

First Nations Voice to Parliament
Annual Address to Parliament
27 November 2024

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT ON COUNTRY

We acknowledge and pay our respects to the Kurna nation, sovereign owners and custodians, whose Lands we are on today. This is where Kurna ancestors lay in their resting places and where present-day Kurna reside and speak in their authority.

From this place, and as far as our eyes can see, it always was, is and forever will be Kurna country.

We pay respect to all First Nations people here today and watching online, and acknowledge their past, present and ongoing connection to country.

The First Nations Voice to Parliament represents two thousand generations of kin who thrived on our Lands for over 60,000 years. Our history speaks of having and maintaining the peace expressed through our distinct identities.

I stand here today as a proud Barngala, Wirangu, Kokatha, Mirning, Kuprun, and Noongar man, and alongside the nearly 50 First Nations people elected to this historic advisory body.

STRANGERS IN PARLIAMENT


About 170 years ago, the first meeting of the South Australian Parliament took place.

While Aboriginal men had the right to vote, there is no record of Aboriginal men registering to vote at the time.

South Australia's Aboriginal women gained the right to vote in 1894, but with the Federation of Australian colonies, all non-whites were barred from voting in Federal elections.

The federal parliamentary debates on who should and should not be able to vote reflected the racist temper of the times with references to savages, slaves, cannibals, idolaters.

While provisions in South Australian law meant Aboriginals should have retained their right to vote, many are believed to have lost that right as debate about the interpretation of the constitution continued.



From 1857 – when the first meeting of State Parliament took place - to today, we have only ever seen one First Nations politician elected, and only one appointed Minister for Aboriginal Affairs.

Even though that member – the Hon Kyam Maher MP – grew up in the South East of this state, his people are from Tasmania.

This, again, highlights the challenge of having our voices heard.

There has never been an elected member to this Parliament whose origin story begins in the story lines of First Nations people of South Australia.

In this place, politicians capture our stories and then pass them on.

Stories are triaged into material for committees, for submissions, for debates.

It's transactional, though. It's about us, not with us.

And now, having Parliament, and having Government hear First Nations voices telling stories of lived experience from across South Australia, is more important than ever before.

WHO WE ARE

The First Nations Voice Act brings us into Parliament... into government buildings... and offers us a seat at the table where decisions are made.


We understand our communities... we know too well both the conscious and unconscious bias and racism towards First Nations people.

We come here today knowing the work we do to close the gap of knowledge must be done with evidence and truth telling.

We seek to advise on laws and policies in a way that empowers us.

If this is done our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and the First Nations foundations from which our culture and peoples stand proudly will be a gift to all South Australians.

Our members are connected to each of the more than 30 First Peoples groups that make up the Indigenous population of South Australia.



We come from the farthest reaches of the Far North of the State... from the Murraylands, Riverland and South-East... greater Adelaide... from the Flinders and the Upper North... from the Yorke Peninsula and the Mid North... from the West and West Coast and not to mention the ongoing connections that cross borders.

We are mothers, we are fathers.

We are uncles... we are aunts...

We are elders... we are young.

We come from all walks of life... with different perspectives and lived experiences. We include members of the Stolen Generations... and nearly all of us are connected to a former mission or government reserve... places the community has since reclaimed for their own.

Our cultural ties, our ties to the land and to our ancestors spread far and wide.

And we are here today speaking with one voice, and united with one purpose...

We are here for truth telling, and to ignite within you an understanding of the plight of our people.

You may not walk in our shoes, but since the state we know as South Australia was formed... and every day since... we are being asked or told to walk in yours.


We are here to change that... to lift our State out of ignorance and into a movement building our voices... by having a say on the laws you debate and talk about what we can all do to elevate a nation of people and their communities in a way that is different to make the future better... for First Nations people and for all South Australians.

Because, sadly, we're a portion of the South Australian community that is unfairly disadvantaged when it comes to things that most South Australians take for granted.

Less than a third of First Nations children starting school in South Australia are developmentally on track...

only 65 per cent of First Nations people aged in their mid-twenties have completed year 12...

and less than half between 25 and 34 years old have some form of tertiary qualification.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are 3% of the population yet 25% are incarcerated. In health... in criminal justice... in housing... across the board... the story is the same.

And yes, we are seeing progress.

The last Closing the Gap Annual Report indicated that of the 17 socio-economic targets, eight of them are improving. And I acknowledge SAACCON and other organisations working with government to improve progress.

