

Views aired

RECOGNITION OF FIRST PEOPLES IS SOUGHT



WORDS IN ACTION

Shepparton Region
Reconciliation Group

Last week, members of the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples convened in Shepparton to hear from council, community groups and individuals.

The committee wanted to hear views on the potential changes to the Australian Constitution to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as our nation's first people, as well as a protection from racial discrimination.

Archaeologists have shown that our country's history goes back around 40 000 to 60 000 years. Australia has the longest continuous civilisation in human history — a remarkable fact and something of which we can be jointly proud; and this culture is continuing today.

However, the Australian Constitution — the founding legal document for our nation —

has no reference to this. There is no recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people inhabited our continent for numerous millennia before the British arrived.

To change the Constitution is no easy task. It requires a successful referendum; which in itself requires a double majority — a majority of those voting nationwide as well as a majority of states. Only eight referenda have been successful in this country out of 44 attempts.

So here's our chance to set the record straight.

It's the task of the bipartisan Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition to consult widely on how we can do this. This is democracy at work.

The hearing in Shepparton was an opportunity for local groups and individuals to have a say in this incredibly important step in our country's history.

Students from a local secondary school spoke about how proud they were of their Aboriginal heritage and culture. They talked about how their forefathers such as William Cooper and Pastor Sir Doug Nicholls fought for Aboriginal rights, but how little Aboriginal history was covered in their school curriculum.

They also talked about their hopes for a future where the rich diversity of Aboriginal culture was part of our Australian history — that this would be something for which we as a nation could be rightly proud.

Joint Select Committee chairman Ken Wyatt said to the students: "Thank you very much. You have been amazing. In the future, once this referendum occurs, if there is an overwhelming vote in favour of it, then you will have contributed to the debate. So as you get older you had better say that although you may not have been old enough to vote, you gave evidence and participated and gave evidence to shape the future. So well done to all of you."