin", therefore a Voice to Parliament is racist. As Baptists we need to resist the ahistorical and decontextualised co-opting of Martin Luther King as opposition to The Voice. His fight for civil rights was when race as a concept was still a living issue, when blacks were seen as lesser humans and thereby denied civil rights and voting rights until President Lydon B. Johnson's legislation changes in the 1960s. Martin Luther King was pushing the USA to honour its own Constitution that expressed that 'we hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal'. In the 1960s a belief that certain races were inferior was still the dominant paradigm, denying rights for black people 250 years after those words were penned by Thomas Jefferson.

Today we know that 99.9% of all humans share the same DNA making the concept of race, innate difference and the notion of superior/inferior a nonsense. So, for example, the Baptist Warlpiri in the NT are not a race receiving special rights because there is a Voice to Parliament. They are a people who have been here for 60,000 years and are original custodians who were never recognised in our race-based constitution. If the constitution is our birth certificate as a nation, we need to correct this blindness. To give them a Voice to Parliament (and it is not a voice in Parliament) is not creating a unique set of rights for one race. We are all one race, one blood and all carry the image of the Creator God, but we recognise that different people in that one race have occupied the boundaries God has set and referred to in Acts 17:26.

Secondly, we hear the argument that there is too little detail. The referendum question will be simply to empower a Voice in the Constitution to be created. It is then Parliament that decides on the mechanics, which of course includes its own democratic checks and balances. The detail for how it functions, who is represented and how they are elected is to be legislated in Parliament. That cannot be set in stone before the referendum vote without undermining Parliament itself. However, the work done by Indigenous Minister Ken Wyatt's advisory committee has canvassed in great detail the likely options. The preference is a Voice council of 24 members, drawn and elected by Indigenous people from seven regions of Australia with a weight on rural regional representatives. Great thought and detailed consideration have gone into this and it was accepted by the Morrison cabinet. Sensitive representative questions had to be addressed such as the predominance of Indigenous majorities in NSW and in large cities. They landed on ensuring that it is not "Redfern voices" dominating remote communities as charged by the 'No' case. As Marcia Langton, Tom Calma and Ken Wyatt have said, the 'No' case must have simply not read the detail. How can a 'No' case cry 'no detail' without reading the very detailed hundreds of pages of work over two years under Ken Wyatt, who is himself a 'Yes' for the Voice?

There is no doubt we should be listening to voices from both sides of the debate. We will all benefit from that but these two particular issues that are currently being used as roadblocks are not things that should distract us from considering our response to what a Voice to Parliament will mean for our First Nations people and for our nation as a whole.

## Why should BUV people care about The Voice? - Andy Mitchell

*Andy Mitchell is Lecturer in Practical Theology & Ministry at Whitley College.*

My name's Andy Mitchell. I was born in NZ and moved to Australia when I was 19. I came to faith through the ministry of the Kew Student Residence and worshipped at Kew Baptist Church, before beginning a pastoral role there during an interim period. I sensed a call to ministry that led me to Beaumaris-Mordialloc Baptist and then, most recently, to Whitley College, where I serve as the Lecturer for Practical Theology and Ministry. I completed theological study at Ridley College and was ordained by the BUV in 2019. I'm currently undertaking doctoral research with NAIITS (a global Indigenous theological college) exploring how BUV churches could think theologically about building relationships with local Indigenous communities.

The most common objections I hear from our churches about The Voice are that it's a confusing subject that we don't know much about, and that it's a political issue, which we, as Baptists, have traditionally kept separate from our church life. And I think we're right to acknowledge these realities.

The National Church Life Survey in 2016 found that only 15% of Christians surveyed knew and met regularly with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. Perhaps for this reason our movement of churches in Victoria has not been particularly active in our engagement with Indigenous peoples, apart from a unanimous vote to approve a Resolution of Commitment & Encouragement in 2007. This resolution called us to take "practical steps to grow in understanding and in relationship with Indigenous Australians," such as learning the names of the Traditional Owners on whose lands our churches are built, making contact with local Indigenous people and listening to their stories, and integrating national events that concern Indigenous peoples into the lives of our churches. The Reconciliation Action Plan that emerged from the Resolution explained, "We envisage a world where humankind is reconciled to each other, to God and to creation. We believe the Christian gospel holds a unique priority for those at the margins of our society and thus emphasise a special effort to reconcile with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and to learn from their deep wisdom of caring for creation."

