Why the voice is union business

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When we think about what unionism stands for, here are just a few things that come to mind:

- A fair go
- Equity
- Equality
- A fair and just society
- Doing what is right by everyone and for everyone
- Ongoing support
- Collective action for a fair and just society
- Solidarity

So, when we consider the upcoming Voice to Parliament referendum, we know it is union business.

We know that unions have always stood collectively for and fought for equality, for Medicare, for superannuation and recently for better pay.

This is our opportunity to recognise the 65,000-year history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and for a better future.

We know that if we want solidarity to be meaningful, we need to stick up for each other and take action together. And that is what we ask of you.

But what will you be voting for? What exactly is a Voice to Parliament?

The Voice is a simple and practical step to give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, chosen by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, a platform to provide advice and recommendations to the executive government and Australian Parliament on matters that affect them.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are asking us to support a modest change that will make a practical difference so we can move forward together.

The only way to amend the Constitution to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is by enshrining it in the Constitution.

It will bring positive changes to groups. Federal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Minister Linda Burney stated recently that she would ask the Voice to focus on four priority areas: education, housing, health and employment.

What will be added to the Constitution?

Chapter IX Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

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

i. There shall be a body, to be called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

ii. 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.

iii. 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.

SSTUWA for Yes

The SSTUWA June 2022 State Council Conference, our supreme decision-making body, recommended and endorsed that the SSTUWA:

- Expresses its support for action on elements identified in the Uluru Statement from the Heart including a constitutionally enshrined voice to Parliament and a Makarrata Commission of treaty and truth telling.
- Commits to keeping its membership updated and apprised of the progress of this journey, as well as helping members to develop a fuller and deeper understanding of
- this matter.
- Engages with the WA government and Department of Education to ensure appropriate resources are available to staff and students to raise understanding and awareness and build commitment to this momentous and long over-due action in our history.

At June 2023 State Council Conference, we committed to this ongoing support for enshrining a Voice to Parliament.

For your union it means standing in solidarity with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members, colleagues, students, communities and friends.

It is about doing the right thing. I understand that in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities there has been less support, our latest figures show 86 per cent support the vote.

Like any group of people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are not homogenous, and we respect their decisions on the Voice.

But most importantly it means, listening and supporting SSTUWA's Aboriginal and Islander Education Committee, which has stated that:

We ask our members within the SSTUWA to walk with us and 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.

As a union, we believe that all workers and all people deserve to be consulted about changes in the workplace and in society that affect us - and that by speaking up collectively we can make change that benefits us all particularly in our

education communities.

In The Voice to Parliament Handbook, Professor Fiona Stanley highlights how when services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are developed by them with their knowledge and input, we see an effective change.

A great example of this is the initial Covid response: “All colonised, Indigenous populations around the world are at high risk from pandemics such as Covid-19. They are more likely to have chronic disease, live in overcrowded housing and are more susceptible to viral infections. Thus, in Australia we expected very high infections. We had six times fewer cases than non-Indigenous groups, across the whole nation. In 2020 and 2021, there were low rates of hospitalisation, no deaths, no cases in remote communities and no cases after Black Lives Matter marches. This extraordinary and unexpected outcome was due to Indigenous leadership taking control of all activities for prevention, diagnosis and treatment, as well as housing, social and medical support.”

This was a rare instance where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities were listened to. Imagine what other positive impacts could come from a Voice being established in the Constitution.

The proposed constitutional change to establish the Voice arises directly from the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

It is, therefore, an invitation from our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to walk with them for a voice enshrined.

The SSTUWA will be doing so in support of a position originally proposed by our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, not by a political party or political view, thus supporting our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members, communities, colleagues and students in the Yes campaign.

Having said that, all major political parties in WA are supporting the Yes vote, so it’s fair to say that this issue transcends party politics.

We are also the only country in the first world nation with a colonial past, whose constitution does not recognise its first people.

The SSTUWA is encouraging all union branches to use their branch funds to organise an event on Thursday 21 September.

This could be a morning tea gathering to support The Voice to Parliament. We encourage all union reps to hand out stickers and information from our website and support our first nations educators and community for this important year.

So, knowing all of this, why wouldn’t the Voice to Parliament be union business?



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