



First Nations Voice to Parliament

Annual Address to South Australia's Parliament, delivered by Danni Smith, Joint Presiding Member of the State Voice

13 November 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

I acknowledge and pay my respects to the Kaurna people, the sovereign custodians of the lands on which we gather today.

This is the country where Kaurna ancestors rest, where their spirits continue to watch over us, and where present-day Kaurna people live, speak and stand strong in their unbroken authority.

I extend my heartfelt respects to all First Nations people here in the room today and those joining in online. May your strength, culture, and spirit light the way for generations to come.

The First Nations Voice to Parliament carries the heartbeat of over 2,000 generations of our people, who are strong, wise and deeply connected to this country.

BEYOND THE BUILDING YEAR

I stand here today as a proud First Nations woman connected to the Eastern Arrernte, Guringdji, Narungga, Nukunu, Ngarrindjeri and Kaurna peoples, and also as a mother and a grandmother who is passionate about my people.

I am here today on behalf of all First Nations Voice to Parliament members to update you on the work that we have done and what we have achieved since our first address and discuss where we are heading in a state that continues to walk in the path of reconciliation, truth and shared responsibility.

When Leeroy stood here on 27 November last year, we celebrated the start of something truly powerful. For the first time in South Australia's history, an elected Voice of First Nations people stood in this parliament, our parliament, and he spoke with the strength and the authority of our communities behind him.



SOUTH AUSTRALIAN
FIRST NATIONS
VOICE TO PARLIAMENT



On that day, this house heard more than a speech: it heard the collective voice of our people, democratically chosen by our own communities, speaking in our truth, in our way and on our terms.

It was a moment that generations had waited for, a moment of pride, of courage and of change.

We called last year a building year, a time of creation, of laying down the foundations for something bigger than ourselves.

It was a year we began shaping how the Voice would walk alongside our communities and how it would speak truth into government and parliament.

In that first address, we spoke from the heart with the hope and determination that brought 46 of us together.

Standing strong from the six Voice regions across the state, we carried with us the voices of our people, the stories of health and healing, of housing and hardship, of justice, of culture and of country.

We spoke of the challenges ahead to turn listening into action and to prove that the Voice could be a body that could drive change and get better results for our mob.

During his address, Leeroy said that we were building the plane and flying it, too. As I stand here today, 12 months later, I am pleased to tell you that, while the plane is not complete, we are still up in the air.

Over the past year, we have turned foundation into function. We say with pride that the Voice has moved from establishment to operation, and from operation to impact.

We have listened, we have acted, and in many cases, we have been heard.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENTS

Throughout this year, we have worked hard, talking directly to the communities we represent about the issues that matter to them.

We have held 25 community engagements across the state, with more to come in the remainder of our term. We have travelled to the APY lands and Coober Pedy in the state's Far North; Yalata, Ceduna and Port Lincoln in the West and West Coast; Port Augusta, Hawker, Leigh Creek and Nepabunna in Flinders and Upper North; Point Pearce in the Yorke and Mid North; Murray Bridge, Victor Harbor and Mount Gambier in the Murraylands,





Riverland and South-East; and Port Adelaide, Mawson Lakes and Smithfield Plains in the Adelaide region.

In each place we go, and through all the communities we talk to, we hear the same issues, the same concerns, the same priorities and the same ideas.

They all fall within the themes of housing and infrastructure, health and wellbeing, justice and policing.

These are our three focus areas for this year, because these are the issues that matter most to our people.

We have focused on these collectively, not in isolation, because we know that for our people all these issues are connected.

We know that we cannot address the over-representation of First Nations people in the justice system without confronting the issues and the factors that contribute to it.

We confront these issues head-on because we need actions on the root causes that drive the contact with the justice system.

Whether it is systemic racism or inadequate supports, our health and the wellbeing of our families is counting on it.

This means that government must deliver better education; safe, affordable and culturally appropriate housing; infrastructure that meets not only our practical needs but honours our culture, our connection to country and our vision for the future; better services for child protection, family wellbeing, mental health, disability and community healing; and health care and rehabilitation services that are culturally safe and responsive.

Housing and infrastructure, health and wellbeing, justice and policing are our priorities for this year because we know that change is needed, change that is real, immediate and transformative.

This is why we have sought to use every opportunity to make real impact through every community engagement, because we know that change is needed. In every meeting of the state and local Voices and every one of our meetings in government, we have focused on these issues.

We have made impact, proving that this advisory body, this Voice, can be heard and will be listened to.





ADVICE

True to our name, we have been the voice for our people.

We have talked to the Premier, with ministers, with chief executives and representatives from all government about these issues.

We have talked about the challenges and the gaps that exist for our mob, but more importantly, we have talked about the solutions and provided advice about how we can go about making it right, through conversations grounded in the lived experiences and the voices of our communities.

Out of those interactions with government and our communities came a clear message that progress requires not just advice but partnership, a commitment to working together based on accountability and truth-telling, and we are making progress.

Early this year, we were invited by the Premier to make recommendations on how to address the key issues we had identified. These recommendations we made to government reflect what we have heard from our people and express our desire for a system that listens, respects and responds.


