



## The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council

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### **Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs**

Parliament of Australia

Submitted via: [rhvinquiry@aph.gov.au](mailto:rhvinquiry@aph.gov.au)

Dear Committee Members,

On behalf of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC), I am pleased to submit this response to the Inquiry into Racism, Hate and Violence Directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

This submission has been prepared solely for this inquiry and has not been published elsewhere. It draws on a structured community consultation conducted by NATSICC in April 2026, through which members of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic communities across New South Wales, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory shared their experiences and insights. We note that the consultation reached a relatively small number of respondents within a specific faith community context, and the submission should be read accordingly — as a contribution grounded in genuine community voice rather than a comprehensive survey of First Nations experience nationally.

All respondents have consented to their responses being included in this submission on an anonymous basis. Respondents were also advised that they are welcome and encouraged to make direct submissions to the Committee if they wish their individual voices to be represented in full. Some have indicated they intend to do so.

We commend the Committee for undertaking this inquiry. The experiences shared by our communities reflect systemic issues of national significance. We trust this submission will contribute meaningfully to the Committee's deliberations and to the development of lasting, community-led responses to racism, hate and violence directed at First Nations people.

Yours sincerely,

**Shirley Quaresimin**

Chairperson

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## **Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs**

Inquiry into Racism, Hate and Violence Directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

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### **Executive Summary**

This submission is made by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC), the peak advisory body to the Australian Catholic Bishops on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics. Grounded in the principles of Catholic Social Teaching — in particular the God-given dignity of every person, solidarity with the marginalised, and the preferential option for the poor — NATSICC holds that opposing racism is a matter of faith as well as policy. It is in that spirit that this submission is offered.

The submission draws on a community consultation conducted in April 2026 with members of First Nations Catholic communities across New South Wales, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory.

The experiences shared by our communities are consistent with national evidence: racism directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is pervasive, systemic and causing serious harm. It is not confined to isolated incidents. It operates through institutions, online platforms, public life and the everyday movements of First Nations people through Australian society. The weight of evidence, including from our own consultation, suggests the situation is worsening rather than improving.

Three findings from our consultation are particularly worthy of the Committee's attention. First, the defeat of the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum has been experienced by community members as a turning point, after which racism in public and online spaces became more overt and brazen. Second, online racism — amplified by anonymous platforms with inadequate moderation — is reaching children and young people with nowhere to escape, and has been directly linked by community members to suicidal ideation. Third, across the reporting avenues available — police, employers, anti-discrimination bodies and online platforms — community members describe a consistent pattern of complaints that go unaddressed, of being disbelieved or dismissed, and of perpetrators facing no consequence. Existing laws and mechanisms appear insufficient to meet the scale of the harm being experienced.

NATSICC's communities also bear witness to what is possible when institutions live up to their values: faith, culture, Country and community provide profound strength and resilience in the face of racism. This submission respectfully invites the Committee to consider recommendations commensurate with both the scale of the harm and the depth of that resilience.

## **About NATSICC**

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) is the peak advisory body to the Australian Catholic Bishops on issues relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics. Founded in 1992 and based in Adelaide, NATSICC draws representatives from each State and Territory through local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Ministries. NATSICC is a not-for-profit organisation funded by the Catholic Church and Caritas Australia's First Nations program.

NATSICC advises the Bishops Commission for Relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics and leads a range of initiatives supporting First Nations Catholics across Australia, including cultural training programs, advocacy, pastoral support and community formation.

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## **Consultation Methodology**

In April 2026, NATSICC distributed a structured consultation questionnaire to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic community members and ministries across Australia. Ten substantive responses were received from individuals and community groups in New South Wales, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory. NATSICC acknowledges that this is a small and geographically limited sample, drawn from within a specific faith community context. The responses represent the experiences of a particular cohort of First Nations Catholics and should not be read as representative of the full breadth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience nationally. They are offered as an authentic contribution of community voice within NATSICC's sphere of engagement.

