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## The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council

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**It is fitting that during this special time, National Reconciliation Week - where Australians are called to come together - our first nation people have come together and called for unity in forging a future for the future of our children. The Uluru Statement from the Heart was the result of 3 days of strong deliberation in the heart of Australia – on the future of Australia.**

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) stands in solidarity with the Uluru delegation by echoing calls for substantial Constitutional reform based on a foundation of spirituality and subsidiarity. We seek constitutional reforms that will empower our people and allow us to take our rightful place in Australia.

From our own consultations, and those of the Government appointed Referendum Council, it is clear the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will not simply accept symbolic Constitutional acknowledgement without associated meaningful structural changes. The importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement in decision making processes has been a recurring theme in all States and Territory consultations.

The Uluru Statement is a strong representation of the sentiment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people nationally and must be considered in parallel with the findings of Pat Dodson's expert panel on constitutional reform. Both approaches have value and should be considered on their merits and, most importantly, the impact they will have on the wellbeing and empowerment of Australia's First people.

NATSICC is heartened by the underlying message of the Uluru statement which espouses the empowerment of our people as a key fundamental and imperative to the creation of a fair and truthful relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and non Indigenous Australians. We echoed this sentiment in our submission to the Referendum Council in May 2017, where our Council proposed that the Principle of Subsidiarity should form the foundation of future discussions and planning on Constitutional Recognition. Subsidiarity would dictate that along with major, meaningful changes to the Constitution, substantial reform to the processes in which consultation and delivery of programs for our people would need to take place.

The formation of a national voice, 'enshrined in the Constitution' optimises the concepts of empowerment, self-determination and subsidiarity. Further discussions about the form of this representation needs to continue however Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are unique and constantly changing and a system of representation needs to reflect this. It needs to be agile enough to deal with localised issues but have the mandate to address national, endemic matters. It is imperative that the reforms give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the confidence, resources and trust to take our future in our hands and a First Nations body may provide such a vehicle.

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The Uluru Statement provides an insightful comment on the notion of Sovereignty where it is described as a spiritual notion, seeped in, and at the very core of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality and life. The Western concept of Sovereignty is tied in strongly with ownership, which has proven to heighten apprehension and fear in non Indigenous Australia. Mutual understanding of the concept of Sovereignty is essential to fruitful negotiations on Treaty and Constitutional reform.

Key points:

- NATSICC applauds the statement's call for empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in decision making processes
- NATSICC joins a united national voice calling for meaningful and substantive change to the Constitution and the establishment of a First Nations voice
- NATSICC champions the Principle of Subsidiarity as a cornerstone framework of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy development and Constitutional reform
- The Statement does not discount Constitutional Recognition – however it calls for more substantial changes. It is not a case of one approach over another, it is what is best for Australia now and in the future.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are living amongst the connotations of colonisation and the resulting ripples continue to manifest themselves in our poor health, education and living standards. For over 60,000 years our connection with our creator and the land empowered us to shape our lives and flourish amongst even the most arduous conditions. It is now time that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non Indigenous people come together to right the wrongs of the past and build a new relationship built on a foundation of understanding, compassion and respect.

