

Looking Behind the Spin  
on  
“THE VOICE”



a  
Discussion Paper of Alternative  
Ways to Advance the Lives of First Nations People

## BACKGROUND

Haven't you heard more than enough about The Voice?

Your answer to this question would probably be - in terms of quantity - yes. Everyday we are bombarded with news and commentary to the point where many Australian have "tuned out" to avoid being overwhelmed, confused, angered – or bored.

The quality of that commentary has, however, been far from ideal. It's been characterised by simplistic arguments and the marketing of partial and half-truths that attempt to sway voters one way or the other.

Neither side has chosen to come clean in explaining why The Voice is – or isn't – the best way to improve the lives of our First Nations People.

This essay attempts to probe beyond this familiar 'tip-of-the-iceberg' coverage to explore the deeper and complex issues relevant to finding the best way to achieve the fairness and harmony the Nation seeks.

My motivations?

- I wrote believing our First Nations People (FNP) should enjoy the same opportunities and life experiences that non-indigenous Australians enjoy.

and,

- because I believe those goals should be achieved as soon as possible to prevent future generations of FNP (First Nations People) suffering as they have in the past – and still do in many (especially remote) communities.

- I respect the right of every citizen to vote Yes or No as their reasoning and conscience dictate. I'm not attempting to sway readers one way or the other nor to judge your choice.

Tim Lenehan  
Ballalaba, NSW

*– “Ongoing welfare dependency undermines and hollows out a culture from within by eroding traditional leadership, cultural and gender roles and the work mores that empower a people to shape their own destiny, their way.*

*Generational welfare dependency is a cultural cancer. Unless it is cut-out, it inevitably proves terminal to the culture that becomes dependent on it” –*

## CONTENTS

- 1• Balancing the reasons for voting Yes or No.
- 2• A dearth or abundance of Voices.
- 3• Alternative routes to achieving FNP goals.

*–“No culture can remain forever fixed in time – and survive.  
Change is a prerequisite for cultural survival”–*

**• 1: Balancing the reasons for voting Yes or No**

No reasonable Australian wants to see our First Nations People denied the life experiences, opportunities and privileges the rest of us enjoy.

No reasonable Australian wants to see the descendants of Indigenous Australians continue to suffer because of unhealed, ongoing wounds inflicted as a consequence of British settlement.

No reasonable Australian would morally object to the proposition that it's our national responsibility to address these problems, problems which we pay lip service to (and throw billions of dollars at) but have (so far) failed to solve for far too long.

Those intending to vote Yes in the upcoming referendum on The Voice feel justice and fairness demand they vote that way, that it would be wrong to further damage contemporary indigenous Australians by blocking their aspirations.

A majority of Australians would feel guilty if they rejected the invitation to walk-together as proposed in the in the Uluru Statement from the Heart; that voting No would brand them as 'racists'.

Many feel the above are compelling, and moral, reasons to vote Yes. But they often ignore the question of what an advisory Voice is likely to achieve – indeed, what it can achieve in terms of improving the daily life experiences of FNP living in the twenty-first century - and how.

Is The Voice (as currently proposed) likely to live up to the expectations of FNP or likely to disappoint to further frustrate, demotivate and damage FNP communities as many past initiatives have done?

Is a virtuous Yes vote that fails better than a No vote which argues for a more robust strategy and mechanism to deliver concrete on-ground results rather than just more talk?

Is the currently proposed Voice more likely to be a step-ahead or a step backwards for both FNP and all other Australians?

The least we should aim and hope for is not to do more harm in addressing this pivotal question.

Given the paucity of hard information and surfeit of loose rhetoric as to the concrete objectives of The Voice (yet alone details of how it might work or will work in

conjunction with the Truth Telling and Treaty components of the Uluru Trilogy) it's difficult to answer that last question in any definitive way.

We can, however, sharpen our thinking by exploring what type of Voice is best suited to securing different, specific objectives – different outcomes.

The diagrams in the next two sections attempt to provide basic frameworks for giving due weight to the very important issues that are usually missing or superficially skipped over in much public debate. They are perspectives that should not be ignored.

