

Speaking from the heart of Jewish values

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FROM the heart of Jewish values (emet, teshuvah and tzedek), the rabbinic, lay and youth leaders of the Progressive Jewish Movement in Australia have coalesced to support the referendum to amend the Constitution as a historic step towards justice and reconciliation, whilst acknowledging the existing diversity of opinions within our community in Australia.

The choice facing Australians is: do we provide a constitutional guarantee that Indigenous Australians will be listened to by the government, or do we provide them no guarantee and make listening to their advice entirely optional?

When we have faced prejudice and even persecution throughout history, our voice has often not been heard. As Eli Wiesel wrote, “What hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor but the silence of the bystander.”

How we will listen, and whether advice given through the Voice will lead to social justice for First Nations peoples are not issues in this referendum. If we continue to make listening to Australia’s First Nations people entirely optional, we risk remaining bystanders to an ongoing silence; the silence of the Voice that is not heard.

From the perspective of the Progressive Jewish movement, the principle enunciated so beautifully by Rabbi Eugene Borowitz (z”l) is that through informed choice, we become God’s partners in creation. He tasked the many rabbis whom he taught in New York as follows:

“We need to guide Jews in the difficult art of maintaining an intense loyalty to Jewish tradition, that of living by a deeply Jewish faith, while freely assessing the



Members of the Yolngu people from north-eastern Arnhem Land perform the Bunggul traditional dance during the Garna Festival in northeast Arnhem Land, Northern Territory.

Photo: AAP Image/Mick Tsikas

virtues of the various modern ways of interpreting it – and within this continuous dialectic process to find the personal and conceptual integrity of what it means to be a modern Jew.”

We seek to inform the choice our nation will make by sharing our Jewish values perspective on this vital issue.

Our statement appears below:

“Justice, Justice You Shall Pursue”

The Union for Progressive Judaism, the Assembly of Rabbis and Cantors and our affiliated youth movement, Netzer, acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we live, learn and pray, and pay our respect to their elders, past, present, and emerging. We, as representatives of Progressive Judaism in the Asia-Pacific, are committed to advocating for human rights throughout our region, and beyond. Central to being a Progressive Jew is a commitment to Tikkun Olam, which is to strive to improve the world

in which we live. As it is written, “You have been told what is good and what the Source of all Life demands from you: Only to pursue justice, love goodness and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Because of this commitment, we recognise the deep moral and political significance of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, where Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples called for a constitutionally guaranteed First Nations Voice, the fulfilment of which would require an amendment to the Australian Constitution to establish such a body (Voice).

Jews have also experienced the deep silence that follows atrocity and genocide, the experience of being abandoned by humanity, the struggle for recognition of confronting truths, and the tormenting powerlessness of not being heard. Our Jewish values call us to action to stand in

solidarity with Australia’s First Nations peoples. Emet, the value of truth, imbues us with the responsibility to acknowledge the difficult truth of First Nations peoples’ suffering. Teshuvah, repentance, requires us to atone for our past wrongs and work towards reconciliation. Tzedek, justice, demands that we fight for the representation of First Nations peoples in our parliamentary system. As it is written, “death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21). Voice is power. And First Nations peoples deserve the power to guide their own destinies. We have a long and diverse history, and so do Australia’s First Nations. As Jews, we can understand their passion for preserving their cultural heritage and the importance of passing it onto future generations.

On behalf of the Progressive Jewish Movement in Australia, and noting the support for this statement of Progressive Judaism Victoria, and as proud affiliates of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, we support the referendum to amend the Constitution as an historic step towards justice and reconciliation, and pledge to work within and outside our own communities to move towards a better future for all.

We openly acknowledge the existing diversity of opinions within our community and Australia, and invite all to further research the matter, hear and listen to those affected by the proposed constitutional change, to take into account the Jewish values addressed above and to engage in open-minded conversations to make as informed a decision as possible at the referendum .

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