

World Interfaith Harmony Week 2023

Bringing Our Multifaith Neighbours Together for Reconciliation: The Voice

Report from The Interfaith Centre of Melbourne

Background to The Voice:

The *Uluru Statement from the Heart* was created by more than 250 Indigenous delegates from around Australia at Uluru on the 26th May 2017. It describes the key challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their communities.

It proposes three structural reforms to address these challenges:

- A Voice to Parliament that is enshrined in the Constitution
- A Makarrata Commission that would lead to a process of Agreement making, or treaties, and Truth-telling about our our nation's history.
- It invites all Australians to walk with Indigenous people *in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.*

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has stated that a Referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament will be held before December 2023.

On Sunday 26 February 2023, over 70 people from diverse faiths and cultures, gathered in the Melbourne Town Hall to hear religious and spiritual leaders speak about the proposed Indigenous Voice to Parliament to be enshrined in the Australian Constitution- if a Referendum is successful later in 2023.

Aunty Helen Bnads, an Elder and Cultural Lead, who works with Indigenous communities and in Community Health, spoke about how many young people do not know their culture, because their parents were moved away from their cultural lands, into missions, stations and reserves. Both young and older First Australians are saying "Yes" we need a Voice, we need to be heard. Aunty Helen said that we, as non-Indigenous people need to do our own research on the history of Australia, to step up to the truth of our history and spread the word for a Voice to Parliament.

Bishop Philip Huggins, Anglican Church of Australia, believes that this is the most significant moment of his whole life and for the Nation. Everything he has learned about reconciliation and healing, is here in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* with the invitation from First Nations Peoples, who have experienced dispossession and suffering, to graciously invite non-Indigenous people to "*walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.*" Bishop Huggins commented on the sheer beauty of the poetry of the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Mohamed Mohideen spoke from the Islamic migrant experience and the importance of the Makarata, *the coming together after a struggle*, that is written in the Uluru Statement from the Heart. He spoke about the aspirations of First Nations Peoples for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future based on justice and self-determination - which every faith based community values. All are equal in the sight of God.

Rabbi Gabi Kaltmann remarked that words spoken from the heart, enter other people's hearts. He questioned why we have been so slow in Australia to give First Nations Peoples a Voice to Parliament? It should have happened years and years ago! He asked all of us to speak to our faith-based groups, and social connections, to educate others about our history and the Voice to Parliament, as it is the moral, just, and religious, thing to do.

Dr Diana Cousens spoke from the Buddhist perspective. She said we have not listened to our Indigenous brothers and sisters for far too long. For 120 years the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs was not an Aboriginal but a white man. In 2019, Ken Wyatt was the first Aboriginal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. We, who are not Aboriginal, cannot fully understand "*the torment of our powerlessness*" that First Nations Peoples experience. Dr Cousens called for the creation of the formal Voice to Parliament and reminded us that the first teaching of Buddhism is "Do no harm" and the more advanced teaching is "Help where possible".

Fr Frank Brennan, Jesuit Priest and lawyer, who has worked with the Indigenous Co-Design Process group for three years, called on all faith leaders to unite urgently in this just proposal for a Voice to Parliament and reminded us that whatever our disagreements, let's work together to resolve them. The Voice deserves cooperation. We do need Parliament to start the process and it is our duty to convince those Australians who are undecided about the Voice, to bring them to "Yes". Then, in the Constitution, we can get a Voice.

In Bishop Philip Huggins words, "If we can say "Yes" it can be a model - we can think of other places on this planet where this is impossible - but so much needed.

Following the Speakers, the audience was invited to ask the speakers questions. A lively and informative session took place.

- Rev Helen Summers, OAM
Founder & Director
The Interfaith Centre of Melbourne