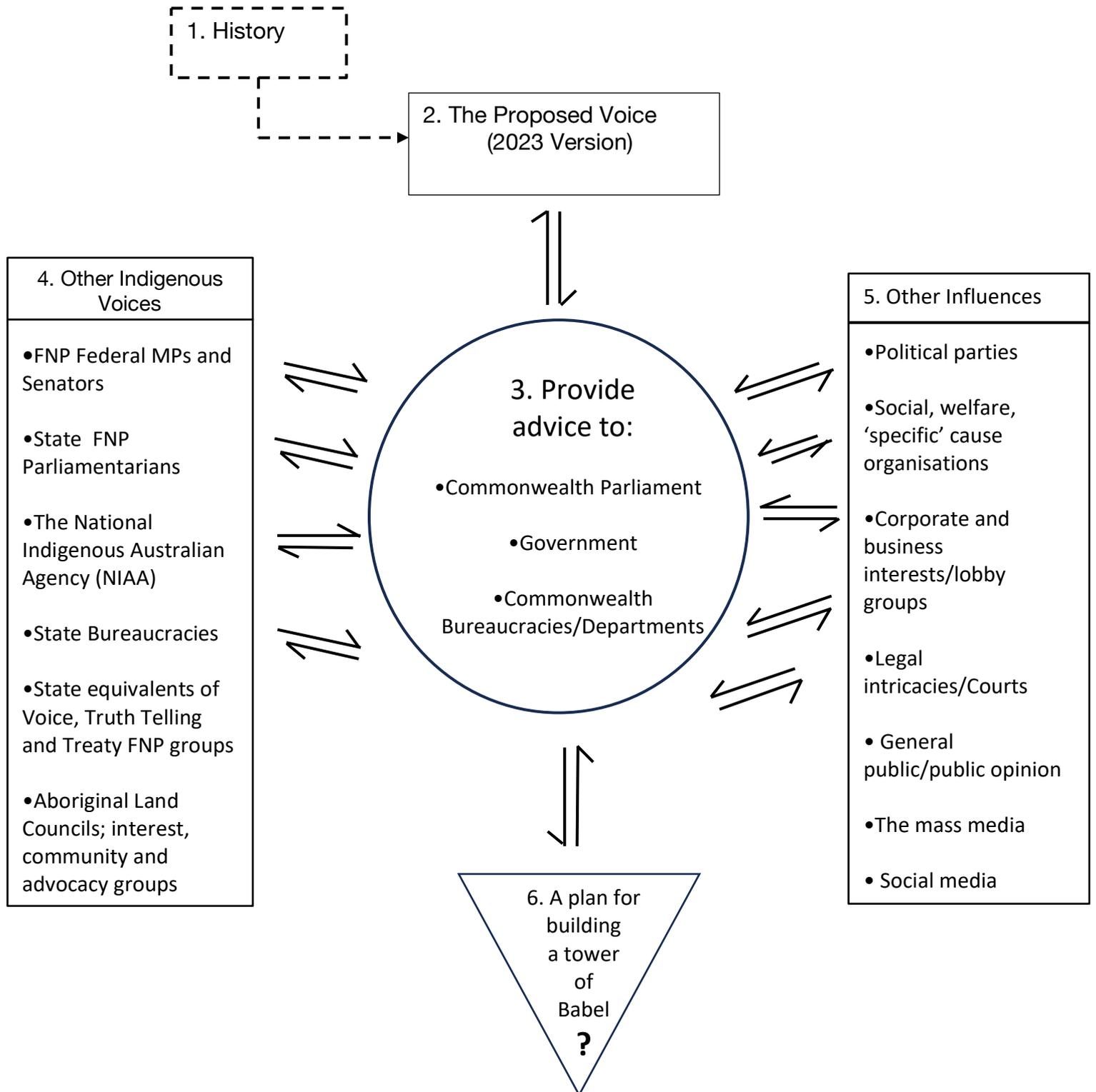
*– “A major danger for FNP is that non-indigenous Australians (especially those who have migrated here since the Second World War) will end up pigeonholing First Nations People the way they most often see them depicted in smoking ceremonies, Welcome to Country invitations, dirt dancing in traditional dress and body paint to the beat of clapsticks or the throb of the didgeridoo etc.- as an ancient culture that’s ‘interesting’ in the same way they find the ancient cultures of the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Chinese, Turks, Tibetans, Zulu, Indian et al - as providing interesting stories from a long ago past that survive, in residual form, in many of the countries they left to come to Australia in search of a better life.*

