

CHURCH CALLS FOR CONSTITUTIONAL RECOGNITION OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS



Photo Credit: Rusty Stewart / Flickr

Fri 25 November 2016

An Aboriginal girl takes part in the Ampilatwatja Walk Off in 2010, when elders and community members walked out of their houses and set up camp in the bush as part of long-standing calls for indigenous self-determination and autonomy.

The Primate of Australia, Archbishop Philip Freier, has called for constitutional recognition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, saying it is “vital” if the country’s indigenous people are to flourish. Archbishop Freier expressed concern that the political debate about the introduction of same-sex marriage and parliament’s rejection of a plebiscite on the issue should not be used to prevent a referendum on indigenous recognition. He said that the issue had “dropped increasingly below the Federal Government’s radar”.

Last week, the standing committee of the Anglican Church of Australia agreed to support recognition at the Federal Parliamentary level, including removing powers to make laws on the basis of race while allowing the country to make laws to overcome disadvantage, ameliorate past discrimination and protect culture, language and heritage.

The disadvantage faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is clear. The Child Deaths Review and Prevention Committee told the Northern Territories parliament this week that a study of 315 child deaths and still births over the past five years revealed that indigenous children were overrepresented in every category and that indigenous children and infants die at much higher rates than non-Indigenous infants and children.

And a petition has been raised in the Australian parliament calling for a lower retirement age for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders due to their decreased life expectancy. Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that indigenous men die 11.5 years earlier, and indigenous women nearly 10 years earlier, than their non-indigenous counterparts.

Dr Freier said he was concerned at the latest delay to the proposed referendum on constitutional recognition from May 2017 until the year after at the earliest, which followed “a long history of this issue being deferred”. He said he hoped it did not “signify a reduced commitment to this opportunity for important change before the Australian people”.

The desire of indigenous Australians for constitutional change, including giving the First Nations people treaty-making powers, would not succeed without strong bipartisan support, he said.

The Church’s standing committee has asked the national Public Affairs Commission and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglican Council to help it find ways to support constitutional recognition of indigenous people within the Church’s own constitution.

This article originally appeared on the [Anglican Primate Press](#) and [ACNS](#) on 23 November 2016.