

Opening Statement, 1 May 2023

Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Alteration(Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice) 2023

Ian Trust, Chair Empowered Communities leaders group and Executive Chair, Wunan

Thank you for the opportunity to appear today.

I've always worked at the coalface in the Kimberley. It's a very long way from government in Canberra and a long way from Perth.

I'm old enough to remember when Aboriginal stockmen were the backbone of the beef industry.

And when the towns in my part of the Kimberley were virtually crime free with very little domestic violence, child abuse and youth suicide. We had mainly functional two parent families.

That place where I grew up is very different today.

There's been a lot of focus on the problems in Alice Springs and you would find exactly the same issues any night in Kununurra, Halls Creek and Kalumburu.

Over the years since those carefree days growing up in the Kimberley, I have seen many of my people become locked in a downward spiral that we have not been able to escape.

When I first started working I thought that if we worked hard enough this was something that we could 'fix', a temporary problem – jobs would return, kids would keep going to school and we could make our communities safe again.

That wasn't possible, the spiral trapping my people was too strong.

I realised early on that I needed to work with both state and federal governments.

I wanted jobs for my people, kids going school and learning and old people and children safe in their homes and communities.

I've been doing this for over 35 years with limited success.

We need solutions that are locally tailored, co-designed in partnership to empower our communities to take responsibility in our affairs.

There has never been a collective approach that reaches across and binds all governments to a proper partnership with our communities.

Government has never really understood the value of working in partnership with Aboriginal people and listening to what they are saying about what they need, rather than imposing some ready program fix.

The closest we have come to a good empowering partnership is Empowered Communities.

Even then we've operated with only a flimsy policy commitment to formalise our partnership.

We have joint decision making with government about IAS funding coming into our regions.

It's working to reduce duplication and waste, increase productivity and ensure services and funding have the intended impact for Indigenous people.

To date we've been able to influence around \$150 million of funding coming into our regions.

It gives us some joint accountability with government for decisions made about us.

So far it's limited only to NIAA - those mainstream agencies that can have a big impact on jobs and education are missing.

A key problem with our Empowered Communities JDM is that for all the effort we put in, jointly with government, we have no guarantee that the government will stay the course long term.

Although the value is recognised by both Indigenous and government partners, it's hard work – harder than the business as usual, set and forget grant funding.

Genuinely seeking input from those affected at the coalface is often regarded by departments and Ministers as inconvenient.

We are ever aware that the government could walk away tomorrow and this empowering, Indigenous led opportunity to have a say in decisions that impact on us would be lost in an instant.

I make these introductory comments because the purpose of these hearings is to consider the wording of the Constitutional Alteration bill and the particular issue of providing advice to Executive Government in the amendment.

All my years of practical on the ground work demonstrates that constitutionally guaranteed engagement with departments and bureaucrats, as well as Ministers is essential to improve practical outcomes.

If our only guarantee is providing advice to Parliament we will miss the boat where the crucial influence is needed at the policy development and program design phase.

As we said in our submission:

'It is inconsistent to argue both that the Voice must achieve practical results, and that its constitutional role in giving advice on policy must be restricted or removed. Such an approach undercuts the practical substance of the Voice proposal. The Executive is where most of the important decisions impacting Indigenous communities are made.'

The Voice must be able to provide advice to Executive Government to have a new empowering and productive partnership.

We've already been demonstrating how this can work through JDM. How decision making can't be one size fits all.

It's a respectful and rigorous process and not something to be frightened of. We need more of it.

I'm happy to answer questions.