*If pressed too far the symbolic representations of ancient FNP cultures can backfire and serve to marginalise the need for urgent reforms to improve the lives of indigenous peoples living today. Our eyes need to be focused more on the future than on reliving the past. ” –*

• **2: A Dearth or Abundancy of Voices?**

\*

## AN ABUNDANCY OF ADVISORY VOICES?



## 1. History

Many advice-to-government models have been tried in the past. Governments led by (in recent times) Whitlam, Fraser, Hawke, Keating, Howard, Rudd, Gillard, Abbott, Turnbull and Morrison tried various approaches. None proved successful in materially improving the life experiences of FNP, especially those living in remote communities.

- The last Voice to the Commonwealth Parliament was ATSIC (1990-2005). It was dismissed by the Howard Government, backed by Labor (then led by Latham).
- ATSIC was more than an advisory body. It had some (albeit limited) executive powers (with a programmes budget of around \$1 billion). In this sense ATSIC was, theoretically, more powerful than the advice-only model now proposed in the 2023 referendum.
- ATSIC (Mark 1 of The Voice) could be dismissed by the government of the day – and was. The proposed new Voice differs in that it will be a permanent body that cannot be dismissed by Parliament.
- The reasons for the dismissal of ATSIC are complex – and hotly disputed. The Howard Government described it as ‘a failed experiment’. That was an unfair conclusion that positioned indigenous leaders as scapegoats. Multiple factors were involved. Many of the problems implicated in the design of ATSIC (eg. cost and responsibility shifting between Commonwealth and State Governments and their instrumentalities, a failure to progress toward greater FNP self-determination and self-management) have not been addressed in the design of the new 2023 Voice.

## 2. The proposed new 2023 Voice

### Objectives as promoted,

- \* Recognition of First Nations People in the Commonwealth Constitution.
- \* Act as a permanent advisory body to Parliament and Executive on matters affecting FNP.

### Objectives expressed in everyday language,

- \* Act as permanent, taxpayer funded lobby group to promote indigenous interests at Federal level; an advisory Voice that has the ‘right’ to present its advice

(perspectives and demands) to Parliament (The House of Representatives, The Senate and its committees), Commonwealth Government departments and instrumentalities.

\* No matter how the 2023 Voice performs, it cannot be terminated other than by a national referendum; it stands beyond Parliamentary control.

### **3. Provide Advice to.**

Commonwealth Parliament, the Government and Commonwealth bureaucracies/departments.

### **4. Other Indigenous Voices**

#### 4 (i) Indigenous Parliamentarians

\* Currently there are eleven indigenous members sitting in Federal Parliament – a record high. Eight are women and three men. This representation is higher than the 3% to 4% indigenous people represent in the overall population of Australia.

\* Currently there are around 26 indigenous Parliamentarians serving in Commonwealth, State and Territory Parliaments – about 3% of all Parliamentarians.

\* Many of these indigenous Parliamentarians are highly visible and powerful players on the national stage. In the Federal Parliament they include,

- Linda Burney – Minister for Indigenous Australians (ALP)
- Senator Patrick Dobson (ALP)
- Senator Jacqui Lambie (IND)
- Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price (CLP)
- Senator Lydia Thorpe (ex Greens, now IND)

None of these are ‘wallflower’ politicians. These are strong voices that occasionally even hold the balance of power in the Senate They are voices that are listened to. They are diverse voices that offer different perspectives on both indigenous and national matters.

All are responsible to their electorates via the ballot box where each voter has equal weight and equal rights.

These parliamentarians are used to working toward finding workable compromises that may not always be ideal but are, nonetheless, acceptable to a majority. Their job is to bring people together; lobbyists aren't constrained by such an objective.

