

**THE ARGUMENTS FOR
AND AGAINST DEDICATED SEATS**

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This Chapter examines some of the arguments for and against the establishment of dedicated seats in the NSW Parliament.

The Inquiry was presented with a range of views on the benefits of dedicated seats for Aboriginal people and for the wider community. Some people pointed to the symbolic significance of dedicated seats. It was suggested that the initiative would be a recognition of Aboriginal people as the original owners of Australia. Other evidence suggested that dedicated seats could allow Aboriginal people to influence and contribute to legislation and policy on issues affecting Aboriginal people.

There were also a range of views presented on the arguments against the establishment of dedicated seats. These arguments included the lack of power of an Aboriginal dedicated seat and the pressure on candidates to represent the diversity of Aboriginal issues. This Chapter also discusses the suggestion that dedicated seats are undemocratic and may create a backlash and potential division between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

6.2 ARGUMENTS FOR DEDICATED SEATS

6.2.1 RECOGNITION OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AS THE ORIGINAL OWNERS OF AUSTRALIA

For many people giving evidence to the Inquiry, dedicated seats would have significant symbolic value. The majority of people at the community consultations suggested that dedicated seats would be an acknowledgment of Aboriginal people as the original owners of Australia. Many participants felt that political representation of Aboriginal people was a moral issue. One group at Lismore argued that “morally and ethically, this is a positive initiative” (Reys evidence, Lismore). At Armidale, Dr Dan Naidoo said:

It is for the Australian population to be convinced morally that years of colonialism have placed our indigenous people at a great disadvantage (Naidoo evidence, Armidale).

Mr Roy Kennedy made a similar point at the Batemans Bay meeting, suggesting that dedicated seats “could be a way of demonstrating compassion to Aboriginal people” (Kennedy evidence, Batemans Bay).

In evidence to the Committee, John Waugh, Lecturer in Law, suggested that if the Parliament moved to create dedicated seats for Aboriginal people, arguments in support of the initiatives at a referendum would be to “stress the unique historical position of indigenous people, the effect of colonisation (and) the absence of a treaty” (Waugh evidence, 27 October 1998).

The Committee also received some evidence in support of dedicated seats as an appropriate measure in response to the reconciliation process. The NSW Aboriginal Land Council considered that Australia's Aboriginal people possess sovereign rights as "First Nation Peoples" and argued that dedicated seats would not only include Aboriginal people in decision-making processes, but also contribute to "the ongoing education processes necessary for reconciliation" (Submission 22). Several participants at the Coffs Harbour meeting suggested that dedicated seats would "represent a true measure of reconciliation" (Lovelock evidence, Coffs Harbour).

6.2.2 INDIGENOUS PEOPLE HAVE DISTINCT RIGHTS OVER OTHER GROUPS

The Committee was told that the claims of Aboriginal people to dedicated seats could not be compared to other ethnic and minority groups in the New South Wales community. Some of the evidence suggested that, while sections of the community may argue against dedicated seats on the basis that other groups would demand seats, Aboriginal people have a unique status as the original owners of Australia.

The NSW Aboriginal Land Council believed that as the original owners of Australia, Aboriginal people have distinct rights compared to those possessed by other "minority groups":

This distinction has been recognised within the structure of the United Nations for decades, leading to the creation of different institutional structures for Indigenous Peoples, as well as negotiation of different legal instruments for them ... (Submission 22).

Dr James Jupp, Director of the Centre for Immigration and Multicultural Studies at the ANU, told the Committee that Aboriginal people have always been treated both legally and administratively as a "distinct entity". Dr Jupp also explained that other ethnic groups are not treated as a "distinct entity" and said,

I have never heard the view expressed that they wish to be treated as a legally distinct entity, nor that they wish to have separate representation in Parliament (Jupp evidence, 19 August 1998).

Some participants at the community consultations also argued in support of Aboriginal dedicated seats over other groups in the community. Pauline Gordon, at the Lismore meeting, said that Australian Aboriginal people, the indigenous people of this country, are "nowhere near on a level with immigrant groups, ethnic groups, or non-Aboriginal groups" (Gordon evidence, Lismore). Another participant at the Armidale meeting commented on the unique status of Aboriginal people and their claim to dedicated seats over other ethnic groups:

I, as an Indian Australian, do not think I am a traditional owner. You are talking about traditional owners, people from this country, and I think they

have the right to say “I belong here, and I do not wish to be alienated; I very much wish to be part of the decision-making process” (Sivaraman evidence, Armidale).

