



6 October 2023

Baptist Leaders for Yes!

A Public Letter of Support for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament

Next Saturday Australians will vote in an historic referendum. This stands as a once in a generation opportunity to implement a meaningful pathway for a fairer, more truthful, and better reconciled relationship between First Nations people and other Australians.

We respect many people will vote “no” in the referendum, but we, the undersigned Baptist leaders from across Australia, believe voting “no” means accepting the status quo, which we have lived with for too long as a nation. We would encourage all people to carefully consider what is at stake as they vote next weekend.

As Baptist leaders, motivated by the compassion of Jesus, we are heartbroken by the ongoing injustice, disadvantage and racism faced by many First Nations people. We are committed to playing our part in supporting genuine and practical reconciliation initiatives in our local communities and across the nation. As followers of Jesus, we see we are called to be bearers of justice, not just in our words but in our actions.

We are alarmed by those who have sought to question First Nations disadvantage in the referendum campaign to support the “No” case. We believe most fair-minded Australians agree that the historic, disadvantaged position of First Nations people in our country is untenable and unacceptable and remains a stain on our national consciousness.

If you feel there needs to be real change, then voting “yes” opens the door to new possibilities for genuine healing and reconciliation across our country. An Indigenous Voice to Parliament won’t suddenly address all the challenges, but it will be a huge step in the right direction. A “no” vote leaves us nowhere!

The call for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament was made in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which concludes with the compassionate invitation:

“We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.”

As leaders from across the Australian Baptist movement we resoundingly say “yes” to this gracious invitation. And with our “yes” to the Uluru Statement from the Heart invitation we look forward to voting “yes” on October 14. In voting “yes”, we as Baptist leaders say:

- ***Yes to constitutional recognition***

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have stewarded the lands that make up the Australian continent for more than 60,000 years. We respect and value the unique cultures, histories, languages and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities and see that their recognition in the Constitution as the *“First Peoples of Australia”* is long overdue.

- ***Yes to humbly listening***

We have been listening to local First Nations people in our communities across Australia. Listening is vital to any form of reconciliation.

While we affirm that not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples support The Voice, four in five Indigenous Australians are asking for our support and Christians represent a larger share of the Indigenous population than the population at large. In voting “yes”, we stand with First Nations sisters and brothers as they graciously invite us to walk with them in fostering genuine reconciliation across our country.

The Scriptures speak of putting the needs of others first. Our First Nations people, including many Indigenous Christian leaders, have spoken clearly about what they see is the best way forward. We humbly stand with them.

- ***Yes to First Nations voices being heard***

For too long many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have felt voiceless. Most have felt that others have made decisions on the key issues that impact their lives. And clearly these solutions, even offered with the best of intent, have failed to deliver. We believe it’s time for First Nations people to have a direct voice to the Federal Government and Parliament on decisions that impact their lives, communities, health, lands, seas, concerns and hopes and dreams.

Sadly, in opposing The Voice, some in the “no” campaign have sought to intentionally mislead, frighten, and confuse the Australian public, fostering an eco-system of misinformation. We see nothing to fear, but so much to gain!

The Indigenous Voice to Parliament will be a representative, advisory body, with no legislative or veto power. Any budget which may be allocated to it will operate within the usual fiscal constraints of all government entities and be accountable for how it uses its budget. It’s fundamentally a consultative body, answerable to the Parliament as well as to those Indigenous people whom it will represent. Decisions on how The Voice will be formally shaped will be made by the elected Parliament, the same group of people we entrust each day to legislate on all other matters that impact our lives.

A group of eminent retired Australian judges wrote recently that there is nothing to fear about the Voice: *“We confidently believe that, by raising the quality of our public debate, the proposed Voice will both enrich our democracy and increase the likelihood of governments making correct decisions about matters that affect Indigenous peoples. The Voice will not, in our opinion, divide our nation. On the contrary, it will heal a wound which presently divides us. Nor will it disrupt government or destabilise the presently stable and appropriate division of power between the parliament, the executive, and the judiciary.”*¹

- ***Yes to a new way forward***

On October 14 we can unite with people from all cultures that are part of the Australian community and vote for a new way forward together. We can usher in a new era in the relationship between First Nations and non-Indigenous people across the nation. Voting no next weekend – for whatever reason – means accepting the status quo. We will remain stuck where we are, 235 years after the arrival of white people on this continent.

¹. <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/The-Voice-Open-Letter-Authorised-WEB.pdf>

We support The Voice being enshrined in the Constitution because throughout our history various Australian governments have established Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory panels only to have them disbanded or defunded by subsequent governments. Mr Dutton says he will establish another version of a government advisory panel if elected, but there is no guarantee such a body will last.

An enshrined Voice in the Constitution means the government of the day cannot dispense with it and will be forced to make it work for the good of our country.

- ***Yes to healing and reconciliation***

Our strong support for The Voice rests on what most First Nations people are asking for, including most Christian Indigenous people. They see constitutional recognition and the implementation of The Voice as a vital step along the path to genuine healing and reconciliation in Australia.