The solutions we identified require determination and a willingness to commit to long-term place-based investment, investment that builds capability, supports self-determination and recognises a strength that lies within our communities.

This means ensuring that decision-making processes are designed with participation from First Nations people, so that decisions are shaped by lived experience and cultural authority.

We have also identified ways to address service delivery gaps by letting First Nations voices lead the design, implementation and evaluation. This is the only way we can be confident that they are culturally safe and effective.

As the First Nations Voice to Parliament, in making recommendations to the government, we have called for Truth and Treaty; for genuine and respectful engagement and a process to address historic injustices; a stronger commitment to partnership, strengthening collaboration across government, mainstream services and the community-controlled sector; a whole-of-government accountability framework to ensure commitments are not only made but measured and met; stronger partnerships with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to design and deliver housing, health and justice initiatives; reform in policing and corrections to address the over-representation and embed cultural safety across the system; integrated support pathways for people leaving custody, connecting health, housing and employment services; and sustained investment in community healing and wellbeing,





recognising that trauma cannot be punished away, it must be healed through culture, connection and care.

Each recommendation is built on what communities have told us and what they have said must change.

Already we have seen government respond to many of these recommendations. A pilot program will run in the Port Augusta Magistrates Court to provide culturally appropriate legal and support services to our Aboriginal men in custody.

Culturally appropriate and accessible information materials are currently being developed to explain and promote the culturally supportive processes that are available within the criminal justice system, including the Nunga Court.

Funding is being directed towards a 30-bed Bail Accommodation Support Program in Adelaide's north, which will be co-designed with the Voice and the South Australian Aboriginal community controlled sector.

The South Australian Housing Trust will undertake targeted work to inform the design of new public housing builds to ensure responsiveness to the needs of Aboriginal families and identify opportunities that expand Aboriginal employment and engagement of ACCOs in the delivery of repairs, maintenance and improvements.

SAPOL will conduct a review into one of the regional police stations in Murray Bridge. Our people have told us that they have had a very positive relationship with the officers at this station and we want to know how other stations can adopt a similar culturally appropriate service.

ACTIONS

We are being invited to participate in the implementation of many of these initiatives. We are getting a seat at the table when it matters. Our actions and our impacts this year are a demonstration that the Voice to Parliament works. Our members and our communities are being heard and real, tangible improvements are the result.

Most of this progress has happened in the background. We know that many have asked why the Voice has not stood before this parliament to address legislation that is being debated.

Our answer is simple: we have not needed to. This is not because we agree with all the laws proposed here. It is because government have consulted us on bills before introducing them to parliament.





This year, we have been consulted on 10 bills and provided submissions and advice on five, including the Children and Young People (Safety and Support) Bill, the Education and Children's Services (Enrolment and Attendance) Amendment Bill, the Education and Children's Services (Inclusive Education) Amendment Bill, the Criminal Law Consolidation (Street Gangs) Amendment Bill, and the Statutes Amendment (Recidivist Young Offenders) Bill.

Many bills have changed directly because of our advice. While some did not, this is a challenge of being an advisory body.

Regardless, even if it is not done within these walls, we are receiving and taking hold of the opportunities to provide advice to ensure that First Nations perspectives inform the laws that shape our children's future, our families and our communities.

And soon that advice will be more specialised and culturally informed.

This year, we have made significant progress towards establishing four statutory advisory committees. Those four advisory committees involving elders, youth, the stolen generations and native title now have formally endorsed terms of reference and we are in the process of finalising how their membership will be appointed through a transparent and culturally appropriate selection process.

The establishment of these committees will deepen the quality of the state's Voice advice to government and strengthen its authority, accountability and connection to community priorities across South Australia in the future.

Our achievements this year, our meetings, our community engagements, our feedback on legislation and our government interactions are proof that, when we work together, positive change follows.

We are encouraged by the strong interactions we have had with our communities and we thank those who have recognised the SA Voice as an instrument of change and engaged meaningfully with us.

The independence of the Voice is central to this work. Being separate from government ensures that our advice is genuine, grounded in community needs and not influenced by political cycles.

But independence also brings responsibility. We know that we must demonstrate accountability and achieve impact with limited resources, balancing ambition with what is feasible. We seek independence, authenticity and accountability.





Across our six regions, our capacity is uneven. Some regions have strong networks and resources, others are still finding their footing.

All members balance community responsibilities, work and cultural obligations alongside their duties to the Voice. Resourcing remains tight, both for the Voice itself and for the secretariat that supports its work.

The weight of expectation is heavy, and the pace of government systems we navigate means that our work is sometimes slower than we would like.

While we know that collaboration takes time and patience, the needs of our people are urgent.

Health disparities still shorten Aboriginal lives by a decade or more. Aboriginal women remain the fastest growing prison population in the state.

In some regions, youth suicide remains unacceptably high. These truths remind us that the Voice's work is not about tokenism or ceremony. It is about closing the distance between policy and reality.

It is about holding a mirror to government and to ourselves and asking: are we delivering better outcomes? Are we doing it with integrity and transparency, and are we doing it fast enough?

LOOKING AHEAD

Next year marks a significant milestone in the end of our terms and elections for the new cohort of Voice members.