6.2.3 PROVIDING A VOICE FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

One of the strongest arguments for dedicated seats at the community consultations was the importance of having an Aboriginal voice in Parliament to ensure Aboriginal issues are raised and debated. One group of Moree participants argued that there would be an “Aboriginal perspective on the issues being discussed - for example, the environment, mining, use of resources and so on” (Telford evidence, Moree). At Wagga Wagga, participants felt the an Aboriginal Member would “give a voice to the indigenous community ... and create a level playing field” (Bilney briefing, Wagga Wagga). At Lismore, Jenny Dowell said that the initiative would give Aboriginal people a voice “particularly in such issues as health, education, social issues, and corrective services” (Dowell evidence, Lismore).

At other meetings, participants argued the importance of an Aboriginal voice to ensure the broader community are exposed to Aboriginal issues and provide a presence and dignity for Aboriginal people.

In evidence to the Committee, Ossie Cruse, Chairman of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council said that designated seats need to be introduced so that “the voice of the people (can) then be heard” (Cruse evidence, 26 September 1997). The NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs suggested that dedicated seats would provide “the opportunity for Aboriginal people to play a more inclusive role in state politics” (Submission 21).

Geoffrey Scott, Director-General of the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs told the Committee that Aboriginal representatives are best placed to represent Aboriginal people and that “existing politicians do not or cannot perform this role adequately” (Scott evidence, 26 September 1997).

6.2.4 ABORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION TO DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

A small number of submissions and witnesses commented on the potential for Aboriginal dedicated seats to influence and contribute to the decision-making processes of the NSW Parliament. The NSW Aboriginal Land Council said that an Aboriginal Member of the NSW Parliament could:

- chair and/or serve on Aboriginal Committees and influence legislative and policy proposals relating to the needs and rights of Aboriginal people;
 - inform the Parliament and guide them towards real outcomes for the benefit of Aboriginal communities;
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- avoid the present party political polarisation of Aboriginal issues;
- produce Private Member's Bills; and
- participate in the scrutiny of expenditure review process in relation to Aboriginal matters (Submission 22).

Aden Ridgeway, recently elected Federal Senator for the Australian Democrats, and former Executive Director of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council felt that Aboriginal participation in government could lead to some possible changes in the quality of life for Aboriginal peoples. He explained to the Committee that indigenous Members could chair Aboriginal Committees and "allow closer scrutiny ... of services being delivered by government agencies" (Ridgeway evidence, 26 September 1997).

Many participants at the community consultations felt that a major advantage of dedicated seats was that Aboriginal people would be able to provide Parliament with the expertise to devise and implement policies for Aboriginal people. Participants at Parramatta said that dedicated seats would give Aboriginal people "some actual, real political power" and the opportunity to influence debate (Frøland evidence, Parramatta). One member of the Armidale meeting explained the importance of Aboriginal participation in "law-making":

A lot of the laws that we are dealing with are really set out in a destructive way for Aboriginal people; they are not taking into account what the culture of the Aboriginal people is, and what is happening in Aboriginal communities. ... A dedicated seat would mean more power to the Aboriginal people in New South Wales (Libbs evidence, Armidale).

Dubbo participants argued that dedicated seats "would lead to self-management of Aboriginal affairs" (Lancaster evidence, Dubbo). The NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs suggested that dedicated seats could demonstrate a commitment by the State government to the notion of self-determination for Aboriginal people in NSW (Submission 21).

6.2.5 OVERCOMING EXISTING BARRIERS TO REPRESENTATION IN PARLIAMENT

Several people suggested that dedicated seats were the only way to secure a seat in Parliament for Aboriginal people as the usual processes had failed to achieve this. Michael Clancy, Assistant Director of Electoral Education with the Australian Electoral Commission, told the Committee that a dedicated seat could be one way to ensure Aboriginal people have political representation:

I think it is positive because I do not see any way, unless an Aboriginal person is preselected by a major political party, that they would be able to get anybody into Parliament (Clancy evidence, 27 October 1997).

Mr Ray Leslie, a 1990 candidate for the Labor Party for the seat of Parkes, suggested one advantage is that dedicated seats might provide the opportunity to bypass the existing barriers to an Aboriginal person seeking seats in Parliament. Mr Leslie said these barriers include “difficulties in being endorsed for a major political party” and “lack of opportunity to stand for a safe seat” (Submission 12). Mr Leslie argued that, if an Aboriginal person cannot access a seat in Parliament in the usual manner, then intervention such as “reserved seats” may be necessary (Submission 12).

At the Parramatta community consultation, some participants supported Mr Leslie’s claim (who was in attendance) and suggested that party politics and party structure did little to encourage Aboriginal participation. One group of participants felt that one advantage to dedicated seats would “make it possible for (Aboriginal) candidates to come through, despite racism” (Frøland evidence, Parramatta).