The consultation instrument was designed by NATSICC for a Catholic community context, and responses reflect that framing — with participants drawing on their experiences within parish, school and ministry settings as well as in broader public and institutional life. The submission situates the evidence within wider national patterns of racism, institutional failure and community resilience documented across many sectors of Australian society. Where themes from the consultation align with nationally documented evidence, that alignment is noted. Where experiences appear specific to particular community or institutional contexts, the submission reflects that specificity rather than overstating its reach.

All respondents provided consent for their responses to be included in this submission on an anonymous basis. No names or identifying details of individual respondents appear in this submission. Respondents were explicitly advised that they are welcome and encouraged to make direct submissions to the Committee if they wish their voices to be represented in full, and some have indicated they intend to do so.

The submission synthesises themes across all responses. Where experiences are described, they are illustrative of patterns observed across the evidence base rather than claims about the universality of any specific experience.

## **Grounding in Faith and Catholic Social Teaching**

Having heard from its communities, NATSICC offers its response to the Committee grounded in the principles of Catholic Social Teaching — the ethical and spiritual foundation that informs all of NATSICC’s public advocacy. For NATSICC, opposing racism is not merely a policy position. It is a matter of faith and moral responsibility.

Catholic Social Teaching affirms that every human person is created in the image and likeness of God — *imago Dei* — and possesses inherent, God-given dignity that no act of racism, hate or violence can diminish. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are subjected to racial abuse, institutional exclusion or ideologically motivated violence, their God-given dignity is being attacked. This is a spiritual harm as well as a social one, and it demands a response grounded in both faith and justice.

The principle of solidarity calls us to recognise that we are one human family, and that the suffering of our First Nations brothers and sisters is the concern of all. Solidarity is not passive sympathy — it is active, costly and requires those with power and platform to stand alongside those who are most marginalised. The preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, a cornerstone of Catholic Social Teaching, places a particular obligation on the Church and its institutions to stand first with those who experience the deepest disadvantage. In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — the First Peoples of this land — are precisely those to whom this principle is directed.

The principle of the common good reminds us that the wellbeing of all members of society is a shared responsibility. Racism diminishes the common good — it fractures community, erodes trust, and prevents the full participation of First Nations people in the life of the nation. The principle of subsidiarity, which holds that decisions should be made at the most local and community level possible, underpins NATSICC’s insistence that responses to racism must be community-led and grounded in First Nations self-determination rather than imposed from above.

The Church’s teaching on care for creation resonates deeply with First Nations peoples’ profound spiritual connection to Country. The land is not merely a resource — it is a living relationship, a source of identity, culture and belonging. Racism that denies this connection, or that seeks to sever First Nations people from Country, is a form of spiritual violence that Catholic Social Teaching is equipped to name and resist.

It is in this spirit — of faith seeking justice, of the Church walking in solidarity with its most marginalised members — that NATSICC offers the following evidence and recommendations to the Committee.

## **Term of Reference 1: Nature, Prevalence and Impact**

Community members described racism across a wide range of everyday settings including workplaces, schools, healthcare, public spaces, media and faith communities. Forms of racism reported include: direct racial abuse and slurs in public and in schools; racial profiling by media outlets; stereotyping and identity-questioning in institutional settings; dismissal of First Nations cultural practices and identity; and the deliberate erasure of Aboriginal presence in institutional and community spaces.

Institutional racism — embedded in systems, structures and silences rather than only in individual acts — was identified by multiple respondents as a defining feature of their experience. Examples drawn from education settings include: staff questioning colleagues' Aboriginality on the basis of skin colour; explicit statements that "real Aboriginals" live elsewhere; condescending remarks to First Nations professionals about how they "make it" given their "backgrounds"; and the tendency to respond to the disengagement of some First Nations students by classifying them within disability funding categories, rather than addressing the underlying causes of disengagement. This raises concerns that students may be grouped in ways that reflect structural patterns linked to race, rather than individual need.

Institutional silences are equally significant: for example the denial of a staff gathering to support First Nations employees after the referendum result; and refusal to acknowledge culturally significant dates. In some faith settings, community members described similar experiences of erasure — including the removal of the NATSICC Acknowledgement Plaque from a parish wall, which had not been restored eighteen months later. This small act carried a large symbolic weight, communicating to community members that their presence and recognition within that space was not valued.

