Moving forward with a voice in our affairs

By SSTUWA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Committee

On Thursday 23 March, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced the wording of what will be proposed in the referendum to change the constitution and recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the First Peoples of Australia.

In doing so, it recognises our country will be stronger, more productive, fairer and strengthened as a nation by establishing a Voice to Parliament on matters pertaining to us.

We implore you to support this proposal and join us with a Yes vote. The referendum invites you to recognise our unique history and connection to the world's oldest living culture and allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be part of the decision making on matters that pertain to us.

Nothing to us, without us

The proposed amendment to the Australian Constitution to recognise First Peoples and support for a voice for the referendum reads as "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?"

This supports the formation of a body that engages the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice to have the ability to make representation to Federal Parliament and the government of the day on matters relating to us. The Parliament subject to the constitution will establish its composition, functions, powers and procedures.

The Prime Minister described why it matters and what it will achieve, stating that it is "common courtesy and decency to ask people before you take a decision that will have an impact on them ... because when you reach out and listen to communities you get better results. It won't take decision making power away from the government or Parliament, but it will help governments and parliaments make better decisions and achieve better outcomes. And we urgently need better

outcomes.”

The Uluru Statement from the Heart was released to the Australian people six years ago, and as the Referendum Working Party stated, this opportunity has been years in the making and represents a big step forward on a long journey of constitutional recognition.

Megan Davies, chair of the Uluru Statement, implores all Australians to unite behind us and walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

The final wording was the result of consultation with the Referendum Working Party and the government and the invitation is extended to all Australian people.

Pat Dodson explains it requires all Australians, “so that we as Australians can arise to a better relationship with our First Peoples”.

As educators we have an important role to ensure we are educating our students and staff in a balanced way.

It is our responsibility to be informed and understand what the referendum is about and what it means for Aboriginal peoples and the kind of relationship with us you want moving forward.

It asks you to understand how past government policies and practices have impacted us intergenerationally in negative ways because we haven’t been part of the decision-making process.

Our voice has been ignored in those arenas, and we are asking you to help us reconcile as a nation and move forward by empowering us to be decision-makers in policies and programs that target us.

We have always known the power of building positive working relationships with Aboriginal people in our schools.

Ensuring that an Aboriginal family’s aspirations are reflected in school directions and students’ achievement have yielded the strongest outcomes. But governments change, and so does the political will.

This is too important to keep changing. As surmised by Thomas Mayo from that referendum working group: “we want this to be above politics, we are tired of having our lives used as a political football.”

Past practices such as ASSPA Committees, School Community Partnership Agreements, Aboriginal Advisory Councils all reflect the journey we have been on in ensuring the voice of our parents is reflected in the priorities and actions of schools and systems, but all have faded away with change of governments.

Enshrining our voice in the constitution is the only way to stop this and ensure we have a voice in our affairs and move forward as a reconciled nation.

We ask our members within the SSTUWA to walk with us and that as educators, we are informed and accept the invitation that is at the heart of the Uluru Statement that specifically calls for a voice enshrined in the Australian Constitution.

This request has come after decades of activism by our people who have fought for a fair go and say in our own communities and in our own affairs.

We urge you to vote Yes.

From the SSTUWA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Committee.

Western Teacher volume 52.3 - April 2023

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