But we're a long way from achieving these targets ... and it is clear that many of the policies implemented by successive governments at a state and federal level have not worked. Often, policies were driven by Governments and imposed on our communities. Sometimes our solutions have been taken by government and then run by non-Indigenous organisations. We are frustrated by this because our community misses out on receiving a better service.

Maybe... by trying something new... by working together... by having an honest and open talk about where we are, what is working and what isn't... we can make them better – not just for First Nations people, but for all South Australians.

Because yes... the problem directly hurts First Nations communities.

But it affects us all. Indigenous and non-indigenous South Australians.


Poor education outcomes for Aboriginal kids can set them on the wrong path... We love our families and our children, and the start of their lives must change so the middle and end is better for our young people.

Poor health outcomes for First Nations people lead to a further drain on the public health system at a time when we know resources are scarce and budgets and staff are stretched far too thinly.

If we can address chronic health and disease issues in First Nations communities, we can ease that pressure.

In 2017 a group of 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people met to make a plea to the people of Australia.

In 1967, they said... the Australian people voted to let us be counted.



Now, they said, we're asking the Australian people to let us be heard.

They wanted to see a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

At a national level, it was a cause taken up by the current Federal Government.

And at a state level, it was a cause taken up by the now Premier.

Sadly, at a federal level, the referendum failed.

But, here, in South Australia, legislation to establish a First Nations Voice to Parliament ... a Voice elected by our State's First Nations people... made up of our State's First Nations people... was introduced and passed.

This legislation was not formed in a vacuum.

Dale Agius – the former Commissioner for First Nations Voice – travelled across the state, hearing directly from First Nations people in both regional and city areas about what they wanted from a Voice.

What came through loud and clear was that First Nations people wanted a Voice elected by First Nations people... representing grassroots communities... with direct access to key decision makers... in Parliament, in Government and other organisations.

He then sought First Nations peoples' views on the proposed legislation itself – in face to face meetings with First Nations communities... and... once the legislation was passed, he – along with the Electoral Commission of South Australia – worked to spread the word in First Nations communities and encourage people to nominate.

And now we are here... a point in history where a democratically elected First Nations man – elected by my community - can stand here and speak to the nearly 70 people who have also been democratically elected to represent the people of South Australia.

THE BUILDING YEAR

It has been a long road to get to this point... and there is still a long road ahead of us.

Even now, we are still in our infancy.

We had legislation to set down the basics, but the real work could only begin once all 46 of us had been elected... .. and once we had begun to look at the task ahead of us. We also

met staff in a small Secretariat who were to assist us. I am sure you will appreciate... this was not like being elected to Parliament... where there are rules... standing orders... and procedures in place.

This historic body... is a first for all of us.

There's no precedent.

A Member Induction Guide was created for us and a Code of Conduct, but no rulebook or procedures beyond the legislation.

And there are no examples in Australia that we can look at.

We had to build all of that from the ground up and because information was untested, in this being our establishment year, we were building the plane and flying it at the same time.

And then... we needed to start talking to our communities... to understand their views... to learn about what mattered... and how best we can convey those messages to you... to Ministers... and to the heads of agencies.

This has been no small task.

For you, the doorknocking comes before the election. For us we are always speaking to our community.

We have existing ties to our communities, but... we've needed to hear from as many people as possible to speak confidently and clearly about the views of First Nations people.

That will always be a work in progress, and we will continue to do this in 2025.


Already, we have heard powerful stories that highlight why we're here... and our hopes for meaningful action.

To give you an example...

One member encountered an elder experiencing homelessness.

I'm sure you can all appreciate the high regard and esteem that elders hold in our culture.

This person is not just homeless... they also have serious mental and physical health issues, including a heart condition that required regular medicine.



They had been barred from their local chemist, because they would not let security guards search their bag.

That bag represents this Elder's life... it is all the personal belongings they have... and searching that bag would be incredibly upsetting and an invasion of their privacy.

A Voice Member was able to help this Elder get their prescription sent to another chemist. But this was only the first step...

The Elder was unable to access support services, because they closed at four o'clock.

They had not heard from their social worker in two months and, after an assessment by the local homelessness service, they were deemed ineligible for support... leaving the Elder to sleep in the bushes.

The only thing the Voice Member was able to do by this point to help, was provide a sleeping bag, an extra blanket to lie on and a suitcase to help protect their clothes from the weather.

More recently, we have seen the case of an Aboriginal man in Port Augusta, who appeared to be shoved and dragged by South Australia police.

