



**BERT VAN MANEN MP**  
**FEDERAL MEMBER FOR FORDE**

**Constitution Alteration (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice)**

This is a very important piece of legislation. We have seen, sadly, over the past 235 years since settlement that Indigenous people in this country have been let down in many ways by successive governments, by successive departments and bureaucracies, both at state and federal level, and by boards paid to represent them. They have been let down in areas of life expectancy, health outcomes, education and job opportunities. By most, if not all, statistical measures, our Indigenous communities have never closed the gap. Of this, I think across this chamber there is no doubt and no disagreement.

This legislation is purportedly designed to fix that through two mechanisms: firstly, through constitutional recognition of Indigenous people and their presence here on this great continent long before British settlement; secondly, through the creation of a Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Constitution. Sadly, the details of which, remain a mystery to us all.

It is the second part of this that is proving divisive. We cannot address these issues by dividing Australians on the basis of culture. To paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr's eloquent statement, no Australian should 'be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character'. We cannot address the systemic issues faced by Indigenous communities without acknowledging the amazing diversity of opinion, culture, background and life experience that exists in Indigenous communities right across this great nation.

In relation to the first part of the question, I firmly believe, as does, I think, everybody who has contributed to this debate, that Indigenous recognition in the Constitution is both necessary and well overdue. I think if this was the first part of question was a separate question that we were addressing, we would see an outcome even greater than the 1967 referendum. If we want to look for examples, the Queensland, South Australian, Victorian and Western Australian governments have been able to include such recognition in their own constitutions. Therefore, there is no reason why this should not occur at a federal level.

In relation to the second part of the question though, the coalition believes this is best achieved through legislation. It has been pointed out previously that this could be done here and now, and importantly this would deliver local and regional voices. These should be the direct voices of their respective communities, built from the grassroots up. What may impact Indigenous communities in the APY Lands or on Cape York may bear no relationship to the issues faced by Indigenous communities in an urban setting or in areas like my electorate of Forde.

It is important to note that there are already a multitude of organisations supposedly trying to fix the issues in Indigenous communities, but I think it's fair to say that they have demonstrably failed to deliver for those Indigenous communities. If we go down the path of a voice, these organisations as well, in my view, must be restructured, reformatted and refocused on solving the genuine problems facing local Indigenous communities right across this country. It is because these local communities themselves are best placed to know what they need and when they need it.

It is these local communities in the electorate of Forde that I would like to highlight. There is so much Indigenous heritage to celebrate my communities. The traditional custodians of the land between the Logan River and Tweed Rivers are the Yugambeh people, and to the north of the Logan River is the Yuggera people. These lands include that of the Logan district, now the City of Logan, a large portion of which falls within my electorate of Forde, and the northern Gold Coast.

The early history and creation of the Logan districts itself is much like the broader Australian story over the last two centuries. Relations between the settlers, law enforcement and the Yugambeh people was, as Griffith University states, 'at times volatile, while at others relatively peaceful and respectful'. And I know from stories I have heard that there is an acknowledgement among the settlers' diary records that if it wasn't for the assistance of the Indigenous communities in their first couple of summers of settlement they would not have survived. But we also have to acknowledge the moments when things weren't so good, such as the activities of the native police in attempting to disperse Indigenous peoples from the lands on which they had lived for generations past. However, we should also acknowledge and celebrate those, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who have worked to bridge the gap between the Yugambeh people and the settlers. We've recently seen through

the Yugambah Museum the Yugambah language being revived by their extraordinary work, and it is now being taught in our local schools.

I'm also proud to have worked with and continue to work closely with some wonderful local Indigenous groups. For over a quarter of a century the Jimbelunga Nursing Centre in Eagleby has provided and continues to provide high standards of care, safety and service for the aged and elderly in our communities, to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service in Brisbane has worked tirelessly in our community for many years. And the Beenleigh Housing Development Company is an organisation that strives to support, enhance and transform the lives of its members in a culturally supportive and regenerative way. The previous coalition government was one of its biggest supporters, having provided a \$750,000 funding grant over three years for it to continue to run its programs. Its aim is to provide shelter for the community that provides nourishment and protection through the concept of the Jinndi Mibunn, or the eagle's nest. The pilot Family Jarjum Jinndi project is a key goal of the organisation that would see the establishment, construction and running of a housing hub for the local Indigenous community. The Forde electorate, and the Indigenous community within it, fully demonstrates so clearly the benefit of working together towards a single goal of bringing real change to the lives of Indigenous people.

I've heard those opposite comment during this debate that we should be listening. The remarks I've just made on the successes of our local Indigenous community show that we are listening. I can share with this House that the views I hear when I am out and about speaking to a variety of constituents across my electorate are much like those shared by the member for Bradfield in his earlier comments. There are those who fully support the Voice and the present proposal, there are those who do not and there are those in the middle who want more information and are undecided.

As noted earlier, it's important that any actions we take in the space do not divide us. All Australians want to see real change, a real closing of the gap for all of our Indigenous communities. This change cannot happen by creating citizens with different rights. How can something that is built on a premise that is divisive be expected to deliver positive change? With this proposal we are left with so many unanswered questions. What happens if the proposed model does not work as expected? Will we be required to hold another referendum to repeal fundamental errors? How and why should Indigenous people trust the

government to deliver meaningful change to their communities when, since the last election, it has already gone back on so many of its promises to the Australian public? How can the Voice be held to account to make sure it does not overlook the needs of remote communities? No government should ever provide so little detail on such an important and permanent decision and then seek that you trust everything will work itself out once the decision is made. Australians deserve all the details before they vote on a permanent change to our Constitution.

As others on this side have noted, the coalition supports the passage of this bill and, importantly, Australians having their say. That's why I'm supporting the passage of this bill, allowing every Australian to vote on the proposed question and on whether it should be adopted and enshrined in our Constitution. I urge each and every person in this country to think carefully before casting their vote. Do not feel pressured to vote a certain way because a corporation or organisation is telling you that you should. If the proposal is not completely satisfactory to you, do not feel that you have to vote for it at all in order to attain parts of it. Good policy married with poor policy will not necessarily equate to a good outcome.

The question for me remains: on a vote as significant as this, are the risks worth taking? Guilt-tripping the Australian public into voting for the poorly detailed policy that is the Voice, as distinct from constitutional recognition—those two should be separated—in my view is not a risk worth taking. Establishing a local and regional voice, along with restructuring Indigenous organisations, for the betterment of Indigenous people could be done right now in this place via legislation. We would then have genuine information and detail to discuss the specifics of the policy—an aspect of this debate which, to date, has been sadly lacking.

I will continue to support the call for Indigenous recognition in the Constitution. Constitutional recognition would be a significant step forward for Indigenous Australians and, in my view, would mark the completion of our Constitution.