



Secretariat National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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**Statement by SNAICC Chairperson Dawn Wallam**

### **Panel's recommendations on constitutional reform an exciting opportunity for Australia**

All Australians have cause to celebrate if the recommendations made by the expert panel to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Constitution are approved at a referendum.

They should be excited by the prospect of bringing Australia's founding political and legal document into the 21<sup>st</sup> century to reflect contemporary values — and to remove, as the panel observes, “outdated notions of race”.

The proposed reforms represent an important opportunity to formally recognise the unique status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and include them — belatedly — in the fabric of this nation.

I am especially proud that, should this referendum succeed, the next generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will be born into a society that welcomes and honours their presence as First Peoples and full citizens.

There is no better way to 'grow them up strong' than as people who are acknowledged and can be proud of their history and achievements. On this base we can work to overcome the hurdles and hurts of the past.

The recommendations offer an opportunity to reset the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, government and the wider community.

The panel has recommended repealing sections 25 and 51 (xxvi), the so-called 'race' provisions, in the Constitution. It goes further, by suggesting a new section to prohibit all discrimination on the grounds of race, colour or ethnic or national origin.

It has called for new powers to be inserted to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, and to make positive laws with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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The panel's suggested changes would also recognise the prior occupation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their continuing relationship with their traditional lands and waters, and their languages as being the original Australian languages.

However, SNAICC is disappointed that the expert panel has not included among its recommendations the recognition of self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In our submission to the panel, we emphasised that self-determination is recognised as a fundamental right in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

SNAICC believes that, based on all available evidence, self-determination can ensure vastly better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by sustaining and strengthening our culture, our languages, our social and economic wellbeing and our ongoing connection to our traditional lands.

SNAICC shares the panel's confidence that the constitutional changes it has recommended "are capable gaining the overwhelming public support needed to succeed at a referendum."

We are encouraged that constitutional recognition so far has multiparty support. We also hope that our political leaders will continue to respond to this fundamental issue in a manner that transcends party politics.

Timing of the referendum is also crucially important. SNAICC urges for consideration of a referendum to be held separately from a Federal election.

This is a defining moment in the shared history of Australia that deserves every opportunity for success. It must not be allowed to be lost in the frays of politics.

To view SNAICC's submission to the expert panel (September 2011), go to: [www.snaicc.asn.au/policy-advocacy](http://www.snaicc.asn.au/policy-advocacy) and click SNAICC Publications

Available for media: Frank Hytten, SNAICC CEO, on (0432) 345 652

For more information: Emma Sydenham, SNAICC Policy and Research Manager on (0415) 188 990