The impacts on wellbeing, community participation and cultural identity are profound and compounding. Community members described a constant state of guardedness in public, the erosion of trust in institutions, disconnection from cultural and faith communities, and the exhaustion of repeatedly having their experiences dismissed. People withdraw from workplaces, school events, parish activities and leadership opportunities for fear of judgement, tokenism or further exclusion. Culture is drawn on tokenistically — First Nations people valued for dancing at NAIDOC but not supported through safe spaces or inclusive policies throughout the year. For children and young people the impacts are particularly acute: young people are openly expressing exhaustion from racism, with one community member documenting a child asking why people do not like them. Intergenerational trauma is being reactivated by new incidents. The post-referendum period was described by one respondent as a time of mourning without space or time to grieve — a quiet and telling description of collective grief with no institutional acknowledgment. Community members also observed that First Nations women — particularly those who appear vulnerable or lack confidence in public settings — are disproportionately targeted by racism. This intersection of gender and Indigeneity as compounding risk factors warrants specific attention in the Committee's deliberations.

Multiple respondents independently identified the defeat of the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum as a significant turning point. The referendum outcome appears to have signalled to some Australians a social permission to express racism more openly — including saying directly to First Nations people "you lost." Online and in-person racism is described as more brazen since October 2023 than at any previous point in recent memory.

## Term of Reference 2: Online Platforms

Online racism is described across multiple responses as pervasive, escalating and causing serious harm. Community members documented hostility in comment sections targeting a school's decision to rename sports houses after Aboriginal peoples, sustained negative commentary following the Voice referendum, threats of violence in response to sharing information about the Appin Massacre Memorial, and the online trolling of a First Nations community leader for incorporating a Smoking Ceremony into a Church service. Toxic content targeting First Nations people intensifies around culturally significant dates, particularly 26 January, to the point where community members routinely avoid opening comment sections or engaging with social media altogether on those days.

Anonymity is consistently identified as the central enabling factor. The absence of identity accountability allows racist content to proliferate without personal consequence. Algorithms and clickbait are identified as actively shaping what content is amplified and what moderation decisions are made — prioritising engagement over community safety. Online platforms are assessed across responses as wholly inadequate in their moderation, speed of response and understanding of the specific forms that racism directed at First Nations people takes.

The cumulative effect on community members is significant: some have deleted their social media accounts entirely to escape toxic hate speech, while others describe attempting to respond with patience and education only to be met with defensiveness, making it unsafe to remain in the exchange. This withdrawal from online public life is not a free choice — it is a harm. It represents the loss of community connection, public voice and cultural participation for people who have been driven out of shared spaces by unaddressed racism.

The harm to children and young people is particularly serious. Previous generations could physically remove themselves from hostile environments; in an online world, young people face racism in person and online simultaneously, with no space to withdraw to. Students are consuming toxic social media content that is actively influencing how they engage with First Nations peers and communities. One community member directly linked online bullying to suicidal ideation among family members and friends. This Committee should treat this as one of the most urgent findings in this submission.

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## Term of Reference 3: Effective Initiatives

Community members identified several approaches as effective in reducing racism and supporting healing and reconciliation. Mandatory cultural training — delivered consistently, led by Elders, renewed annually, and applied across all levels of institutions from school to parliament — is the single most widely recommended intervention across the evidence base. NATSICC's own online cultural training program was specifically noted as effective, with a call for universal uptake across Catholic organisations.

Critically, one respondent with direct experience in a large Catholic education system identified top-down institutional leadership as the essential precondition for cultural change: when executives actively promote anti-racism values, model them visibly, and hold non-compliant staff accountable, the culture of an institution shifts. Without that leadership commitment, training and policy remain aspirational rather than operational. Specific programs identified as effective include: community-led truth-telling speaker series run annually by an Archdiocese;

parish Reconciliation Action Plan information sessions; cultural education and yarning circles; and strong local relationships between institutions and First Nations communities. Within some archdiocesan contexts, culturally respectful liturgies and genuine partnership with First Nations peoples are described as having begun a meaningful journey toward long-term commitment.

