

19 January 2012

Panel Report on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples reflects mood for change

Recommendations just released by the Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples would bring Australia's Constitution up to date and reflected the views of many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people throughout Australia, Oxfam said today.

Oxfam Australia's Indigenous Policy Advisor Andrew Meehan said recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution, removing outdated discriminatory provisions and protecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages were changes that were long overdue and in the national interest.

Mr Meehan said most Australians would be shocked to learn that our nation's founding document and pre-eminent source of law still permitted laws that discriminated on the basis of race. The Panel's recommendations include the removal of discriminatory provisions within the Constitution, and the insertion of a new section that prohibits the government from discriminating against anyone on the grounds of race.

"These changes make sense – it's hard to see how you could have recognition on the one hand and discriminate against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on the other," Mr Meehan said.

"Such changes should appeal to Australians' sense of fairness. They would mean our Constitution is brought into the 21st Century to reflect our modern, liberal, democratic country. They would also ensure that all Australians are protected from racial discrimination."

The Panel's report, *Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the Constitution*, was developed from extensive consultations in more than 80 communities and more than 3,000 submissions.

"In coming up with recommendations, the Panel has listened to views from right across the country," Mr Meehan said. "What the report shows is the goodwill and understanding in the community that recognition is the next step towards building stronger relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

"Changing the Constitution is a way all Australians can join together to acknowledge our history and the great contribution made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples."

Oxfam calls on all political parties to maintain their support for recognition of Australia's first peoples and get behind the report's recommendations.

Mr Meehan said what was needed now was a fully-resourced public education and awareness program to educate the public about the Constitution and the importance of Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Oxfam Australia has supported opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to exercise their rights to basic social services, sustainable livelihoods, a strong voice and cultural diversity, for more than 30 years. By addressing the exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the nation's founding document, Constitutional recognition has the potential to improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

For further information, please contact Laurelle Keough on 0409 960 100 or laurellek@oxfam.org.au
Oxfam is a leading international aid agency working with communities around the world for solutions to poverty and social injustice.