



Don't vote No without finding answers to your questions

By Archbishop Geoff Smith

Recently I spent a few days in Napier, New Zealand as a guest at the biennial Maori Anglican synod. I was received very warmly and enjoyed the very bilingual environment. An extras bonus was being at a synod that I wasn't chairing!

In the course of the synod I had many conversations with people and lots of them included the referendum on October 14. There was universal surprise at the degree of concern being expressed by some in Australia about what is a very modest proposal-A Voice to Parliament in the Constitution. People in New Zealand couldn't see what the fuss is about.

And I must say, I feel the same.

Back in April this year [I wrote an article for the *Adelaide Guardian*](#) setting out the reasons why I would be voting 'yes' in the referendum on the Voice. Six months later I am still intending to vote 'yes' on 14 October.

For me the reasons for a yes vote are even clearer now than in April before a date for the referendum had been set.

Recent media has highlighted the reality that some aboriginal people are going to vote 'no'. That should not be a surprise in a society where people are free to express their views. The other part of the story is that, as I understand it, 80% of indigenous people intend to vote 'yes'.

Australia is a divided nation. There is division in terms of incarceration rates with the incarceration rate of indigenous Australians being way higher than non-indigenous. There is division in terms of life expectancy with indigenous life expectancy much lower for indigenous people. There is division in terms of health outcomes with those of indigenous Australians be much poorer than for non-indigenous.

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A Voice to parliament fixed in the Australian Constitution will in itself not be the solution to this unacceptable situation. But a 'yes' result on October 14 will say to Indigenous Australians that the Australian community is ready to listen to its first peoples. It will say that we are so committed to hearing the opinion of our first nations people that a mechanism for doing that is enshrined in the Constitution.

Having a Voice to Parliament in the Constitution will be a powerful 'yes' to the first peoples of Australia. A yes to their place as the first people of this land. A yes to the value of their views and opinions. A yes to their capacity to be part of the solution to the challenges many face.

Over the past one hundred years there have been a number of legislated mechanisms for indigenous Australians to make their views known, but each one has either fizzled or been discarded by one government or another. That's why we need a Voice to Parliament in the Constitution so the voice of first Australians is not subject to the political whims of whichever party is in government.

I fully realise there is a variety of opinion about the Voice to Parliament but I think it would be a tragedy for Australia to say 'No'. I can see no harm in what is proposed. In fact I see a lot of good. A 'no' vote will be a tragic rejection of a request that didn't emerge only in 2017, but has been an ongoing request of indigenous Australians for more than one hundred years.

In a few weeks time we will meet for our Synod and I will begin my address to synod in exactly the same way as I have on every occasion since my first synod as Archbishop in 2017. I will acknowledge that the synod meets on the land of the Kurna people and I will say again that we are committed to reconciliation with the first peoples of this land.

From a Christian perspective we pray for, look forward to and work towards the coming of the kingdom or reign of God. Whatever can bring reconciliation, wholeness and healing to people and communities is a kingdom work. I think the Voice to Parliament has at least a part to play in this project.

The referendum on October 14 presents us with an important opportunity. I will be voting yes, and I hope very much the referendum is passed. I think its only fair that the first people of this land have a constitutionally protected Voice to Parliament. If you have questions about the Voice, don't vote 'no', find the answers to the questions. There is lots of information available.

Please keep the referendum and the Indigenous people of Australia in your prayers at this very important time. Please encourage people to find the answers to the questions they have.

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