Faith, culture, Country and community are consistently described as sources of profound strength and resilience. Critically, one respondent named something that gives this observation its full weight: these values — faith, culture, community, connection to Country — were taken from First Nations people through colonisation. Programs and relationships that reconnect people to them are therefore not supplementary to the work of addressing racism; they are central to it. The Church — at its best — is experienced as a place of genuine belonging, solidarity and healing, and NATSICC Assemblies are cited as exemplary in bringing communities together with mutual respect between Bishops and community members.

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#### **Term of Reference 4: Ideologically Motivated Extremism**

Community members reported heightened vigilance when wearing Indigenous-identifying clothing in public, and described choosing to stay home on culturally significant days due to credible threats from extremist groups — including a police warning that a neo-Nazi group intended to attend an Invasion Day gathering in one community. Respondents also described exposure to white supremacist activity in specific regional communities in Queensland, and documented instances of Vote No pamphlets being left on school staffroom tables during the referendum period — illustrating how ideologically motivated hostility to First Nations rights can operate within institutional settings as well as in public. The self-restriction of First Nations people's movements and participation in cultural events due to extremist threat is itself a significant harm that warrants the Committee's attention.

The Invasion Day bombing attempt in Perth on 26 January 2026 — the event that in significant part prompted this inquiry — was experienced by our communities not only as a physical threat but as a demonstration of a deeper, systemic problem. The delay in characterising the attack as an act of terrorism, and the contrast community members drew with the immediate framing applied to comparable attacks on other communities, reinforced a long-held and well-founded perception: that threats to First Nations people are accorded less urgency and gravity by authorities than threats to others. That disparity is itself a harm this Committee should address.

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#### **Term of Reference 5: Reporting Mechanisms**

The failure of reporting mechanisms is one of the most consistent and serious findings across this consultation. Across every available avenue — police, employers, Church institutions, anti-discrimination bodies and online platforms — community members describe a pattern of complaints that produce no meaningful consequence.

Specific documented outcomes include: racist perpetrators in a workplace told they would be asked to leave, still in their roles five years later; a formal complaint about a public racist

incident resulting in the complainant being told first that it did not happen, then that no offence was intended — with the burden placed on the Aboriginal person to accept the perpetrator's benign intent; employer and HR processes that prioritise protection of staff over support for complainant families; and families left without communication, feedback or accountability after raising concerns. Anti-discrimination bodies are described as underfunded and slow. Police are described across multiple responses as not culturally informed and unlikely to respond appropriately. One respondent identified the absence of a formal racism policy in their workplace as a foundational structural gap — without such a policy, there is no framework within which accountability is even possible.

A pointed concern was raised by one respondent regarding a perceived gap in hate speech protections: that existing laws appear to provide stronger safeguards in some contexts, including against antisemitic language, than for racism directed at First Nations people. This perceived gap suggests that some of the most harmful speech targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may fall outside the effective reach of current legal protections. The ongoing failure to prevent deaths in custody was also raised as the most serious and irreversible expression of the failure of institutional protection — a reminder that the consequences of inadequate systems are not only social and psychological but fatal.

The barriers to reporting are compounding and mutually reinforcing: deep distrust of authorities, expectation of no meaningful outcome, fear of retaliation, shame and trauma, complexity and time burden of formal processes, the requirement to provide personal identification, and the absence of culturally safe or anonymous pathways. These barriers do not operate independently — they accumulate into a rational decision by community members not to report. The question posed by one community member — how many women and children die because reporting has no outcome — should not be dismissed as rhetorical. It reflects a lived calculation about risk, trust and the cost of engaging with systems that have historically failed First Nations people.

Current laws are described as adequate on paper but ineffective in practice — “paper tigers” that provide legal protection without operational protection. The gap between legal framework and lived reality is the central problem the Committee must address.

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## **Term of Reference 6: Other Matters**

NATSICC draws the Committee's attention to one further matter of significance: the cumulative harm of racism over time, and the erosion of the will to engage that results from years of unaddressed experience. Community members described no longer wanting to identify as Aboriginal or support other community members — because sustained racism and institutional failure had made advocacy feel futile. One respondent questioned directly whether this inquiry would produce any change, describing it as yet another exercise in putting experiences on paper with no resulting action.