In evidence to the Inquiry Pat Dixon, Deputy Mayor of Armidale and a recent candidate for the Labor Party in the Federal seat of New England, suggested that political parties “put up an Aboriginal candidate when they know they are not going to win a seat” and that a dedicated seat would be one positive way to ensure Aboriginal representation (Dixon evidence, 13 October 1997). Philip Donnelly, State Manager of ATSIC, also said there was little sign of the willingness of political parties to pre-select minority groups and that Aboriginal people are suspicious of mainstream political life. He argued that dedicated seats might be one way to ensure Aboriginal representation until such time as there is greater acceptance of political processes and structures by Aboriginal people (Donnelly evidence, 26 September 1997).

6.2.6 IMPROVED AWARENESS OF ABORIGINAL CULTURE

The Committee heard some evidence from individuals and organisations that a dedicated seat could improve general community awareness of Aboriginal culture, as well as educate non-Aboriginal Parliamentarians about Aboriginal values and culture.

The NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs suggested that dedicated seats could lead to a shift in perception and understanding in non-Aboriginal communities about Aboriginal peoples and cultures in NSW, resulting in “better relationships” (Submission 21).

The potential for dedicated seats to improve broad community awareness of Aboriginal culture was also raised at the consultation meetings. At the Lismore meeting, one group suggested that having an Aboriginal presence in Parliament would mean that:

Those people who would not normally have contact with Aboriginal people would have an opportunity to hear another point of view (Reys evidence, Lismore).

The Wagga Wagga briefing also presented some ideas on the possible educative value of dedicated seats. Con Bilney argued that there would be a “cultural awareness and sensitivity to some of the issues that are facing the Aboriginal community” (Bilney briefing, Wagga Wagga).

Some participants also argued that a dedicated seat could help to dispel misinformation and racist attitudes in community about “Aboriginal abilities to speak on and represent the views of their communities on a range of issues” (Telford evidence, Batemans Bay).

Several Moree participants felt that, in addition to educating the wider community, dedicated seat could “enhance” the cultural awareness of non-Aboriginal Members of Parliament (Telford evidence, Moree). Michael Dodson suggested that dedicated seats could have educative value for other Members of Parliament and result in a better understanding of Indigenous issues (Submission 24).

6.2.7 PROVIDE ROLE MODELS AND ENCOURAGE ABORIGINAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

It was suggested to the Committee that dedicated seats would provide Aboriginal communities with leadership and role models which could encourage Aboriginal people to become more politically involved.

The low levels of political participation by Aboriginal people was identified as a problem in submissions and evidence to the Committee, with some suggestions that dedicated seats could have a positive impact on Aboriginal people. Michael Dodson said the existence of Aboriginal Members of Parliament would provide much needed role models and mentors for Aboriginal people (Submission 24). Mr Dodson also suggested that a dedicated seat may result in an increase in interest of Aboriginal peoples in standing for election. Aden Ridgeway said that Aboriginal representation would raise the confidence levels of Aboriginal communities, and that the creation of dedicated seats “if properly designed and implemented” would help make government and the Parliament more relevant to Aboriginal people (Ridgeway evidence, 26 September 1997).

Many participants at the community consultations believed that dedicated seats have the potential to make Aboriginal people feel they are being listened to and to give indigenous communities “greater faith in the parliamentary system” (Dowell evidence, 9 June 1998). One group in Lismore argued that an Aboriginal dedicated seat could provide a:

role model for younger people, to realise that their vote has value and they have a voice, and that their opinions ... can be represented in Parliament (Dowell evidence, Lismore).

Participants in Armidale suggested that dedicated seats could raise the “self-profile or the self worth of Aboriginal people” (Hassett evidence, Armidale), while one group at

Batemans Bay suggested that “an Aboriginal Member of Parliament would provide leadership for Aboriginal communities” (Horey evidence, Batemans Bay). Another group at Batemans Bay felt that an Aboriginal dedicated seat would encourage more Aboriginal people to enrol and vote in elections (Telford evidence, Batemans Bay).

6.3 ARGUMENTS AGAINST DEDICATED SEATS

6.3.1 DEDICATED SEATS MAY BE SEEN AS UNDEMOCRATIC

A large number of the submissions from individuals who opposed dedicated seats for Aboriginal people argued that they would be undemocratic. For some people, the initiative would contravene the principles underlying the Westminster system of government - particularly if the Aboriginal Member in a dedicated seat had the balance of power.