As followers of Jesus we are familiar with a vision of how the world was designed to be, found in Genesis, and a similar vision for how the world will be, named by Jesus as the Kingdom of God. The Old Testament characterises this vision using the word shalom, which describes well-being that we experience when we live aligned to God's vision. It encompasses ideas like love, righteousness and justice. Shalom is an inherently relational term, in that it is measured in relationships - where there are healthy relationships, there is shalom. In the New Testament, the Kingdom of God describes the rule and reign of God come to Earth in fullness. This reality could be described in many of the same terms as shalom.

We all understand and experience the dissonance of living as followers of Jesus in a world that is not yet aligned to God's vision for it. And I think we have a sense that our absence of relationship with the First Peoples of this land is a part of that dissonance. The Voice represents a significant step toward open dialogue and the healing of these relationships. The invitation from Indigenous peoples found in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, from which The Voice emerges, is simple: "We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future."

A further part of this dissonance is the status of Indigenous peoples in this country. We don't have to Google for long to find out that the consequences of colonisation are still being felt by Indigenous peoples - consequences that are not felt by many of the rest of us. The issue of Victorian Baptists' posture toward Indigenous Victorians should be about justice and relationship, not about politics.

I often hear it said in our churches that the Indigenous community doesn't have a unified perspective on The Voice, so how can we know how to vote on it? In my experience I believe the Indigenous community does have a unified perspective, which centres on a recognition of their status as sovereign peoples, deserving of dignity and respect, wishing for the opportunity to represent themselves in issues that concern them, as we all do.

As shalom/kingdom people, we want to honour the image of God in all humanity. As Baptist people, we have been on mission for over 400 years, advocating for the dignity of all humanity - even for those who we do not know personally and who may be geographically far from us. It's my belief that we

Victorian Baptists can do better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by remembering and enacting the commitments we made to them in 2007.

I am one of those New Zealand citizens who has recently been offered a pathway to Australian citizenship. If my application is approved in time, it's my intention to vote in support of The Voice, not because I think it's a perfect end goal, but because I think a "yes" vote opens a way for the beginning of long overdue dialogue and moves us closer toward God's vision for the world as we have it in Scripture. In my mind, voting "no" when we have nothing to lose from saying "yes," further enshrines these barriers to relationship and justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters that we, as Victorian Baptists, ought to be dismantling.



# A devotional

*This devotional is by Garry Worete Deverell. Garry is the inaugural Vice-Chancellor's Fellow in Indigenous Theologies at the University of Divinity. In Appendix 4 are some other scripture references to reflect on.*

## **1 Kings 21 – the story of Naboth's vineyard.**

'The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance': Naboth and the dispossession of Indigenous People.

In the book of 1 Kings, chapter 21, we read about a Jezrealite named Naboth who farmed a fruitful vineyard on his 'ancestral inheritance', that is, on land that was given to his family by God. Unfortunately, his next door neighbour was Ahab, the king of Israel, who maintained a military fortress in Jezreel. Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard and sought to persuade him to part with it in exchange for another vineyard or else for a large sum of money. But Naboth refused, saying:

### **The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance. (21.3)**

Allow me to translate what Naboth was saying into a more modern idiom: 'Even if I wanted to, I could not part with this land. It is the inheritance of my family from the Lord, and I have a responsibility to care for it in perpetuity'. Well, Ahab was not well pleased. At first he sulks, much like a small boy who is forbidden what he wants. But then Ahab's wife, Jezebel, taking the role of an indulgent mother, sets about claiming Naboth's land through various forms of legal subterfuge. False witnesses are summoned to testify against Naboth, claiming that he had publicly cursed both God and the king, two crimes (blasphemy and treason) arguably punishable by death in Israel. Naboth is summarily executed by stoning on Ahab's orders, and his land seized by the crown. Now, should there be any doubt in the mind of the reader about the righteousness or otherwise of what Ahab has done, the narrator finishes the story by telling us that Elijah the Tishbite, amongst the greatest of Israel's prophets, is sent by God to confront the royals concerning their crime.

I recall this story because it reminds me of the pattern of acquisition habitually used by colonists to annex Indigenous territories. Here on the lands of the Kulin nations in Naarm (Melbourne), for example, capitalist investors from England – some of whom, like John Batman, already had substantial assets in lutrawita (Tasmania) – heard reports of rich country suitable for sheep and cattle farming in the area they called, at the time, Port Phillip. Knowing that those lands were

already occupied by Aboriginal clans, they tried to acquire the land through trade: the land for a few European trinkets of extremely limited value. But the Kulin elders would not trade their lands. For them, the land could not be sold or in any way disposed of, because it was given them by their creator ancestors, and they therefore had a responsibility to care for it in perpetuity. Instead, they generously allowed the new arrivals to pass through their lands, taking only what they needed for their own sustenance.