This submission respectfully asks the Committee to take that voice seriously — not as cynicism to be managed, but as evidence. Consultation fatigue is itself a consequence of systemic failure. It tells the Committee that previous inquiries, reports and frameworks have not produced sufficient change in the lives of First Nations people. The standard for this

inquiry's success should be measured not in the quality of its report, but in the tangible changes that follow it.

NATSICC also notes, in the spirit of transparency, that some of the institutional experiences described by community members in this consultation occurred within Catholic settings. We do not seek to minimise this. The Catholic Church, like any institution, is called to a higher standard than it sometimes meets — and the gap between the Church's stated values and the experiences of some community members within it is a matter NATSICC takes seriously as an ongoing internal priority, separate from but related to this inquiry. Catholic Social Teaching does not permit us to look away from this. The same principles that ground our advocacy to this Committee — human dignity, solidarity, the preferential option for the poor — apply with equal force within our own institutional walls.

A related observation concerns the physical and institutional spaces in which First Nations Catholics find genuine belonging and safety. Community members described Aboriginal Catholic Ministries as having low participation numbers precisely because broader parish environments are not experienced as welcoming or safe. At the same time, Church buildings that have served as spiritual homes for local Aboriginal communities have in some cases been under consideration for sale — a prospect experienced as deeply undermining institutional commitment to First Nations community. NATSICC draws the Committee's attention to this as a broader policy principle: rather than reducing or removing the spaces in which First Nations people experience genuine safety, belonging and cultural expression, governments and institutions should be actively designating, protecting and resourcing more of them. The creation of culturally safe spaces is not peripheral to the work of addressing racism — it is central to it.

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## **Recommendations**

On the basis of this consultation, NATSICC makes the following recommendations to the Committee:

1. That the Federal Government strengthen and adequately resource anti-discrimination laws to ensure they function as genuine protections in practice, not only on paper — including through greater funding for the Australian Human Rights Commission and state and territory anti-discrimination bodies.
2. That hate speech laws be extended to provide First Nations people with equivalent legal protection to that currently afforded to other groups, including protection against racist language and incitement that currently falls outside existing legislative coverage.
3. That the Federal Government build on the Australian Public Service Commission's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Capability Framework by making Elder-led cultural competency training mandatory — rather than encouraged — across all federal government agencies, federally funded bodies, and institutions receiving Commonwealth funding. Training should be renewed annually, designed and delivered in partnership with First Nations communities, and supported by compliance monitoring.

4. That online platforms operating in Australia be required under legislation to implement and enforce enforceable codes of conduct addressing racist and hateful content, with particular attention to content targeting First Nations people, removal of anonymous posting as a shield for racial abuse, and faster response times for reported content.
5. That the Federal Government develop and fund culturally safe, anonymous reporting pathways for racism and hate incidents — designed in partnership with First Nations communities — that do not require complainants to navigate complex bureaucratic processes or expose themselves to retaliation.
6. That law enforcement and intelligence agencies adopt consistent, transparent standards for characterising and responding to threats targeting First Nations people — equivalent to those applied when other communities are threatened — and that agencies be required to report publicly on their response to extremist threats directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
7. That First Nations peoples' own cultural, community and faith-based strengths be recognised and resourced as central to healing and reconciliation — and that any government response to this inquiry be developed in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, led by community voices rather than designed for them.
8. That the Federal Government endorse and fully implement the Australian Human Rights Commission's National Anti-Racism Framework without further delay.

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*Catholic Social Teaching calls the Church not merely to witness suffering but to respond to it — with solidarity, with courage, and with the conviction that every person's dignity demands defence. The experiences shared by our communities in this consultation are not statistics. They are the lived reality of people made in the image and likeness of God, whose dignity has been diminished by racism, whose voices have been dismissed by institutions that should have protected them, and whose faith and culture sustain them through harms that should never have been inflicted.*

*One community member asked plainly whether this inquiry would produce any change, or whether it would be yet another exercise in putting experiences on paper with nothing following. That question deserves a direct answer from the Committee — not in words, but in action. NATSICC stands in solidarity with its communities in holding that hope, and we ask the Committee to honour the courage it took to share these experiences by responding with the urgency and commitment they deserve.*

*NATSICC thanks the Committee for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.*

**Shirley Quaresimin**

Chairperson, NATSICC

April 2026