\* There is a risk that the voices of indigenous Parliamentarians will not always be in concert with those of the proposed Voice. Conflict here could well damage the advancement of FNP – both within indigenous communities and in terms of undermining general public support.

#### 4 (ii) National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)

\* The Commonwealth Government department under the Minister for Indigenous Australians – The Hon, Linda Burney.

\* Staff, around 1200 (including around 300 FNP) operating in approximately 40 locations across the country.

\* Mission: Improving the lives of FNP .... Effectively delivering programmes through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) – already in place in partnership with FNP: key member of the multibillion dollar Closing the Gap programme.

\* Cost of running department – around \$290million P.A. (2022)

#### 4 (iii) State Governments

\* Some states have (or intend to) duplicate The Voice, Truth Telling and Treaty trilogy within their jurisdictions to accommodate the different needs of different tribes/mobs that existed within their territories before white settlement.

These State Voices will not always be in harmony with each other or the advice of The Federal Voice. Overlaps are likely to be a constant source of division between Indigenous Peoples that will breed dissatisfaction and division that could well delay on-ground progress.

\* Cost and responsibility shifting between Federal and State Governments (and their bureaucracies) will again complicate things – just as they did with ATSIC.

#### 4 (iv) Regional Indigenous Land Councils, Community and Interest Groups

\* There are approximately 145 Land and Sea Councils looking after specific regional areas throughout Australia. Land Councils advocate for Traditional Land Rights,

land management (including mining royalties in some cases) and, sometimes, other matters such as housing and equal pay.

\* The roles and legislative frameworks involved here are complex and varied – well beyond the scope of this brief summary. Suffice to say that (given the importance of ‘Land’ in FNP cultures) many indigenous people are deeply concerned and wanting to ‘speak-their-voice’ on such matters.

\* Land Councils are self-funded (by the communities they serve).

\* In addition to Land Councils there are many other indigenous art, cultural and educational groups promoting their specific interests.

In Summary,

\* The new, 2023 Voice would be but one of many, many Indigenous Voices that seek to be heard on matters relevant to their particular ‘Nation’ (of which there were many before settlement). The term First Nations People acknowledges the fact there never has been one, homogenous indigenous nation – there were, and are many.

## **5 Other Influences**

### **5 (i) Political Parties**

Political parties rarely act in unison, even when addressing the most virtuous causes. They play to win, to maximise their power, to sway public opinion to see things their way. ‘Combat’ between political parties causes friction, division, doubt and emotional upset where there should be common cause.

On Indigenous matters (such as The Voice) the destructive consequences of political game-playing are all too obvious in the mass and social media.

This modus-operandus is not going to change. Concerned citizens need to look beyond the propaganda of politics to the facts to form an informed point of view on a subject so vital to progressing the wellbeing of our First Nations People.

### **(ii) Other Social and Welfare Organisations**

Government monies are always limited. Spending priorities have to be set.

Non-indigenous welfare groups are, legitimately, going to ask governments why their causes shouldn't win government support – just as FNP do.

Comparative statistics are going to play a role in the 'equality of funding' debate. Here are some statistics you're likely to come across.

\* On a per capita basis, FNP receive between 2 and 3 times more Government (Commonwealth, State and Territories) \$ support per capita than do non-indigenous Australians.

\* In 2020, 53% of indigenous Australians received some form of Government support (compared to 26% for non-indigenous Australians).

\* In 2018 the unemployment rate for indigenous Peoples was 3.8 times higher than for non-indigenous Australians.

\* Around 70% of FNP aged 20-24 are not engaged in paid work or education.

\* Government (in total) spend about \$4 billion annually with an overall cost of \$7.9 billion on the incarceration of FNP.

\* About 40% of Australia's landmass is subject to some form of FNP control or influence.

\* Overall, Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments spent (in 2012) \$30 billion plus per annum on welfare (indirect) and programme (direct) funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Source. Fact Check 2016 by Dr. N Biddle  
(Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (ANU))  
Reviewed by,  
Prof. D Foley (University of Newcastle)  
Dr. E. Klein (University of Melbourne)

### (iii) Corporate and Business Interests

It is obvious that business interests will have inputs to government policy on FNP matters especially in relation to mining in remote areas where FNP have Land Rights. Economic interests will demand to have their voices heard.