But the colonists were not satisfied with this arrangement. They wanted the land for themselves, so they employed large teams of former soldiers and convicts to 'clear' that country of its Indigenous owners. In the bloody conflicts of the next twenty years, now called the 'Frontier Wars', many thousands of native peoples died. Subsequent Colonial Office reports justified the killings as a necessary and proportional response to the 'wickedness' of Aboriginal aggression. But the truth of the matter has never been fully faced by either British or Australian governments. The land was simply stolen, and its owners murdered or permanently displaced. All for the sake of making a few million pounds out of sheep and cattle farming.

The result of this sordid history could not be more stark. The families of those investors who annexed Kulin territory are still amongst the wealthiest in the British Commonwealth. The land they acquired at the point of a gun was either farmed or sold on to new waves of white settlers. New colonial governments simply claimed the remaining territories for the crown. But the few Kulin who survived the initial violence were rounded up and placed in missions run by the churches with government money. Later their children were taken away from the missions and placed in white households, where they worked as slaves. Their descendants are today the most disadvantaged members of Victoria society, on any measure. Still, the Kulin have found their voices once more and have started out on the long pilgrimage to reclaim what is theirs by way of history, culture and family. Perhaps the churches who participated in their dispossession might now become allies in the quest for justice?

*Garry Worete Deverell*

# Links

## **VIDEO and ON-LINE RESOURCES:**

- Dale Stephenson, Senior Pastor Crossway: [australianstogether.org.au](http://australianstogether.org.au)

## **From the Heart:**

- Campaign and educational resources [fromtheheart.com.au/](http://fromtheheart.com.au/)
- Online e-learning course [fromtheheart.com.au/education/](http://fromtheheart.com.au/education/)

## **Australians Together Resources:**

- [australianstogether.org.au/churches/](http://australianstogether.org.au/churches/)

## **Uluru Statement quick guide:**

- [Uluru Statement - aph.gov.au/](http://Uluru Statement - aph.gov.au/)

## **Common Grace**

- [commongrace.org.au/](http://commongrace.org.au/)
- [listentotheheart.org.au/](http://listentotheheart.org.au/)
- **Sermon Aboriginal Sunday 2023** Listening to the Voices from the Past - [YouTube](#)

## **First Australians Series – SBS on Demand**

## **BOOKS**

- Riding the Black Cockatoo – John Danalis
- One Blood – John Harris
- Lowitja – Stuart Rintoul
- Tumultuous Times (Chapter 4) – Dr John Sampson

## **OTHER RESOURCES**

Scott Darlow is a Yorta Yorta man who lives in Melbourne. He is available to speak and sing in your church. [scottdarlow.com](http://scottdarlow.com); [scottdarlow@icloud.com](mailto:scottdarlow@icloud.com)

## **EVENT**

25 March - Indigenous Debate on 'The Voice' - [surrender.org.au/](http://surrender.org.au/)

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Baptist Union of Victoria Resolution of Encouragement & Commitment

### Baptist Union of Victoria Resolution of Encouragement & Commitment

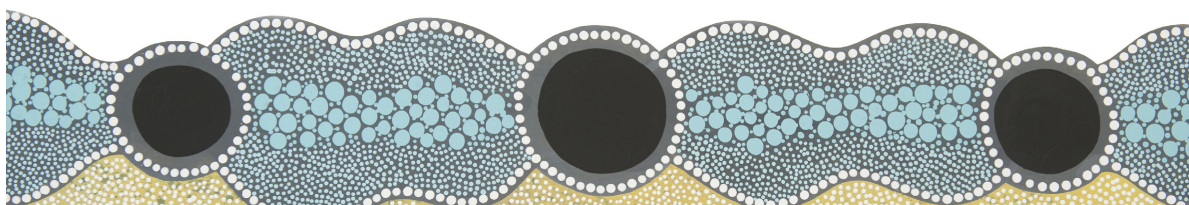


In the spirit of the apology and commitment made to Aboriginal and Torres Strait sisters and brothers at the BUV Assembly in March 1998, this October 2007 Gathering resolves to encourage every Baptist Congregation to commit to taking practical steps to grow in understanding and in relationship with Indigenous Australians.

