

Path to Treaty Submission

December 2019

Introduction

The Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Queensland Government's consultation paper, Path to Treaty.

QCEC is the peak strategic body with state-wide responsibilities for Catholic education in Queensland and represents 22 Catholic School Authorities which operate a total of 306 Catholic schools educating more than 147,000 students in Queensland, 7,000 of whom identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. In addition, 240 employees of Queensland Catholic schools identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Eleven Catholic schools in Queensland have a majority of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students, with, for example, St Michael's School on Palm Island being comprised of 100% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students and St Teresa's College, Abergowrie having 96.8% of its student population identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Queensland Catholic Schools seek to deepen a respectful understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their histories, cultures and spiritualities. Our Catholic School Authorities work to develop and grow collaborative partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, parents, community and organisations to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to have equitable access to quality Catholic education that is mutually enriching for all.

Queensland Catholic School Authorities are committed to reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, guided by the principles of personal dignity, social justice and equity, as reflected in living the Gospel message and according to the mission of the Church (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 1999).

1. What does treaty mean to you?

Treaty is the opportunity to formally articulate the special status that First Nations Queenslanders have by right of their history and connection with our shared home. It provides an opportunity to address past hurts and wrongs and provide a new hope-filled and positive way of working together in a mutually respectful and beneficial partnership. The concept of treaty is supported by our Catholic ethos and belief in the innate dignity of every human. For healing and progress to be made in the act of reconciliation, a treaty would be a significant way of addressing and redressing many of the wrongs that have occurred since colonisation.

2. Who needs to be involved in the Path to Treaty journey?

It is important that the journey to treaty is respectful and inclusive. QCEC supports the premise that the Path to Treaty must not be a divisive issue, nor an imposed outcome. This means that

consultation needs to be comprehensive and that First Nations Peoples play a key role in shaping the outcome. Communities, and especially Elders, must have a significant voice. Given the complexities of hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Nations Peoples, the process cannot be hurried; acknowledging the significance of the process and high-level stakes associated with possible outcomes. Consultation needs to be open, accessible and inclusive of key stakeholders such as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Representatives from each of the Local Thriving Communities.

A treaty, however, cannot be one-sided. The whole Queensland community needs to feel confident that the treaty is the product of genuine and widespread consultation, but non-Indigenous people must be committed to deep listening.

The wisdom of those who work closely in the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education must also be considered. There are many Indigenous Support Officers across all sectors of education with a unique relationship with First Nations students. Their expertise must be harnessed to ensure young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices can contribute to the desired outcome.

The voice of youth must also be actively sought and reflected in any outcome. Opportunities must be provided to ensure that young people have access to ensure that their opinions are considered. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are uniquely placed to share their insights and dreams of how a treaty may provide recognition of the important role our First Nations People play in shaping our social, economic and spiritual future.

3. [What would you like a treaty to achieve in Queensland?](#)

QCEC would like to see a treaty promote greater understanding of, and appreciation for, the histories, cultures and spiritualities of our First Nations People, and be a positive step towards true and lasting reconciliation. We would like to see the treaty develop a meaningful framework that is inclusive of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, with short and long-term goals that enable empowerment, meaningful change and targeted success.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures is one of the three cross-curriculum priorities of the Australian Curriculum and all Queensland Catholic schools are committed to this priority. Many of our schools utilise the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elaborations in delivering the curriculum in recognition that these are not only beneficial in enhancing learning outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but all students as they have proven to be engaging and relevant to all.

A treaty could help to give broader recognition to those seeking to achieve reconciliation. Each year, during Catholic Education Week, the Aunty Joan Hendriks Reconciliation Award is presented to recognise staff members who create positive change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff and/or develop an improved understanding of Indigenous cultural heritage in Catholic school communities. In 2019, this award was presented to the Deadly Indigenous Education Workers Team, to recognise outstanding work by a team of Indigenous staff members.