## 5 (iv) Legal Intricacies

In the early days of the 2023 Voice most of the activity in the Canberra Bubble focused on various parties attempting to rearrange and massage the ‘words’ for the proposed Referendum to trying to secure either its easy passing (with a Yes vote) – or raise sufficient concerns to prompt its rejection.

All sorts of vague assertions, emotionally arousing calls to morality and justice, scary truths and half truths about possible disasters that could lie ahead, were thrown around in gay abandon.

The result was (and probably still is) public confusion as to what The Voice hopes to do – and whether it has the power, or sway, to do it. This uncertainty triggered a huge amount of speculation, much heat and little light.

Where nobody understands the ‘rules’, those in disagreement tend to turn to the Courts for ‘justice’ – thereby risking turning our already litigious society into an even more litigious one. Many senior legals thought this a possible outcome, others opined that the chances of that happening are minimal.

All we know for sure is that the ambitions of FNP living in remote areas will not be delivered by High Court decisions. Pieces of paper are no substitute for making on-ground improvements in FNP communities in ways congruent with their local priorities and cultural traditions.

The less we turn to the Courts to resolve issues, the better.

## 5 (v) Public Opinion

Voters can’t be forced to seriously think about how they’re going to vote. Some will decide on a whim, others will vote according to racist stereotypes or some romantic idea of virtues of an ancient hunter gatherer culture. Yet others will be influenced by issues of fairness and morality while some whites will vote out of a sense of guilt. Some will be swayed by the power of simplistic slogans or the opinions of influencers. All these are quick and easy ways to decide whether to vote Yes or No.

Citizens of a democracy have a responsibility to think deeper than this if they are serious about addressing the very real and complex problems limiting the life experiences of FNP. The fate of our First Nations People deserves more of us than making symbolic gestures based, at best, on a shallow understanding of the realities involved.

As citizens, we should discipline ourselves to look deeper than the tip-of-the-iceberg. Perhaps there are better ways to advance toward FNP equality than by endorsing yet another Voice? This is the question we should all be thinking about.

#### 5 (vi) Media

\* The mass media have to be entertainingly arousing to thrive. They need to tap into conflict and controversy to survive. Sensationalism is their life blood. Good news (outside of sports) is dull news.

Intense competition between the many arms of the mass media explains why they're all under constant pressure to attract (and hold) 'eyeballs' to their mastheads, 24/7. That daily pressure explains their short-term outlook – and why the mass media goes about its business in the sensational ways it does.

There is a tough business that encourages its members to cultivate different 'bases' to secure their financial viability. A type of tribal warfare is an unwelcome consequence of this marketing business model. The Guardian demonises the followers of Fox News. The SMH and The Age rile against the views that appear in The Australian. Commercial channels criticise The ABC...and vice versa.

Other side effects of this modus operandus exacerbate divisions within society.

The obsession with being the first to break the news, the pride taken in 'exclusives', short attention span snippets on major news events, 'light-on-information' and 'heavy-on-competing-opinion' formats, a strong preference for emotional-laden stories over rational discussion, the promotion of 'media stars' etc. – all these proclivities contribute to the constant tensing and unhealthy unsettling of society.

The mass media will welcome a talking Voice to Parliament and the Executive because it will provide them with a never-ending source of human-interest stories, conflicts and emotionally divisive opinions – ie "fodder". Their insatiable need for 'input' may well turn out to impede, rather than advance, the interests of FNP by continually highlighting FNP 'demands' to a point where they trigger a negative response that "these people will never be satisfied". If that point is reached the whole movement will be jeopardised.

#### 5. (vii) Social Media

The internet provides access to reliable information and rational discussion. But a great deal of what appears on social media is biased, ill informed, conspiratorial, excessively emotional, intentionally hurtful – or just plain crazy.

'Informed debate' is not a phrase one associates with social media.