#### We the Churches of the Baptist Union of Victoria undertake to consider:

1. Do we know the name of the Aboriginal groups who were the first peoples and custodians of the land on which our church meets?
2. Would we have a plaque or acknowledgement of those groups on or near our church meeting place, and acknowledge them in special services and public events we run?
3. Finding ways to learn some early history of our area and trying to make contact with any descendants to hear their stories.
4. Will we commit to including indigenous people and situations in the prayer life of our church?
5. Will we make an effort to discover the many positive contributions indigenous people are making to society from their wealth of cultural insights and gifts?
6. Will we make a financial contribution of some kind to indigenous people and causes?
7. Reading more indigenous stories for adults and children, watching films, listening to regular radio programs and watching regular television programs that educate and inform us, and reading history that takes account of Aboriginal story.
8. Will we have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flags somewhere in our building as a reminder of our desire to understand and develop relationships with our Indigenous People?
9. Connecting with Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR), Reconciliation Australia, and/or observing events like Sorry Day, Aboriginal Sunday, NAIDOC week, the Long Walk, or campaigns like 'Close the Gap', or 'Make Indigenous Poverty History'.

As a member church of the Baptist Union of Victoria, \_\_\_\_\_  
affirm our commitment to taking practical steps in reconciliation \_\_\_\_\_ (date)



## Appendix 2: Indigenous Artwork commissioned by the BUV



The Waters of Baptism by Robin (Goma) Conlon (2012)

This picture depicts young men and women coming to the next phase of baptism through water. The people on the edge are the leaders and witnesses taking people waiting to be baptised. The red dots represent the blood of Jesus and the black dots behind depict the world on which they have turned their backs as they now look to their future in Christ. The white dots in the centre represent the presence of God in this place.

## Appendix 3: Uluru Statement from the Heart

We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from ‘time immemorial’, and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or ‘mother nature’, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia’s nationhood.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness.

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: the coming together after a struggle. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

## Appendix 4: Other scriptures to consider

### Other Scriptures to consider:

- Deuteronomy 19:14 – You must not move your neighbour’s boundary marker. (Walter Bruggeman writes in his commentary on Deuteronomy, “The kingdom of God is not and will not be a place where powers overrun the entitlements of the vulnerable”.)
- Proverbs 23:10-11 – Don’t cheat your neighbour by moving the ancient boundary markers; don’t take the land of defenceless orphans. For their Redeemer is strong; he himself will bring charges against you.
- Matthew 5:23-24 - 23 - Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift...
- Acts 17:26 – ... and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation...

### There are numerous Scriptures referring to God being a God of justice. Some examples:

- Psalm 33:5 – He loves righteousness and justice
- Psalm 89:14 – Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne
- Psalm 111:7 – The work of His hands are truth and justice
- Exodus 23:6 – You shall not pervert the justice due to your needy brother in his dispute
- Proverbs 21:7 – To do righteousness and justice is desired by the Lord more than sacrifice
- Isaiah 28:17 – I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the level
- Isaiah 30:18 – For the Lord is a God of justice
- Luke 11:42 – Woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithes of mint and rue and every kind of garden herb and yet disregard justice and the love of God

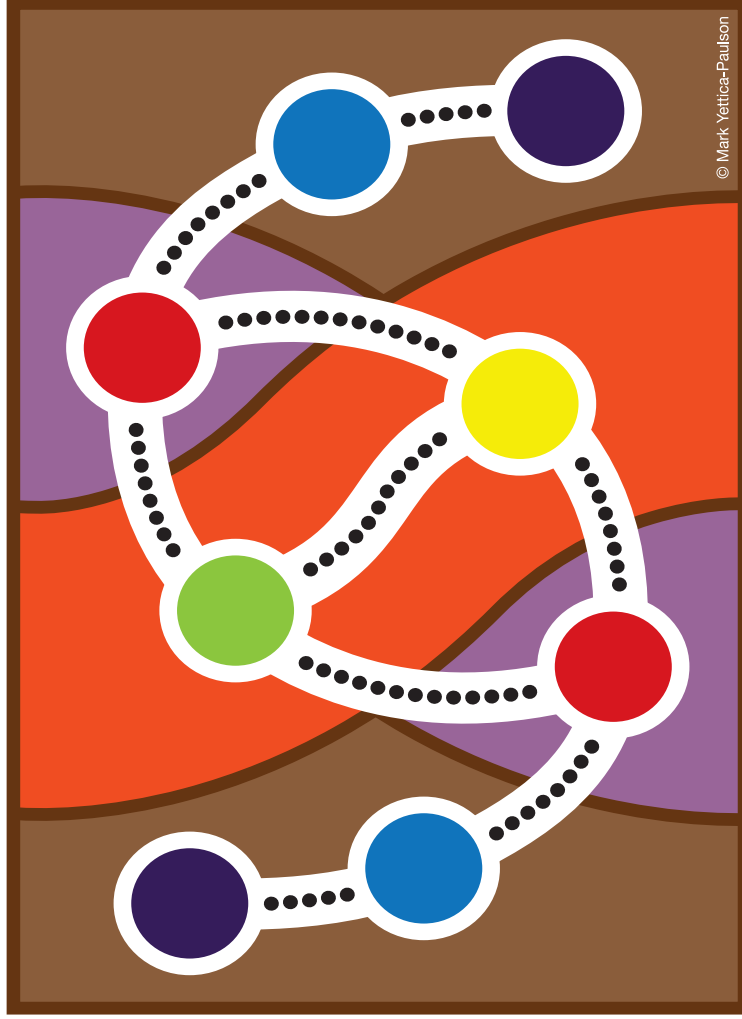
# Appendix 5: Intercultural framework diagram