By publicly recognising those who work for reconciliation, the Queensland Catholic education community highlights an expectation that reconciliation is everyone's responsibility. Our hope is that the treaty would allow for similar recognition of those who strive for recognition of the unique place that our First Nations People hold and to serve as an inspiration for all

Queenslanders to work for a better understanding of the histories, cultures and spiritualities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

4. [What would you like to see included in a treaty in Queensland?](#)

The treaty should acknowledge the long history of First Nations Peoples in Queensland, including the history of dispossession since colonisation. It must also promote recognition of how this history continues to impact on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today.

The treaty must include recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of this nation and acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were the original custodians of this land. The treaty should also identify education, health and wellbeing as priority areas for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and show a commitment to improving these areas.

It must be a hope-filled document, outlining the wisdom that can be learned from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and spiritualities and principles needed to achieve reconciliation. QCEC notes and supports the implications such a treaty may have on curriculum and learning within our schools.

5. [What needs to be done to support truth telling as part of this Path to Treaty?](#)

It is important that a shared understanding is established regarding the purpose of a treaty in order to ensure that all discussions are truly respectful. Any work towards developing a treaty must authentically reflect the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and articulate the purpose and objective. It is critical that this is done in collaboration with First Nations Peoples, so as to maximise the likely success of the treaty process.

A positive communications strategy also needs to be developed and implemented. Such a strategy should aim at ensuring the media provides unbiased and factual information to the Queensland public about the Path to Treaty. This could be augmented by effective and engaging online resources.

Given that Australia is the only Commonwealth country that does not have a treaty with its First Nations Peoples, it is important that the process to establish a treaty in Queensland is positive and that it engenders respect. The telling of stories, with an emphasis on stories of hope, is a powerful opportunity that must be utilised. Yarning Circles would be one appropriate method for engaging a wide cross section of First Nations People. Consideration could also be given to other opportunities that would enable people to provide input to the treaty process beyond the standard written submission and face to face consultation. For example, art is an important medium to allow First Nations Peoples, especially young people, to express their hopes and concerns for a treaty, in a culturally safe manner. Finally, it is important that education resources are developed and distributed across sectors, schools and communities.

6. [Are there any elements from treaty reforms in other states, territories or countries that you think could work in Queensland?](#)

QCEC would endorse the Northern Territory and Victorian examples of appointing a Commissioner to maintain a positive momentum to the treaty process. The Commissioner

should be an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person and be independent. Ideally, the Path to Treaty will achieve bipartisan support, be adequately resourced and continue regardless of which political party holds government. Victoria's example of establishing an Aboriginal Representative Body also has some merit but a process to consult widely must be mandated. Like the Northern Territory approach, the Queensland Government is urged to establish an initial agreement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, to create a method of consultation and to develop a framework for treaty negotiations.

It is imperative, in such a diverse environment as Queensland, that the focus of consultation is as broad as possible and that the process is not imposed or rushed. The three principles of New Zealand's Treaty of partnership, protection and participation could be reflected across the areas of education, health, housing and employment.

7. **What are the key issues we need to consider?**

A key issue for consideration is acknowledgement that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the first Australians with the oldest continuing cultures in human history. This incredible fact needs to be reflected in any treaty. Allied to this is a recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have an ongoing spiritual closeness to land, seas and waterways. It is also vital to understand the unique characteristics of the many different groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and not to assume that what suits one group will equally apply to others. The challenge to build consensus will be difficult but the goal of achieving a Treaty with Queensland's First Nations Peoples has the potential to change lives and create a positive framework that supports healing and the realisation of true reconciliation.

8. **What are your priorities for the next steps for the Path to Treaty in Queensland?**

In pursuing the Path to Treaty, attention must be focussed on ensuring that the process is inclusive of the whole of Queensland, enjoys bipartisan support and is sustainable. It is also important that people in communities are kept informed of progress and have equitable opportunities to inform, shape and critique developments as the process progresses.

9. **How would you like to keep the conversation going about the Path to Treaty?**

QCEC suggests that the key to keeping the conversation going is to garner bipartisan support and ensure dialogue is respectful and guided by the principles of personal dignity, social justice and equity. A considered, inclusive and comprehensive communication strategy will be required.

Should you wish to discuss any of these responses further, please contact Yvonne Ries, Director - Education at yvonner@qcec.catholic.edu.au.



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