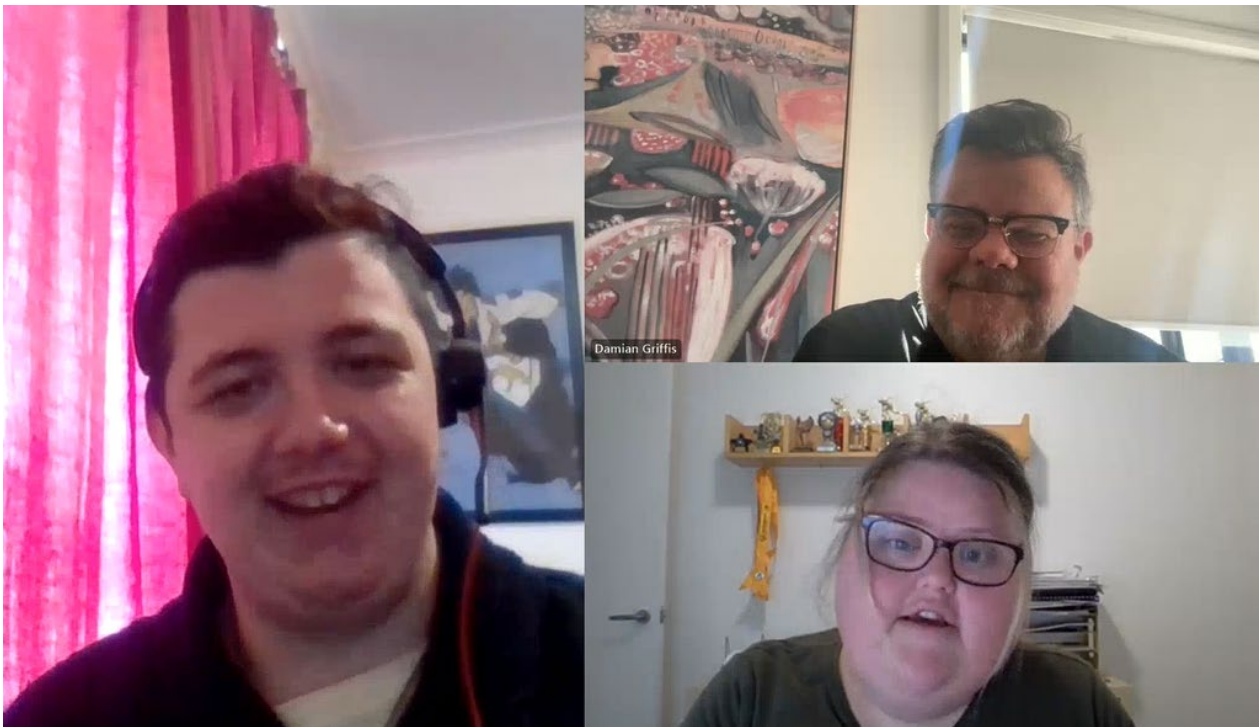




Talking about the Voice to Parliament

One day before the official date of the referendum was announced, Inclusion Australia staff met with Damian Griffis, CEO of First People's Disability network to talk about the Voice to Parliament for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people.

Interview by William Ward-Boas and Brooke Canham - 29 August 2023



William It's really exciting to have Damien with us today. Before we jump in, I want to give an acknowledgement of country. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we're all coming from today. I'm acknowledging from the Wurundjeri lands. And I'd like to pay my respects to the elders past and present.

My name is William Ward Boas. I'm a person with a disability and I'm coming in with some advocacy experience and lived experience within my work in the disability space. I'm glad to be here and to try and guide this conversation.

Brooke I'm Brooke Canham and I am a person with lived experience with a disability. I'm from Perth, WA. Work with Inclusion Australia is good for my work and to understand how things work in our systems.

William: Today we are talking about the Voice to Parliament. We will find out what The Voice to Parliament is today and why we are having a vote about it in 2023. To help us understand it more, I would like to introduce Damian Griffis. Damian is a Worimi man and a leading advocate for human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability. Damian has been a central figure for Aboriginal Disability Network NSW and FPDN, which is First Peoples Disability Network. Damian represents FPDN at regional, national, and international forums. In 2014, he won the Tony Fitzgerald community individual Memorial Award at the Australian Human Rights Awards.