**Intercultural Framework**  
by Mark Yettica-Paulson  
Chief @ Super Native Unlimited

**The Green Space** is for Innovation in collaboration for cultures. It is where a new way forward is developed. In most cases it will be a hybrid form of existing knowledges, but can also represent a break-through paradigm shift.

**The Deep Purple Space** is for our deep cultural memory. It is where we draw our deep sense of belonging. It is where our mental models of the world, our beliefs and values originate. This is the space where we justify our place in the world and our ways of relating to others.

**The Red Space** is a teaching space. It is where we take on the posture of a teacher or a learner and often both. We either face across the Ochre Riverbed and teach others about our cultural ways or we face towards the Brown Background to teach our own peoples.



**The Light Purple Space** is for culture awareness, signifying an awareness of us and others. It is where we assess the risk/reward and threat/opportunity dynamics of working with others.

**The Ochre Riverbed** is where the cultures meet. It is the common or shared space. It is where pragmatic and innovative collaboration happens.

**The Brown Land Background Space** is the culture that we live in. It is often not obvious because it is our natural lifestyle. We do notice it when it clashes with others or is threatened by others.

**Blue Space** is for cultural practice and participation. It is where we perform activities that strengthen our sense of belonging and deepen our identity. This space is where we actively, and sometimes intentionally, live out our cultural activities either in lifestyle activities, festivals, ceremonies or commemorations.

**The Yellow Space** is for pragmatic collaboration. It is where energy and activity is focused on immediate practical solutions in working side-by-side in collaborations. This space relies on existing knowledge and relationships to work through current barriers to achieve more immediate outcomes.



## Appendix 6: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and the Constitution

The Australian Constitution (created in 1901) was intended to unite Australia under the original and continuing agreement of the Australian people, but the First Peoples of Australia were not included in this agreement.

When the Australian Constitution was being drafted, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were excluded from the discussions concerning the creation of a new nation to be situated on their ancestral lands and territories. The Australian Constitution also expressly discriminated against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Australian Constitution did not – and still does not – make adequate provision for Australia’s First Peoples.

The Australian Constitution has failed to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights as the First Peoples of this country. For example, the Racial Discrimination Act 1875 (Cth) (RDA) was compromised in 2007 when the Constitution did not prevent the suspension of the RDA for the Northern Territory Emergency Response (a package of measures enforced by legislation affecting Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory), which lasted from 2007 to 2012. The measures included restrictions on the consumption of alcohol and pornography (including complete bans on both in some communities), changes to welfare payments, and changes to the delivery and management of education, employment and health services in the NT. Therefore, it was ineffective in protecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from the most basic of all freedoms, the freedom from discrimination.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have consistently fought to have their rights recognised and acknowledged by the Australian Government and the Australian people. Throughout Australia’s history, many Australians have supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in these struggles. It is upon this historical foundation that Australians are now realising the need for constitutional change to help address some of the lack of recognition and the exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in what is commonly considered to be our nation’s birth certificate, the Constitution.

At the federal level, bipartisan support for amending the Australian Constitution in this regard has been maintained since 2007. Bipartisan support was reaffirmed by both major parties as election commitments in the federal election of August 2010.

Adapted from: [humanrights.gov.au](http://humanrights.gov.au)



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