On the surface, at least, it appears excessive and confronting not only of the young man, for his family and his community, but all Aboriginal people and I am sure many South Australians.

We understand our Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement Incorporation isn't resourced adequately...


to deliver meaningful engagement that can empower our communities.

The incident highlights the disconnect between SAPOL and our communities, with an overrepresentation of First Nations people being incarcerated at an unacceptable rate.

These stories are experienced by many in the community, not just the First Nations community.

But it's far more common for First Nations people than others.

And that is why we're here.



To start that conversation about how we can do things differently...

And advocate for change that helps avoid terrible situations like this.

Part of that conversation will be difficult; and it will be confronting.

But... if we work together, it can also be rewarding... and help not just First Nations communities, but South Australia as a whole.

In 2024 as we flew the plane, there has been 18 local Voice Meetings, 3 State Voice meetings, a Member Briefing and an Annual Meeting of Local Voices. The State Voice has held one meeting with Cabinet and one meeting with agency CEOs.

In building the plane, the 6 local Voice regions and State Voice set up its governance structure, such as their own Terms of Reference, policies and procedures, and forming working relationships and determining best practice for the Voice's interactions with Parliament and Government under the Act. This includes the forming of a Memorandum of Administrative Arrangement with the SA Government with the State Voice.

At the same time, in local voice meetings, members started to capture their own matters and views specific for their region and then ideas from the community.

There were topics commonly raised in a majority of regions: health and wellbeing, education and employment, housing and infrastructure, cultural preservation, justice and policing. They had discussion on how we can prevent our people getting incarcerated and look at prevention strategies before and during incarceration and after release from prison.

They had discussions about ways to increase the celebration of culture and culturally appropriate preventative mental health services.

We need reunification.... not removals... for our children.

Some regions focussed on tackling drug and alcohol related harm in our communities, better access to rehabilitation and how we can address the significant mobility of community members and getting data that could assist with better service impact in areas affected.

How to ensure cultural training for Police... how we can address domestic and family violence... how we can heal through Family Services... alleviating homelessness and poverty was of particular concern to one region.

Another local region said that successful outcomes of funded services should be shared at the regional level so that the community can understand the results.

One region spoke of greater support to men and young men to foster cultural leadership and enable men to create their own solutions, while another region raised the current state-funded model for funerals needing alignment to First Nations practices of sorry business.

These are just some of the matters raised in Local Voice meetings so far. These are all important discussions, and some of the areas where we feel that real, positive change can be made.

STATE VOICE

The State Voice has met once with Cabinet and Chief Executives this year. In setting the scene for these initial meetings, we highlighted these common and different views from Local Voices.

With its engagement with the Government, the State Voice has agreed to concentrate effort on preventing our people being incarcerated and solutions to achieve this. Better outcomes in health and wellbeing and improved progress concerning housing and infrastructure.

Given we only have a two-year term we are sharpening our focus to get results in 2025.

The 6 Local Voices are at different stages of settling their lists of views to pass to the State Voice. It is planned for this information to be finalised in 2025. They will also do more work to improve outcomes in their local regions focussing on matters raised with them, and we hope much is achieved across all regions in 2025.

We have not commenced engaging with the community to establish our State Voice Advisory Committees. This work will start in 2025 when we have the capacity to start this work.

In 2024 since our onboarding in April, we have held 25 meetings.

In 2025 we are expected to hold 34 meetings as directed under the Act.

WE'RE NOT A TYPICAL ADVISORY BODY

There's a lot of cynicism around the creation of the Voice... and there's a heavy burden on us to prove ourselves.

To prove ourselves to First Nations people who heard about the Voice and thought 'been there..... done that'.... and think we're just going to be another failed advisory groups..... that have been established to make it look like something's being done, without ever achieving anything.

To prove ourselves to the critics who feel like this opportunity is giving First Nations people a special advantage that other South Australians don't have.

And to prove ourselves to those people who've voted for us... who believe that this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to be seized.

Those of us who have been elected to the Voice realise just how incredible this moment is... and how we have a great responsibility to our people, as well as those who put their faith in us by supporting the legislation that has helped us come into being.

So....do not be discouraged..... for today is great day to be a First Nations person in South Australia

WHAT WE'VE DONE

So far, the journey has just begun... and there is a long road ahead of us.


Already, we have started speaking to our communities... and hearing their ideas on what we should try and address.

We are a small but determined group of listeners, conscious of how important consultation is in our community.