Damian: Thanks for having me, William, and Brooke, and lovely to meet you both. It's really wonderful to be here. It's a real privilege. I thought I'd begin by acknowledging the country in which I'm speaking to you from today, Dharug Country in northwest Sydney. It's a lovely sunny day here actually. And we also like to acknowledge two of our founding elders, Uncle Lester Bostock, who was a proud Bundjalung man, and Aunty Gayle Rankin, who is a proud Ngarrindjeri woman from South Australia. We like to acknowledge them and thank them for their wisdom. I acknowledge also that you're on Noongar Country there today, Brooke. Lovely to meet you both!

Brooke: Can you tell us a little bit more about FPDN and what you do?

Damian: So, we're a national organisation like Inclusion Australia. We represent First Nations or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability and their families. We're about being a voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability around Australia.

William: We wanted to hear from you about the referendum. Because this year it's happening. Could you tell us a bit more about what a referendum is?

Damian: A referendum is about changing the Australian Constitution. It's kind of like the rulebook for Australia. It sets the way that Australia should work as a country. A referendum is called when there are to be changes made to that national rulebook.

Referendums don't happen very often, and they are difficult to win. What happens is Australians of voting age (any Australian over the age of 18) is asked "do you want to make this change to the Australian Constitution?" So, referendums are very, very important. They are an opportunity for all Australians of voting age to have a say about changing the Australian Constitution, about changing the rules for the country.

William: To follow up on that, why is this particular referendum happening?

Damian: So, we've talked about what a referendum is, and now there'll be questions asked of Australians. Firstly, "do you recognize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people" (or First Nations people - in this instance it will say 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' [but] First Nations, First People, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

people all mean the same thing) “do you recognize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the first Australians?”.

We would say, well, that's just a fact so the Australian Constitution should say that! It shouldn't even be controversial, or shouldn't even be an argument, because that is a fact. But people will be asked whether they say ‘Yes’ to that, or ‘No’ to that.

The second part of the referendum is asking Australians if they support the idea of a Voice made up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that will talk to the Australian Parliament. We know that Parliament is the place where the Prime Minister and all the politicians are. So, giving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people an opportunity to have a voice in that system, which has never existed before.

It's also about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having the opportunity to talk to the Australian cabinet. The Cabinet is all the ministers who make decisions about all sorts of different things. So having an opportunity to talk directly to ... the Australian Parliament, and the Australian cabinet, and giving voice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people so they can have a say in those systems. That's never existed in a formal way. By putting it into the Australian Constitution, or the Australian rulebook, it stays there forever.

Right now, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people only have a chance to have a say when they're asked to ... and if the government allows that. This is about creating more security for it to stay in there forever. So that's why it's really important.

Brooke: What is the Voice to Parliament and what would it do?

Damian: So, what it will do is provide advice. It will talk to government, talk to the Australian Government, talk to ministers. It doesn't run services, though. It won't go out and run a disability service or anything like that.

What it does is provide advice or talk to government. It's a voice. It's about creating a place where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can be part of where the power lies in Australia, in the Parliament, and in the cabinet. So, it's a very important step forward for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

There's a whole lot of reasons why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need a voice. Firstly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people don't live as long and have much worse health outcomes.

We also have a very high population of mob with disability. So Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability who don't often get access to say, the NDIS. A lot of our community members live in situations where they don't have housing. Some people are very remote. People outside the cities often have trouble getting food on the table, for example. So that's why it's important for this referendum to make changes,

so Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can one day live the same life that people that aren't Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander live.

William: That would be ideal, that everybody just lives a life and nobody's less fortunate than others. I think that's totally reasonable. We've heard about something called the Uluru statement from the heart. Can you tell us what this is?

Damian: The Uluru Statement from the Heart was based on a lot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people coming together at Uluru. Uluru is the centre of Australia. It's that beautiful, amazing rock that sits in the heart of Australia, right in the middle.

A lot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people came together and talked about a Voice, talked about a way forward. They talked about things like a treaty. They talked about truth telling. Truth telling is about talking about the real history of Australia.

When we think about it in terms of disability, we all know there's been some really bad treatment of people with disability in Australian history. People were institutionalised or grew up in institutions were treated badly. In a way, this is a similar story in the sense of, well, we've got to tell those stories. We can't pretend it didn't happen. We can't pretend that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people weren't treated badly, just like we can't pretend that people with disability haven't been and still are treated badly.