Mr George Smith, Q. C. said the provision of dedicated seats “for ANY specified group offends the democratic principle of ‘one vote, one value’” (Submission 14). Mr N.S. Stewart argued that the introduction of fixed seats for a “special interest group” is a distortion of the Westminster system; a distortion that may have “unexpected and major drawbacks” (Submission 13).

While Michael Dodson does not suggest that dedicated seats would be undemocratic he does say:

the creation of more Aboriginal seats than would be representative of the number of Aboriginal people in the electorate must not contravene international or domestic law (Submission 24).

Jenny Dowell, a participant at the Lismore meeting said “it could be seen that dedicated seats for Aborigines could contradict the one vote one value tenet of our electoral system” (Dowell evidence, Lismore).

There was some concern in both submissions and in evidence at the community consultations that one or two Aboriginal representatives could end up with the balance of power. Some people felt that “it would be wrong for such a minority to hold so much power” (Submission 30).

6.3.2 OTHER MINORITY GROUPS WILL DEMAND DEDICATED SEATS

While most individuals and organisations commenting on the demands of other groups for dedicated seats suggested that Aboriginal people had a special claim to be treated as a “separate entity” (see Section 6.2.2), a considerable number of participants at the community consultations felt that “ethnic and other special interest groups could also demand dedicated seats” (Dowell evidence, Lismore).

Participants at both the Dubbo and Coffs Harbour meetings felt that other groups may expect dedicated seats, and there was the potential for this to create division within the community (Lancaster evidence, Dubbo; Eakins evidence, Coffs Harbour). Another group of participants at Armidale said that dedicated seats may create:

a perception of special treatment, with injustice for the other groups. We brought up that the Greek population, and the Italian population and the Asian population have got enough people now to (have) their own members of Parliament, so they might think having a dedicated seat could be an injustice (Hassett evidence, Armidale).

6.3.3 LIMITED POWER TO THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY AND PRESSURE ON THEIR REPRESENTATIVES

In evidence to the Committee witnesses and submissions identified two aspects to the potential failure of dedicated seats to deliver real power to Aboriginal people: that a small number of seats would provide limited power to Aboriginal communities; and that, in the case of only one or two seats, the Aboriginal representatives could not adequately address the diversity of indigenous interests. Some evidence to the Committee also said that the Aboriginal Members would be under extreme pressure to represent Aboriginal people, particularly if the representative had the balance of power.

A number of participants at the community meetings questioned whether an Aboriginal Member would have any real power if there was only a small number of dedicated seats. A group of participants at Armidale suggested that a limited number of seats would be “window-dressing” and that “their power would be very limited” (Davis evidence, Armidale).

Michael Dodson felt that the capacity of the Aboriginal representative to effect change may be limited as the Member would be reliant on the votes of other non-Aboriginal Members for legislative change.

Several individuals and organisations expressed concern about the effectiveness of a small number of dedicated seats in a majority, non-indigenous Parliament. David Pross, Chairperson of the Ngaimpe Aboriginal Corporation said some areas of NSW such as the Central Coast region do not have a strong representation of the original people, and are made up of a variety of peoples from all over Australia:

They have many different needs and are often in conflict over the limited resources available to them. This lack of cohesiveness is only exacerbated by the high mobility of the population, many members of which are transient (Submission 16).

Mr Pross doubted the ability of a small number of dedicated seats to represent the diversity of issues confronting them. Mr Dodson also suggested it would be difficult for

one person to represent the diversity of views of Aboriginal people in New South Wales (Submission 24).

At Armidale, Byron Davis was also concerned about the possible impact of a small number of dedicated seats:

There are 60 nations in New South Wales, and if there are four in there how ... can they represent everyone in New South Wales? (Davis evidence, Armidale).

A considerable number of participants at the community meetings commented on the pressures an Aboriginal Member would be under, especially if there was only one or two seats. A group of Armidale participants were concerned that there would be “unrealistic expectations” on the Aboriginal Member and they would be swamped with work (Davis evidence, Armidale). Participants at Redfern felt that, if there was only one or two dedicated seats, the Aboriginal Member would be isolated (Maybury evidence, Redfern). The Batemans Bay meeting suggested that:

There could be unbearable pressure on the Aboriginal Members, not just from their own people, through unrealistic expectations, but through pressure from the main political parties to get their vote on things (Telford evidence, Batemans Bay).

There was also some concern at the consultations that dedicated seats may give Aboriginal people the balance of power and expose them to pressure from the major parties. At Armidale one group of participants suggested that, in the case of Aboriginal Members having the balance of power, the representative “would be the focal point of people pointing the finger” (Hassett evidence, Armidale).