As followers of Jesus and leaders across the Baptist movement we affirm the grace being offered to non-Aboriginal people in this process. We urge you, don't miss seeing this, or responding to it!

The facts are, that those who have been so wronged are offering us a healing and hopeful way forward.

Anglican minister Rev Glenn Loughrey, a Wiradjuri man, refers to the upcoming referendum as a gift to non-indigenous Australians. He writes, *"What is that gift? The absurd compassion of the open hand and walking together to a better future for this nation. The absurd compassion of allowing you to accept the invitation with a yes and then allowing you, through your democratic processes, to shape your yes into legislation fit for purpose.*

As signatories of this public letter, we wholeheartedly accept this wonderful gift. We choose to seize this opportunity to act with grace and generosity. As Baptist leaders we stand with key bodies in our movement, including Australian Baptist Ministries, Baptist Mission Australia and Baptist World Aid that have publicly endorsed their support of the Uluru Statement from the Heart recommendations.

As leaders across the Australian Baptist movement, we choose to listen to and stand alongside First Nations people who continue to experience injustice. We see this is the way of King Jesus, who consistently stood with those on the margins, modelling love, compassion, and the pursuit of justice.

We reject fearmongering, racism, and deliberate attempts to confuse and divide. We choose to embrace positive change, seeing that the status quo is doing little to advance genuine reconciliation across Australia.

We resoundingly say "yes" to the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and an Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

Grace and peace
Baptist Leaders for Yes

Signatories:

Uncle Don Hayward Meadows, SA	Grant Paulson Brisbane, Qld	Melinda Cousins Adelaide, SA
Tim Costello Frankston, Vic	Michael Frost, Balgowlah, NSW	Belinda Groves Kingston, ACT
Todd Darvas Cromer, NSW	Megan Powell du Toit Thornleigh, NSW	Scott Pilgrim Blackburn South, Vic
Bill Brown Mount Waverley, Vic	Anthea Maynard Evandale, Tas	Charlene Delos Santos St Albans Vic
John Olley Canning Vale, WA	Katrina Lambert Ringwood, Vic	Alan Marr Southbank Vic
Will Small Wyoming NSW	Karen Siggins Atwell, WA	Allan Demond Ringwood Vic
Darrell Jackson Mont Albert, Vic	Brian Harris, Harrisdale, WA	Deborah Storie East Doncaster, Vic
Matt Garvin Howrah, Tas	Stephen Bates Parramatta, NSW	Surette Southwood Croydon, Vic
Caryn Chan Croydon North, Vic	Graham Joseph Hill Yanchep, WA	Christine Redwood Seaforth, NSW
Dale Stephenson Vermont, Vic	Scott Higgins Macquarie Hills, NSW	Andrew Duncan Thornleigh, NSW
David Chatelier North Lakes, Qld	Ken R Manley Northcote, Vic	Susan Campbell Ringwood East, Vic
Jodie MacCartney Nunawading Vic	Ken Clendinning Gerringong NSW	Kirsten Long Wyong, NSW
Marbuen Diaz Padstow, NSW	Frank Rees Camberwell, Vic	Christine McPherson Berowra, NSW
Michael Bullard Willetton, WA	Karen Walker St Marys, SA	Ian Altman Wentworth Point, NSW
Gerry Riviere Warranwood, Vic	Emma Ridley Bidwill NSW	Jenny Bawden Blackheath, NSW
Warren Hodge Wodonga, Vic	Ian Carmichael Penguin, Tas	Therese Wilson Indooroopilly, Qld
John Walker St Marys, SA	Elissa Macpherson Ballandean, Qld	Teagan Dwyer-Riviere Hughesdale, Vic
Ben Carbone Largs North, SA	Andy McCulloch Box Hill, Vic	Derek Bradshaw Warrandyte, Vic
Jeff McKinnon Punchbowl, Tas	Susan Skuthorpe Mallabula NSW	Andrew Dodd Warabrook, NSW
Andy Collier Wavell Heights, Old	Cheryl Williams Footscray, Vic	Chris MacCartney Nunawading, Vic
Sarah Baggaley Harrisdale, WA	Nat Stafford Slippy Downs, Old	Vivian Grice Bangor NSW
Josh Dowton Crows Nest, NSW	Sam Hearn Mornington, Vic	Andrew Piper Inverell, NSW
Jason Hoet Clapham SA	Geoff Maddock Melbourne, Vic	Howard Bennett Carlingford, NSW
Jenny Casey Camden South, NSW	Steve Woods Peterhead SA	Ros Gooden Myrtle Park SA

Nicholas Alexander Devenport, Tas	Mark Foley Grange, SA	Thomas Schmid Cronulla NSW
Ross Young Erina, NSW	Gary Heard Bullsbrook, WA	Gareth Hadfield Penrith, NSW
Andrew Hamilton Yanchep, WA	Jono Ingram Aintree Vic	Stephen Bray Revesby, NSW
Eddie Chapman Box Hill Vic	Peter Green Ingleburn, NSW	David Hughes Narara Valley

PS: If you would like more information on why we support a “yes” vote, please email us at baptistleadersYES@gmail.com and we will be back in touch,