While it's advisable to take what the mass media offers with a grain of salt, it's appropriate to label social media with a 'Danger – Poison' label.

## 6. Conclusion: A Near Perfect Formula for Building a Modern-day Tower of Babel?



\* All the interaction possibilities between so many players with so many poorly articulated agendas, differing powers and responsibilities is more than likely to prove a dysfunctional – and very costly – formula for progressing the wellbeing of First Nations People.

\* Tell-tale symptoms of such weakness would be,

- Parties talking at cross purposes
- factional fights within FNP instrumentalities as to what priorities should be set
- responsibility and funding shifting
- blame gaming
- friction between bureaucracies, confusion, frustration, violence – even paralysis. In other words the usual - only more of it.

\* 'Talking models' force FNP leadership-talent to focus on playing politics in high places as opposed to leading their communities at grass-roots level. Talking models minimise the critical role of on-ground FNP leadership in favour of promoting an urban, sophisticated and professional elite. Such an outcome would risk widening the gap between Voice leaders and ordinary FNP communities – and that would be a backward step.

The most likely result?

- more frustration
- never ending conflict
- disappointment in a lack of on-ground progress
- greater divisiveness

Is there a better way  
to help our FNP achieve  
their goals?

*–“The path to true equality is via self-determination, not by insisting that other fix things for you as penance for the sins committed on your Peoples by past generations of white settlers”–*

## ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO SECURING FNP GOALS

### STEP 1: DEFINE AND PRIORITISE OBJECTIVES



#### AS PROPOSED IN THE REFERENDUM

1. Secure recognition of FNP in the Constitution.
2. Establish a permanent (non-dismissible) advisory voice to Commonwealth Parliament, Government and federal bureaucracy on matters affecting FNP.
3. Boost public awareness of FNP perspectives/advice/goals and demands.

#### AS NEEDED TO SECURE TANGIBLE IMPROVEMENTS

4. Lift the life experiences, living standards and functionality of FNP in the communities where they live; Close the Gaps.
5. Support FNP to increasingly take control of their personal and communal lives their way (within the law)
6. Break the welfare dependency mindset which undermines the self-confidence and resilience of any culture.
7. Move the focus of effort from discussing the historical sins of settlement to actioning on-ground programmes to benefit FNP alive today; pivot from the past to the future.
8. Rely less on symbolism, simplistic sloganeering, emotional arousal and blame-gaming and more on participatory planning and the implementation of programmes tuned to meet local community needs.



### STEP 2: CONSIDER THE TWO MAIN OPTIONS



#### TALKING ROUTE



**INHERENT BIAS:** "FIX THINGS FOR US"

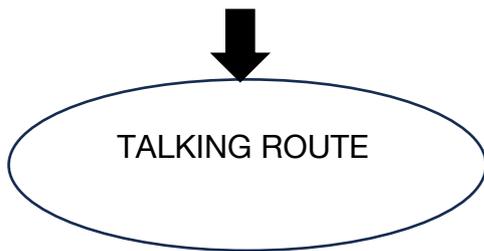
#### DOING ROUTE



**INHERENT BIAS:** "WE (FNP) DOING THINGS WITH YOUR (NIA)\* SUPPORT"

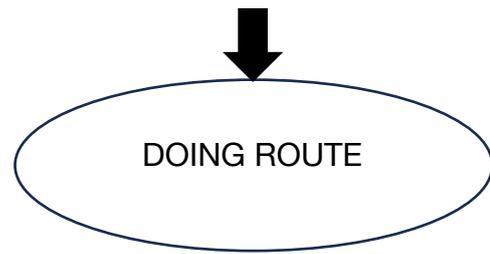
\*NIA = Non-Indigenous Australians

STEP 2: CONSIDER PROS AND CONS OF EACH APPROACH



PROS, most suited for;

