

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE INDIGENOUS VOICE TO PARLIAMENT

Conversations with friends, family, at work, in your faith organisation or sporting club- wherever they occur it's important for ordinary Australians to understand why a YES vote is important and get behind the campaign.

Some questions, objections, even confusion can come up in conversations so here are some ideas about what to say:

1. But I don't know what the Voice means.

It's not final yet but the suggested changes to the Constitution could read:

- 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 Parliament and the Executive Government 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 the composition, functions, powers and procedures of the Voice

The draft question for the referendum is:

"Do you support an alteration to the Constitution that establishes an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice?"

2. But there is not enough detail

That's the point. The referendum decides the principle 'shall there be a Voice' and then if passed the Parliament decides on the who and how. All Constitutional experts agree this is how it's done (remember how the republic referendum was stuffed up by too much detail about how to elect a head of state?)

3. But wont it be telling Parliament what to do, a third arm of government?

No, because it is an advisory body not a decision making body. Governments and Parliament must consult with the Voice about matters affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but do not have to take the advice.

4. If the advice to the executive (Cabinet) isn't taken, wont it be challenged in the High Court?

Constitutional experts are divided on this and some seem to have changed their minds. The very sensible Professor Anne Twomey, a specialist in constitutional law, says a High Court challenge 'maybe a problem' but easy to solve with a process that demonstrates the advice was heard.

5. What's the point, isn't it just symbolic?

It's what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people want. They are sure Governments and Parliament are able to make better decisions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people if they are hearing from their representative Voice.

6. But we are all treated equally, why treat Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people differently by giving them their own Voice to government and parliament?

Because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the First Australians. They have lived here for at least 60000 years. They never agreed to give this land to the English who arrived here. There has not been peace nor a treaty.

They are also the most disadvantaged and imprisoned Australians. Let's make sure we hear their voice when laws are being passed that directly affect them. Let's recognise constitutionally the special part Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people play in the history of this country.

7. But Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people seem divided about what they want

Over two years 13 regional consultations occurred and in 2017 the Uluru Statement from the Heart was endorsed calling for Voice, Treaty and Truth. There is some disagreement about what comes first but 80% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people support the YES campaign.

8. But I still want to see a Treaty in place before a Voice

That's putting the cart before the horse. Getting a treaty will be complicated, and having the Voice will provide the representational structure for the negotiations and the necessity of Parliament and Government to listen to what Aboriginal and TI people want. Remember the Uluru Statement calls for Voice, Makarrata (Treaty) and Truth. We need to speak the Truth about Australian history and the First Australians in order to get the Voice and then the Treaty.

9. But there are already 11 Indigenous people in Parliament- can't they represent their communities?

These members and senators were elected to represent all Australians and they would be criticised if they focused on Indigenous issues. They might also lose their seats at the next election. That's why we need a permanent Voice protected by the Constitution.

10. But remember ATSIC and all the accusations of corruption?

But the Voice won't be funding programs or organisations so there will be no conflict of interest (and frankly with all the recent corruption of Commonwealth and State governments like pork barreling and jobs for the boys, can we point a finger?)

11. But won't this divide the Nation?

A YES vote is supported by all Premiers and First Ministers (Liberal and Labor)

By the Australian Institute of Company Directors representing the Australian Rugby League Commission, Qantas, Rio Tinto, BHP.....

But, most importantly, a YES vote is supported by most Australians.

The Uluru Statement talks about why Indigenous people are not treated equally and here are a few more examples (maybe the numbers need updating):

- Life expectancy is 17 years lower than other Australians
- Unemployment (2006) was three times that of other Australians
- Homelessness (2006) was three times the rate of others
- Indigenous women are 11 times more likely to die from domestic violence than non - Indigenous women
- Indigenous people represent a quarter of the total prison population (2007)

What about finally, if all fails, asking people to consider not voting NO but spoiling their voting paper, to vote informally. They might not agree with the Voice but can they break the hearts of the First Australians like Pat Anderson who says the Voice has the potential to 'heal the torment and our powerlessness'.

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