

## Preparing to Vote on the Voice

Fr Frank Brennan SJ

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What are Catholics to think about the proposed referendum on the Voice? During the first year of his pontificate, Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* said:

‘An authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it. We love this magnificent planet on which God has put us, and we love the human family which dwells here, with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses. The earth is our common home and all of us are brothers and sisters.’

Pope Francis then quoted with approval his predecessor Pope Benedict who wrote in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* that ‘the just ordering of society and of the state is a central responsibility of politics’, and that the Church ‘cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice’.

Pope Francis added this observation: ‘All Christians, their pastors included, are called to show concern for the building of a better world. This is essential, for the Church’s social thought is primarily positive: it offers proposals, it works for change and in this sense it constantly points to the hope born of the loving heart of Jesus Christ.’

Our recent Australian Plenary Council endorsed the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* and encouraged ‘engagement with processes for implementing the statement, including local, regional, and national truth-telling efforts.’

I suggest ten steps for Catholics inspired by our Catholic social teaching when approaching the forthcoming referendum. I couch these suggestions in terms appropriate for those of us who are not Indigenous. We are all invited into constructive dialogue. We must strive to listen to community leaders who know what is good for their communities just as those of us who are not Indigenous know what is good for ourselves and our loved ones.

1. Be attentive to the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Stop telling them what is good for them. Start listening to them. Accept that they know what is good for them, just as we know what is good for us and our loved ones.

2. Don’t expect all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to agree about legal, political and constitutional questions. It’s called living in a democracy.

3. Form respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and engage in respectful conversations with those who are your friends.

4. Having heard a range of Indigenous voices, make your own decisions about what Aboriginal aspirations are morally justified. What would be right and proper for Australia in the 21st century? For example, the Commonwealth Parliament has power to make special laws about First Nations people. Many Aboriginal people now say, 'No special laws without us!'

5. Know your history; know the Aboriginal history. The Australian Constitution does not even mention Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders. They belong in the Constitution. Their belonging should be explicit and particular.

6. The Constitution belongs to all the people. It cannot be amended except with an overwhelming majority of the people. Educate yourselves about the Aboriginal aspirations at Uluru and be ready to discuss those aspirations at the family meal, the workplace BBQ or the local club.

7. Do something to get this issue of constitutional recognition on the right track. Speak to your local member. Ask that the parliament set up a process so everyone can have their say and so that the major political parties can own whatever is proposed. This is not just a matter for Indigenous leaders. It is not just a matter for the government. It involves all of us.

8. Having decided which Aboriginal aspirations are justified, you then need to make a wise decision about which of those aspirations are politically achievable. Don't be afraid to talk to people with varying views when making that decision.

9. Having decided which Aboriginal aspirations are not only justified but achievable, you then need to decide to act. You need to put some skin in the game. You need to decide what concrete and just actions you will take. It's not enough just to vote when the referendum comes around. You need to get on board urging the parliament to put the right proposition to the vote, and helping your fellow citizens make an informed choice.

10. Be respectful and attentive to those who disagree with you, but don't be afraid to demand that they be respectful and attentive to you. Any national Voice worth its salt will have an elaborate system of local and regional ears to hear the local and regional voices which are needed to give credibility to any national Voice. That will be complex. There will be plenty of room for disagreement.

Whatever the politics of this referendum, we all need to take to heart Noel Pearson's chilling observation about his people: 'We are a much unloved people. We are perhaps the ethnic group Australians feel least connected to. We are not popular and we are not personally known to many Australians. Few have met us and a small minority count us as friends.'

Fr Frank Brennan SJ was a member of the Langton/Calma Committee on the Voice. His book, *An Indigenous Voice to Parliament: Considering a constitutional bridge*, Garratt Publishing, 2023 is available at <https://www.garrattpublishing.com.au/product/9781922484659/>