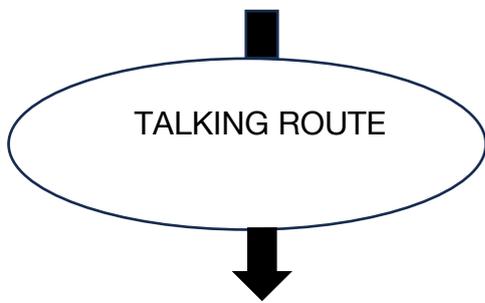
- Building awareness of FNP perspectives.
- Introducing truth-telling into the teaching of Australian history.
- Lobbying parliament (et al) to accommodate FNP demands / interest.
- Stirring emotional support by positioning FNP as 'forever victims' that deserve ongoing special treatment in health services, education, welfare, employment and law.
- Advancing the moral case for Treaty



PROS, most suited for;

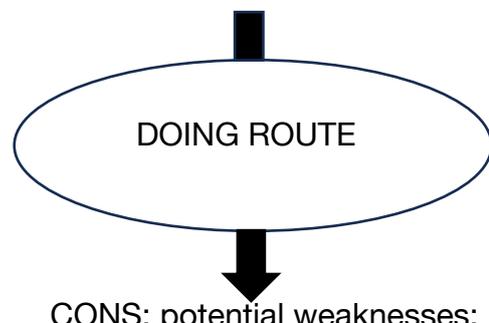
- Empowering FNP communities to (increasingly) lead, staff and run their own affairs.
- Breaking the debilitating cycle of welfare dependency.
- Building self-confidence of community leaders and members (via participation) to direct and police their own kind.
- Providing FNP youth with positive (sport and non-sport) adult role models (including males) inside the communities where they live.
- Providing FNP adults with meaningful roles to play within their communities to build their self-confidence, self-esteem and their motivation to 'engage'.
- Taking the fight to where it can be won – outside of capital cities, on-ground in local, living communities.





CONS: potential weaknesses:

- Positions FNP as ‘suppliants’ – dependant petitioners as opposed to people who can control their own destiny.
- Could easily reinforce a welfare-dependant mindset which undermines any culture’s resilience.
- Almost guarantees ‘The Voice’ will never be satisfied, that it must always complain to justify its ongoing existence. A silent Voice would quickly lose support.
- As an advisory body, The Voice would not be responsible for concrete outcomes. Accordingly, It would be prone to exaggerate its demands, (which could easily trigger divisions between FNP and NIA groups rather than promote a healing, ‘coming together’).
- The Voice will conduct debate in language concepts and legal frameworks in places alien to most FNP - especially those living in remote communities. If The Voice ends up being seen by its own people as a remote elite it will be at serious risk of failure.
- The Voice is not new. It has been tried before and failed.



CONS: potential weaknesses:

- The doing route is by far the tougher one because it increasingly involves FNP taking responsibility for their own fate. The far easier path is to continue as is – demanding more welfare, compensation and support from NIA (by delegating authority to a city elite, ‘voice’ to secure improved benefits).
- This is not the way to build viable future in communities where FNP and NIA will want to live as one community (at best) or in peaceful co-existence (at least).
- The doing route is not a quick-fix one. It will involve FNP and NIA (young, adult, old) working together for generations. Impatience is a major problem. Prompting the search for a ‘silver bullet’ (that doesn’t exist), would only be counterproductive.
- FNP leaders of the political, legal and professional kind are not the best equipped to lead motivate and bond people within local FNP communities. Local leaders from within a ‘mob’ lead best.
- The doing route requires both FNP and NIA to accept the inevitability of failures - and a preparedness to support each other and try again until success is achieved.



CONCLUSION?

WHICH ROUTE DO YOU THINK IS THE BETTER ONE?

The words of the colonial British Empress' (Queen Victoria's) Poet Laureate highlights all peoples – including our First Nations People – eventually face the same challenges to ensure their “culture” survival .....

*– “Though much is taken, much abides; and though  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” –*

Alfred Lord Tennyson  
*Idylls of the Kings*

#### Declaration

- Author: T. Lenehan, Wallace's Gap Road, Ballalaba, NSW 2622
- Publisher: The Author
- Political Affiliation: Nil
- Purpose: To aid community discussion as to how best advance the life experiences of Indigenous Australians in ways that are both advantageous to them and the country as a whole ... by looking behind the emotionalism and half-truths that frequently distort public debate.