

# Let's work for shared future

**DONNA AH CHEE**

VOICE. Treaty. Truth. This is the theme for NAIDOC Week 2019, and the words have never been more relevant; especially in Central Australia.

The movement for constitutional recognition culminated in 2017 in a National Constitutional Convention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at Uluru. From this convention rose the Uluru Statement from the Heart. Put simply, this statement sums up where Aboriginal people see ourselves standing now and what we believe needs to be done to move forward for social justice.

### Voice, Treaty, Truth

As Professor Megan Davis recently wrote "The Uluru Statement from the Heart was tactically issued to the Australian people, not Australian politicians.

"It is the people who can unlock the Australian Constitution for Aboriginal people, as they did in 1967, and the descendants of the ancient polities can unlock what is sorely lacking in this country, a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood."

Co-chair of the Referendum Council, Alywarre woman Pat Anderson said powerfully: "We need real change, because we, First Peoples, have something unique to offer this country.

"Our peoples have been here 65,000 years or more. Over these immeasurable periods we have developed a profound wisdom about this land and about what it means practically and spiritually to live here.

"We know this place. This is our place, and there is no doubt about it."

Despite the enormity of the demands that Aboriginal people could make as peoples who never ceded sovereignty over the lands on which we now all

**A genuine commitment to "Closing the Gap" must include the establishment of a national representative body**

**CONGRESS CEO  
DONNA AH CHEE**

live, our major demand is simply the right to be consulted about the legislation, policies and programs that are meant to help us.

"The experience that Aboriginal people have had having been on the 'underside' of Australian history places us in a unique position from which to consider the laws and policies before parliament and make suggestions for improvements that could make Australia a better place for all of us.

"Having a constitutionally enshrined Voice in parliament would mean that the people who have actually experienced real poverty and hardship would finally be able to use this lens to consider the laws and policy decisions proposed in parliament."

Just this week we heard from Kerry O'Brien on being inducted into the Logies Hall of Fame for his outstanding contribution to journalism, that "the failure to reconcile Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia remained one big glaring gap in this nation's story".

While lamenting the "awful racism this country is capable of", he said that the Uluru Statement — which endorsed a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous representative body — offered hope for the future.

Why is this seen by so many



Central Australian Aboriginal Congress Chief Executive Officer Donna Ah Chee. Picture: EMMA MURRAY

to be so important?

Relative to their numbers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are politically marginalised in Australia.

The 70 years following Federation saw not a single First Nations representative elected to any Australian parliament, only changing in 1971 when Neville Bonner entered the Australian Senate.

Since then only 38 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been elected to any of the State, Territory or Federal parliaments, 22 of these being in the Northern Territory.

Even today, the unprecedented four Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people we have seated in our national parliament only reflects 1.8 per cent of all representatives.

A small number already, made even smaller when compared to the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 3 per cent of

the Australian population, a number that is rising.

The systemic under-representation of Aboriginal people is mirrored in senior decision-making roles within public services across Australia.

It is a powerful contributor to the lack of an accountable, informed, and sustained approach to Aboriginal issues, and the limited success in reaching the Closing the Gap targets.

Since the now famous Whitehall studies of the 1970s, "the control factor" has been recognised as an important contributor to patterns of disease.

The evidence shows that the less control people have over their lives and environment, the more likely they are to suffer ill health. Powerlessness is an identified risk factor for disease for Aboriginal Australians.

Aboriginal peoples' lack of

control of their lives is expressed at a national, systemic level through the absence of a national political representative institution; at a community level through their marginalisation from decision-making about programs that affect their own communities; and at an individual level through their experience of racism.

You only have to look at the poor implementation record of inquiry after inquiry into issues surrounding the health and wellbeing of the nation's First Peoples for evidence of the absence of any real political influence.

Over the past three decades we have seen (most significantly) the National Aboriginal Health Strategy (1989), the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) and the Bringing Them Home report (1997).

They are among numerous other Royal Commissions and

parliamentary inquiries into issues surrounding Aboriginal disadvantage resulting in recommendations that have not been fully implemented.

I often think there needs to be a Royal Commission into the failure to implement so many Royal Commissions.

A genuine commitment to "Closing the Gap" must include the establishment of a national representative body for Australia's First Nations, as was recommended by the Referendum Council after extensive consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia.

This must come alongside a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making and truth-telling between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Such changes, foreshadowed in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, have the support of the overwhelming majority of Aboriginal people and would provide the basis for substantive change in Aboriginal lives, as opposed to mere symbolic recognition.

This NAIDOC Week we need to lift our gaze and consider the bigger picture reforms required to take the next step forward.

A Voice to parliament; agreements or treaties; and a process to enable systematic truth telling. All of this is achievable, and requires deep listening from the Australian community and a commitment to action if we are to all move forward together as a single, unified nation.

Donna Ah Chee is the CEO of Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress), an Aboriginal community-controlled primary health care service employing over 400 staff to deliver integrated services to Alice Springs and six nearby remote communities.

## WE'RE FOR NAIDOC

The Centralian Advocate is a proud supporter of all Alice Springs residents who are involved in the NAIDOC week celebrations from 7<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> July 2019.

**CENTRALIAN**  
**Advocate**  
WE'RE FOR ALICE