We don't have the resources politicians have, but.... with our Aboriginal Intelligence we will work as hard as we can to get the best for our people... and for South Australians as a whole.

We are starting to build links in Government...

We have been engaging with the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence to ensure that our voices, our stories and our experiences are heard...



And we have been slowly meeting our obligations under the Act and engaging with agencies regarding draft Bills.

Over the past three months, the State Voice has provided advice on four Bills that have a benefit or impact on First Nations people, including the Preventative Health Bill and Office of Early Childhood Development Bill.

Changes were made to both of these based on our advice. And we are considering advice on the Children and Young People (Safety and Support) Bill.

To assist us understand the Voice's engagement with Parliament, the State Voice attended a training session in Parliament. The training was designed and delivered by the Clerks of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council.

Members have been doing this work against the backdrop of their own personal and professional commitments.

We are not – as some have suggested – doing this for the money.

We are doing this because we believe the opportunity before us is too great to let it pass us by... and that we can make a real difference.

Some have decided that they must devote their energy elsewhere or not continue because of a difference of opinion ... and this is entirely understandable.


We each have commitments and balancing this with everything else in our lives is a truly significant ask. And not to mention the greater cultural load this responsibility asks of us. We are conscious of caring for ourselves and how important this is for our own wellbeing.

Those who have chosen to leave remain every bit as committed and passionate to improving the lives of First Nations South Australians as those who are still Voice Members.

A MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE WHO QUESTION OUR WORTH

As I look across this chamber, I am heartened to see those Members of Parliament who voted for the establishment of the Voice.

All of us will forever be grateful for the trust you have placed in us, and the responsibility entrusted to us.



I hope you listen to what we have to say and respond with a similar level of trust and respect.

Since the referendum last year, I know some Members of Parliament who are less enthusiastic about our presence here.

Those who believe the money could be better spent elsewhere...or that establishing a First Nations Voice is giving First Nations people preferential treatment at the expense of others.

And those who – like many within the Aboriginal community itself – believe this is either a symbolic gesture that will achieve nothing... Or who say the Referendum showed most South Australians don't support a Voice.

We are determined to prove you wrong.... because we believe in a better future.... A future where we can each put our differences aside and work together constructively.

It's often said that South Australia has been at the forefront of the progressive moment.

In the 1840s, our State became the first to allow evidence from Aboriginal people to be accepted in courts of law.

In the 1890s, our state became the first to allow men and women to vote.

In 1975, our state became the first in Australia to decriminalise homosexuality.

Now, we stand here today with another first.

And yes, people are often scared of what is new... of what is unknown.

But starting on any journey is difficult.

In many ways, we are fortunate that this legislation passed before the Referendum vote...

I realise there is every likelihood we would not be here if the Government had waited until after the Referendum.

That Referendum result hurt our people.... and many of us are still healing.

But it also has made us more determined to have our voices heard, and to make this work.

Because I think every one of us here today can agree that efforts to improve the lives of First Nations South Australians to date have not worked.

So why not try something different?

Why not try working together?

Why not try listening to the people who are directly affected by these decisions?

You may not have the answer...

I may not have the answer...

But together... together we may be able to achieve something truly great.

Even by being here today, we are all achieving something great.

We are beginning this journey together.

The question is, though, can we stay on that same path together?

I really do hope that we can.

AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF OUR COMMON GROUND

It doesn't matter which political party – if any – you belong to... we all have something in common.


We are all South Australians who want to see our state succeed and our people thrive. Members of Parliament... members of the Voice... we have all been elected by our peers to represent our community.

It's fair to say we have all encountered our fair share of scepticism along the way.

You won't need to look very far to find negative stereotypes of First Nations people or our culture.

And I'm sure that every single Member of Parliament has encountered sceptical – if not downright cynical – voters along the way too...

But I believe you've chosen to dedicate this time in your lives to making South Australia a better place.



And we are exactly the same in that regard.

We want to improve the lives of all South Australians – Indigenous and non-Indigenous.... by giving our people, a better start in life.... by helping our people contribute to this great State.... and by preserving our cultural heritage and drawing on our knowledge.

Because we can all learn from each other.

Every great thing..... ever achieved.... Started with a vision.

I see a vision.... where all South Australians are living with cultural harmony based on the land we meet upon..... where First Nations People have equity... access... and are prospering in all aspects of life.... our differences are seen as an advantage.... and this is celebrated by all South Australians.....

Let's work together... learn from each other... take the journey.. and let's make that vision a reality.