

# NTCOSS

Northern Territory Council of Social Service



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14<sup>th</sup> April 2023

Committee Secretary

Joint Select Committee on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice Referendum

Via email: [jscvr@aph.gov.au](mailto:jscvr@aph.gov.au)

Dear Committee Secretary,

## **Re: Inquiry into the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice Referendum**

The Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) is the peak body for the Northern Territory (NT) Community and Social Services Sector and is a voice for people affected by social and economic disadvantage and inequality. NTCOSS membership is made up of community managed, non-government, not for profit organisations, which work in social and community service delivery, sector development and advocacy. NTCOSS's vision is a fair, inclusive, and sustainable NT.

NTCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice Referendum on the *Constitution Alteration (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice) 2023 Bill* (the Bill). NTCOSS represents over 130 members across the NT, including Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs), and organisations based in regional and remote areas. NTCOSS recognises and acknowledges the voices of our ACCO stakeholders in their submissions to this Inquiry.

While this document uses the term 'Aboriginal', we respectfully acknowledge that Torres Strait Islander peoples are First Nations people living in Australia.

NTCOSS acknowledges that we live and work on what always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land. We pay our respects to Aboriginal cultures and country, and to Elders both past and present. NTCOSS supports makarrata and acknowledges the Voice as a critical steppingstone to truth telling about Australia's colonial history, and creating a foundation to work and walk together to build a future based on equity and freedom. NTCOSS acknowledges the work by many Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people that has led to this critical moment.

NTCOSS supports a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament to enable Aboriginal people to provide advice to the Parliament on policies and projects that impact their lives and communities.

NTCOSS supports the Bill introduced to the Australian Parliament on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2023 and the proposed change to the Constitution:

### ***Chapter IX—Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples***

#### ***129 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice***

*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.*

NTCOSS supports the Yes23 Alliance's submission that:

- We have over 65,000 years of continuous Aboriginal culture in Australia, and it is time that our constitution is updated to recognise the First Australians;
- Legal experts, including former High Court judges have confirmed that a Voice to Parliament is a legally safe way to constitutionally recognise Aboriginal Australians;
- Approximately 80% of Aboriginal Australians support constitutional recognition in the form of a Voice to Parliament; and
- Constitutional recognition through a Voice is a simple and timely proposal.

Further, it is important to note the areas of agreement across the Parliament on the elements of the proposed change to the Constitution:

- Life expectancy and quality of life outcomes for Aboriginal people are not good enough;
- We cannot continue with the same policies and laws to address these issues and expect different outcomes;
- No party or government has consistently and effectively provided solutions for the challenges facing Aboriginal people in Australia;
- Aboriginal people are best placed to understand their own challenges and the solutions that work;
- Both the Labor and Liberal parties have shared a bipartisan commitment to recognising Aboriginal people in the Constitution since 2007, and that bipartisanship remains today; and
- There is cross-Parliamentary commitment on the need for an Aboriginal Voice to Parliament and for practical change on the ground.

The provisions of the Bill are the only proposal that can achieve:

- Meaningful recognition of Aboriginal peoples as the First Peoples of Australia in the Australian Constitution;
- Practical recognition through a Voice to Parliament; and
- The recognition that Aboriginal people have long sought, in the form that they have requested.

The proposed wording of the change to the Constitution is a sound means of achieving the Aboriginal Voice to Parliament.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide feedback.

Yours sincerely,



Sarah Holder

Acting CEO

NT Council of Social Service