Our term was only two years, but from now on we will be elected to four. To you, the prospect of an election or a re-election is probably second nature by now, but for us it marks another piece of uncharted territory, a test of the foundations we have built in the 20-odd months since we have been elected.

The eyes of many will still continue to be on us.

Some will be watching and looking for a reason to continue to support our work, others will be watching for a reason to tear us down.

Despite all the challenges we have faced, we have shown that a First Nations Voice to Parliament can and does work.





We have delivered results that will help close the gap and improve the lives of not just First Nations people in South Australia but everyone living in our state.

And because of our hard work and the foundations we have built, when a new cohort of Voice members take their seats next year they will inherit a voice that is stronger, steadier and more connected, a voice that has strong relationships with government, a voice that the community trusts, a voice that demonstrates not just hope but results, a voice that measures impact and not activity, and a voice that continues to evolve in partnerships with parliament, with community and with purpose.

But the elections are still a few months away, and before that time we still have plenty of work to do.

We have more meetings, more community engagements and more yarns to have with our mob.

We remain focused on advancing the recommendations we have made to government and ensuring those that are committed to are fully realised and actioned.

We believe that truth-telling and Treaty are the next steps in South Australia's journey towards justice and reconciliation.

Without truth, we cannot heal. Without Treaty, we cannot move beyond words to agreement.

We therefore renew our call for the establishment of an independent commission for truth-telling and Treaty led by First Nations South Australians grounded in lived experience, democratic authenticity and proper resourcing.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart sets out the path of Voice, Treaty, Truth. South Australia has achieved the first, now we must walk together for the second and the third.

PARTNERSHIPS

I would like to finish with a message to the members of parliament, those who have supported the establishment of the Voice and those who may still question its worth.

We say this: the Voice is not here to divide, it is here to connect.

It is not a favour but a framework, a new way of working that brings together lived experience, evidence and accountability.

We do not seek special privilege, we seek shared responsibility. Partnership does not mean we agree on everything, it means honesty, respect and accountability.





We invite you to walk with us, to listen to our voices, read our recommendations not as demands but as invitations to do things differently, because when you act with us, and not for us, every South Australian benefits.

To the Premier, the Deputy Premier, cabinet, government, chief executives, leaders and the many members of the public sector who have engaged with the Voice this year, thank you.

This year our relationship has become stronger. We are encouraged by your proactive engagement, genuine curiosity and interest to listen, learn and work differently to achieve better outcomes.

We see you as our allies, not only for the Voice model but for the best interests of First Nations people in our state.

We look forward to the ongoing interactions and meetings, not as isolated events but as part of an ongoing dialogue that reflects a new way of working with us all based on collaboration, respect and shared responsibility.

We welcome the Premier's commitment to shared decision-making and the Public Service's openness to cross-agency collaboration, breaking down silos and ensuring that programs affecting First Nation communities are co-designed from the start.

Partnership, however, is not just about meetings. It is about shared accountability. Together, we must track and report on our progress.

In this way, every South Australian can see where the commitments are being met, where more work is needed and how collaboration with our people is delivering real change.

This year, you have opened your doors. You have listened. You have acted. We ask that you keep that door open, not only for us but for the communities whose voices we carry. Let co-design and partnership not be a pilot but a permanent way of thinking.

To our communities who continue to put their faith in us, your voices are being heard.

You have told us that you have wanted practical outcomes, not more reports, not more promises, and this year we are seeing those outcomes take shape from funding, pilot programs, reforms and genuine listening.

Not promises, but progress. Your continued courage and willingness to share your stories of hardship, resilience and hope are shaping the laws, policies and programs of this state.

Every community member who attended a meeting told us their story, offered their feedback or shared their ideas. You are the purpose of the Voice at its core and in action.





Finally, to each local and state Voice member of the First Nations Voice to Parliament, thank you.

This year, you have travelled hundreds, if not thousands, of kilometres to reach the people you represent.

You spend nights away from your families, you take time off work, you have missed out on your cultural and community obligations, all because you believe in the Voice and want to do your community, the mob who elected you, proud.

You have been listening, recording and carrying the cultural load and views of our people all year, knowing the weight of the responsibilities is on our shoulders, ensuring that the Voice to Parliament remains grounded, accountable and connected to the communities we serve.

Our achievements today are because of you.

We have come a long way since our inaugural election last year in March, from the establishment to outcomes, from structure to substance, and nearly two years on we are no longer strangers to this parliament.

We are partners in progress, walking side by side. The Voice is not just a project of one government, one parliament or one generation.

It is part of the ongoing story of Australia's democracy, one that is made stronger when it listens and weaker when it does not.

As we look back on the year that was, we can say with confidence: the Voice is working. It is helping parliament and government make better decisions. It has not been easy, but change never is.

What matters is that we continue with humility, courage and hope to build a system that reflects the world's oldest continuing culture and a shared future we are all responsible for.

Together, let us keep moving forward with truth in our hearts, with equity in our actions, and with the shared commitment to a stronger, fairer South Australia for all. I am also honoured to be able to table our annual report this year for the Voice. Thank you.