So, the idea was, there was a Statement. People came together and came up with some words, to describe what they'd been doing in Uluru. And it's a very powerful statement. It's strong on emotion, but also on how we move forward as a country. How do we move forward as Australia, where we give proper place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

Brooke: Why does the voice matter to First Nations people?

Damian: I'll take that from the perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disabilities. At FPDN [we think] that there needs to be strong representation or a strong voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability in The Voice structure. So that's why we're supporting it. We expect that if the referendum is successful there'll be a place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability to have a strong voice within that Voice structure. So that's really important.

William: Why does it matter to people who are not from a First Nations background?

Damian: That's a great question, William. I think it's about who we are as Australia as a country. It's about recognizing our pasts, you know that there are stories that still need to be told, that are about what happened to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and what still happens to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It's also about recognizing that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were here first. But it's also about coming together as a country, as all Australians, to move forward together, to go forward together and keep working on making a better country.

Because we can always improve as a country, and this is a really important step along the way. It's also about recognizing the past and moving into a future together.

William: I think if people understood that, then the vote would really be meaningful and collaborative, working together instead of it being segregated. So, when is the referendum vote happening?

I'm actually heading to Adelaide this afternoon because tomorrow, we have a meeting of the Referendum Engagement Council in Adelaide, and the Prime Minister will announce the date of the referendum tomorrow. Every indication would suggest that it's going to be on the 14th of October, so we're not far away.

In a lot of ways, we need Inclusion Australia, and we need people like yourselves Brooke and William to spread the word and to talk about it with people to let people know what it's about. There's a lot of people that are telling fibs to be honest and making things up. What's important is to try and get the information that is real and make your decision that way. Things like this conversation are important, because we can talk about it together and come up with ideas together going forward.

Aboriginal people themselves are only 3½ per cent of the Australian population, so we make no difference in terms of the vote. It's the rest of Australia that will determine whether this is successful. So, it's sort of over to Inclusion Australia, and your members and your friends and your family and all that to make the difference.

Brooke: Where can I find out more information?

So, we've got a website called Have Your Say (www.haveyoursay.net) and we've got more and more disability accessible information on there. Also, Inclusion Australia and others are starting to work on Plain English information.

I think the thing to do is go to places where you can trust the information. There's a lot of lot of funny stuff out there on Facebook and Tik Tok that is not official. It's about being careful where you get the information from. Getting it from official websites, get it from Inclusion Australia, get it from FPDN (<https://fpdn.org.au>), Government websites. Yes23 (www.yes23.com.au) is a good website.

And it's good because you need to take your time and think about it and think about what you want to do. But there's also a lot of funny information going around that's not true. It's important to understand that.

William: It's definitely worth talking about where that information is coming from because as we're aware, media can come across in many different shapes and sizes, and it's sometimes not always effective when it comes to fibs. That's not very helpful at all. To finish up is, what is one thing that you would say to people who don't know what to vote with The Voice?

I would say get information about it from people you trust and from places you trust.

Also, by giving voice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in a formal way, in the Australian government system, it means that we can create a new Australia, which will then hopefully give more voice to people with disability in Australia. It's got the opportunity to change the way things are done.

It's also about what's deep in the Australian heart that still hasn't been dealt with. Like any relationship, even with our families and friends, if you don't deal with things, and they stay there, they become harder to deal with, and they create tensions and things. So, in a big picture sense, that's what Australia has to do: recognise that we've got to talk about these things that happened, and then all go forward together. I think that's the really great opportunity we have here.

The only other thing I would say is, it's over to you guys. You and your friends and your family are the people that will make the difference. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need the rest of Australia to join and to lead because our voting power is small.

The Australian Disability Community voting power is very big. We hope that everyone comes together. We'll be having community forums around the country, and we'd really love people to come along to those. It'll be up on our website, and we'd love to see people there. But thank you for the opportunity. It has been wonderful to talk to you, William and Brooke. It has been really great.

William: It's been so insightful to hear from you. Thank you so much.

Brooke: Thank you so much for speaking with us today, Damian. We really appreciate you taking the time out of your day to speak. Thank you so much.

Wording has been amended slightly from the original for length and clarity.

To watch the unedited interview in full, visit: www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ffBalsRguE



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