**The Voice, Part 1**

*The first in a four part series*

The year is 1977 and my parents sit in excited trepidation as they wait in the Mount Gambier Institute to become Australian Citizens, a decision not taken lightly because it meant giving up their Italian citizenship.

In making that pledge of commitment to Australia my parents became as Aussie as Gough Whitlam, Don Bradman and Albert Namatjira.

For many migrants like my parents, Australia offered so much. A nation blessed with an indigenous heritage, strengthened by its British foundations and enriched by its immigrant character. A free society, that welcomed arrivals from the four corners of the world and didn’t discriminate between those who were born on Australian soil and those who were not.

Like so many first-generation Australians I will never be able to repay my parents for the sacrifices they made; it took real courage to leave a land they knew to build a new life in a country whose language and culture they didn’t.

A short 35 years after my parents became Australian citizens I was honoured by being elected as the Member for Barker - the ninth person since Federation to have been bestowed that great privilege. If that's not a statement about how welcoming a society we are, I don't know what is.

I take the opportunity at citizenship ceremonies I attend on behalf of the Federal Government to recount this experience to reassure applicants for Australian citizenship how welcome they are. Some of these applicants have moved here for work, some have moved to join family. Some have moved to escape persecution or discrimination experienced in their country of birth. No matter what their reasons for coming, the pride on their faces as they hold their Citizenship Certificate is both heart-warming and obvious.

In that moment, because the Australian Constitution does not create different classes of Australian Citizenship they have become as Aussie as John Howard, Steve Smith and Kathy Freeman. They are as Aussie as any of us. It’s not their country of birth, their race or ancestral ties that matter but rather their willingness to ‘commit to Australia’.

For as long as there is breath in my body I will I oppose any changes to the Australian Constitution that will compromise this fundamental principle. The Prime Minister’s Canberra based Voice will do just that, it will create two classes of Australian citizens; those who can trace their heritage to Australia's First Peoples and those who can’t.

It will confer exclusive rights to those with indigenous heritage and it will divide our nation by race. I encourage you to reject it and recommit to an Australia in which all of us are equal and enjoy equal rights.