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National Congress urges Prime Minister not to stall on implementing Referendum Council's report

The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples (Congress) welcomes the Referendum Council's call for a referendum on whether "a representative body that gives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Nations a voice to the Commonwealth parliament" should be enshrined in the Constitution. Congress is also supportive of the Council's recognition of the importance of a Makarrata Commission to negotiate a treaty.

Congress urges the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader to take immediate action to implement the recommendations of the Referendum Council. We maintain that any constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples cannot be merely symbolic. The Government must work towards establishing a representative body so that our people can take the first step towards regaining our self-determination.

Congress also calls upon the Parliament to swiftly implement the Makarrata Commission called for by the Uluru Statement. Similar Truth and Reconciliation Commissions organised in Canada and South Africa have yielded positive results. Congress stresses the importance of establishing a commission to pave the way for a treaty, and to ensure that the approach which the Australian Parliament must take towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs is made very clear.

If properly resourced, Congress could operate as an independent advisory body to monitor and evaluate the Government's approach and performance on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues.

As the fourth iteration of a national representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Congress began operations in 2011, and now counts as members over 180 organisations and almost 9000 individual members. Congress was established with bipartisan support, and has been endorsed as the voice of our people in the Kirribilli Statement.

Any representative body for our people must be constitutionally enshrined and protected. There have been numerous legislatively enacted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative bodies since the 1970s, but all have been disbanded with changes of government. It took eight years of voluntary negotiations to set up Congress. Congress stresses that we cannot wait that long for the new body to be

developed, and urges the Australian Government to act swiftly and endorse Congress' suitability for this role.

Congress stresses that urgent action must be taken to redress the injustices which have been inflicted upon our people. We contend that the Australian Government cannot continue to complain that a representative body and Makarrata Commission are "too difficult to implement" when the lives of so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are at stake.

-ENDS-

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