



Referendum Council

MEDIA RELEASE

7 April 2017

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM: SPEAKING THE SAME LANGUAGE

Delegates at the First Nations Regional Dialogue in Ross River may have conversed in a number of different traditional languages over the three days, but they spoke as one on the need for substantive constitutional reform.

The Dialogue, held from 31 March – 2 April 2017, was attended by around 100 local Centralians and was interpreted into three languages. The Central Land Council, Referendum Council and the Alice Springs Interpreter Service worked together to ensure that the information was provided in language.

The Dialogue discussed, among many things, the unique nature of the Aboriginal communities who live in Central Australia, including Aboriginal language survival and maintenance and Aboriginal law.

They also spoke of the powerlessness suffered by communities since ATSIC was abolished, reform of the Northern Territory local government, and the Indigenous Advancement Strategy.

The lack of community control and the absence of self-determination was prominent in discussions, as was the Northern Territory intervention.

Delegates raised the complexity of Territory constitutional arrangements. This included a frank assessment that the mainstream conversation about ‘recognition’ has a tendency to be reductionist and generalise the experiences of First Nations people across the country.

The slogan “Racism Out, Recognition In”, essentialises Aboriginal people and their legal situation to imply that amending the race power by deleting the word ‘race’ or inserting section 51A will be of benefit to all Aboriginal people.

The Dialogue noted that the broad plenary Territories power means tinkering with the race power will not be result in any significant change for the region.

The option of a guarantee against racial discrimination by the Federal Parliament was regarded as one approach to addressing this challenge in a substantive and meaningful way.

The other option that is likely to have an impact is a representative voice to the Parliament that could consider law and policies. This model would be more legitimate than a parliamentary scrutiny body, for example, because it would be representative.

The Dialogue heard that a voice to the Parliament would need to be a land-based representative body so that the representatives are drawn from the micro unit of land ownership across Australia which represents Aboriginal culture.

The First Nations Regional Dialogue in Ross River is one of a series of 12 being held around Australia. The Dialogues culminate in a National Convention in Uluru in May.

In addition to the Dialogues, the Referendum Council is holding a nationwide consultation on constitutional reform and is seeking views from all Australians.

To get the full picture and join the conversation visit www.referendumcouncil.org.au. The consultation closes in early May 2017.

Following the consultation, the Council will report to the Government and the Opposition on the public's preferences regarding constitutional reform.

About the Referendum Council

The Referendum Council was jointly appointed by the Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Leader of the Opposition, Bill Shorten on 7 December 2015.

The Referendum Council's job is to advise the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition on progress and next steps towards constitutional reform.

The Regional Dialogues are designed to ensure the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are heard through this process.

A discussion paper has been released that outlines the main questions for Australians to consider.

All submissions and comments are welcome and can be provided through www.referendumcouncil.org.au

Media contact: Kristen Connell, 0400 054 227