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Submission to the Joint Select Committee inquiring into the Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Voice Referendum Constitution Alteration
(Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice) 2023

**Prepared by The Snow Foundation
April 2023**

Dear Joint Select Committee,

The Snow Foundation supports the proposed wording, contents and chapter amendments to the Constitution and believes the amendments deliver on the call for constitutional recognition in the Uluru Statement from the Heart invitation.

We believe that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia should be consulted with and have an ongoing, facilitated role to contribute to improving their own future. Recognition and The Voice added to our constitution will provide Australia the opportunity to be richer and more complete as a result.

Who we are

The Snow Foundation was founded by brothers Terry and George Snow in 1991. Our purpose is to create opportunities and strengthen resilience for a more caring and inclusive community where everyone can thrive. Geographically, Canberra is our main place, along with key regions (South Coast and Sydney) where we listen and respond to the communities' needs across a range of cause areas. Our national support is focused on social justice issues and supporting social entrepreneurs.

Over the past 10 years, we have become drivers behind key social issues at a national scale, like Indigenous health (crusted scabies, rheumatic heart disease), marriage equality and economic justice.

Support for the proposed Constitutional changes

The Snow Foundation supports the proposed wording changes and amendments to the Constitution. We acknowledge the work undertaken to date to consult and debate approaches including through the Constitutional Expert Group, the Referendum Working Group and the Referendum Engagement Group. The proposed changes deliver on the mandate of the Uluru Statement from the Heart.



The Snow Foundation is highly cognisant of the extensive and considered consultation of the Indigenous community undertaken through the Uluru Dialogues and work of others, and also acknowledge the work of leaders in Government and Community over the past few decades to move to constitutional recognition. We acknowledge and understand constitutional recognition through an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice is the form of recognition *chosen* by the Indigenous community, and that constitutional recognition was the mandate of the Referendum Council set up in 2015 by the then Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull and Shadow Minister Bill Shorten. We strongly support this self-determined position. We acknowledge it is the result of over twelve years of work, with seven processes and ten reports.

The final amendment and referendum question are fit for purpose. The significant number of experts and time involved in proposing, considering and debating these changes is important to recognise and continue to highlight to the Australian community and the Parliament. Legal Experts including former High Court judges have confirmed that a Voice to Parliament is a legally safe way to constitutionally recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Australians.

To deliver meaningful change, it is useful for The Voice to speak to both the executive and parliament. Considered consultation starts from the beginning with ideas forming in the executive government before motions and bills are proposed to parliament. The constitutional wording changes formalise, and enhance, executive government consultation steps already occurring and allow the parliament to make informed decisions.

An example of First Nations leadership and self determination success

To date, The Snow Foundation has committed around \$7M to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, education and support programs. We have seen time and again, that community-led programs, where those who are affected are leading the solutions to their own problems continue to be successful.

Maningrida is an excellent example of how Aboriginal leadership and community-led solutions are successfully tackling some of the highest rates of rheumatic heart disease (RHD) in the world. Traditional owners, doctors, the school, the health clinic and Malal'a Health Services continue to work together to educate children and families about RHD using educational materials in traditional language and local metaphors. In 2018, following an extensive and ongoing educational program across the community, paediatric cardiologists, Aboriginal health workers and nurses were invited to conduct heart screening. They screened 620 children's hearts, diagnosing 32 children with RHD (two-thirds had never been diagnosed before) and three children required emergency open heart surgery. Four years on, the children are being treated regularly and on their way to healthy hearts.

Following this success and demand from other communities, the [Deadly Heart Trek](#) was formed. The Deadly Heart Trek team are a group comprised of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and guides, experienced doctors, local health workers who visit and work with local communities across Australia educating and screening children's hearts to diagnose, treat and prevent RHD. The Snow Foundation initially funded and helped develop this program of work, in collaboration with others, all motivated to end rheumatic heart disease in Australia.

This important work by the Deadly Heart Trek team has Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership at the centre of everything, from the start to the end. This has led to better outcomes with more children and families educated, more heart screenings, and more healthy hearts. The Deadly Heart Trek embraces community-led solutions and so far, has



extended it's work to regions in the Northern Territory, Far North Queensland and most recently Central Australia and APY Lands communities. Aboriginal Leadership and consultation with a wide range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders has been key to this success. Multi-disciplined teams have worked with community schools, clinics, traditional owners and families to educate and provide heart screenings and skin checks to more than 2500 children, for rheumatic heart disease and related skin diseases in remote communities.

Conclusion

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lived in Australia for over 60,000 years. In the past 250 years many decisions that directly impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders people have been made without consultation, and they have impacted negatively. This needs to change. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be consulted with and have a Voice at the table from the beginning.

The 122 year old Constitution was never designed to be a static document and it should have included First Nations peoples from the start. There is widespread support and growing understanding for a First Nations Voice protected in the Constitution. We thank the Joint Select Committee for their work and the opportunity to comment on these proposed historical changes. We support the proposed constitutional wording changes and we are looking forward to the opportunity to vote in the proposed referendum so that *all* Australians can be proud of our history.

Finally, we recommend extensive and immediate civics and referendum education for all Australians, so all Australians can engage in these important proposed changes.