6.3.4 TOKENISTIC AND PATRONISING TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

One of the strongest arguments against dedicated seats was that the initiative would be patronising and would be seen by the Aboriginal people, and the broader community, as a form of tokenism.

At many of the community consultation meetings participants acknowledged that the existence of dedicated seats in the NSW Parliament might imply that Aboriginal people could not gain seats on their own merit. Some participants, such as Don Dodd, felt passionately that “politicians are only being tokenistic and patronising by having dedicated seats within the Parliament” (Dodd evidence, Parramatta).

Jenny Eakins argued that dedicated seats could be “seen as a hand-out. It could be seen as demeaning, and it could be seen as tokenistic” (Eakins evidence, Coffs Harbour).

John Ah Kit, Member for Arnhem, Northern Territory Legislative Assembly felt that the notion of reserving parliamentary seats had a number of “fundamental flaws”:

It would be a form of tokenism that would permanently lock indigenous people into a minority and would be perceived - however unfairly - as a form of “special treatment” for indigenous people that would do little to legitimise our role in the political process (Submission 10).

Mr Clancy told the Committee that dedicated seats could become tokenistic and ineffectual, particularly if the Aboriginal Member is part of a major political party. Mr Clancy said that if the Aboriginal Member was a member of a political party, “their real voice is lost because they get involved in party politics” and they would risk “alienating a certain number of the electorate” (Clancy evidence, 27 October 1998).

Aden Ridgeway told the Committee that the issue of the dedicated seats as tokenistic was dependent on the mechanics of the seats. Mr Ridgeway said that if Aboriginal dedicated seats were not given the same rights, duties and privileges as other Members of Parliament, the initiative would be regarded by the Aboriginal community, as well as the broader community, as being a token gesture, “rather than something of real significance within Parliament” (Ridgeway evidence, 26 September 1997).

6.3.5 MARGINALISE ABORIGINAL ISSUES AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Evidence to the Inquiry suggested there were two possible outcomes which are arguments against dedicated seats. First, that Aboriginal issues would be marginalised, and that a dedicated seat might result in non-Aboriginal Members of Parliament failing to take an interest in Aboriginal issues; and second, that mainstream political parties will not act to ensure Aboriginal people are recruited to their party as members and candidates.

Geoffrey Scott told the Committee that designated seats may marginalise Aboriginal issues as “the rest of Parliament would not actually focus on those issues as a whole” (Scott evidence, 26 September 1997).

The Submission by the Elected NSW Chairpersons and Commissioners of ATSIC and the NSW Aboriginal Land Council emphasised that the provision of seats should not reduce support for a “whole of government” approach to issues concerning Aboriginal people:

Representation must not be seen to be the panacea for everything. Political representation rightly implemented, will be a giant step forward, but it will not be a substitute for action and good policy across portfolios (Submission 17).

Some participants at the community meetings were worried that dedicated seats may remove the responsibility from other Members of Parliament to deal with issues that concern Aboriginal people. Joyce Clague told the Inquiry that non-Aboriginal Members may feel that:

Oh well, that's all black fellows issues, and things are going to be sorted out there, and we don't need to concern ourselves about issues related to Aboriginal people (Clague evidence, Redfern).

A participant told the Armidale meeting that a likely scenario was that the Aboriginal representative would be told “Here you are, this is to do with Aboriginal issues. It's up to you” (Davis evidence, Armidale).

There was also concern at the Redfern meeting that a dedicated seat would imply that the Aboriginal Member was to talk and act on issues only to do with Aboriginal people, and not a whole range of issues concerning the wider community.

There was limited discussion at several community meetings that dedicated seats might disadvantage Aboriginal people in their pursuit of preselection to safe seats for the major political parties. Some participants felt that this could continue to keep Aboriginal people and Aboriginal issues “in the margins”. Linda Burney, a participant at Redfern, said it was critical for the government not to “rush down the path” to dedicated seats without first thinking of the implications. Ms Burney said:

If there are dedicated seats, then the mainstream political parties will feel that they have no obligation at all to support Aboriginal candidates (Burney evidence, Redfern).

6.3.6 BACKLASH AND DIVISION IN THE COMMUNITY

There was genuine concern that any proposal to establish dedicated seats for Aboriginal people may invite a backlash from the wider community. Many Aboriginal participants at the community consultations were worried about the possibility of increased racism directed at Aboriginal people as a result of the introduction of dedicated seats. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people felt that such an initiative could create further division in the community and cause great harm to the process of reconciliation.

Many participants at the community meetings felt that dedicated seats would be perceived as “special treatment” for Aboriginal people and that this perception would lead to division in the community. At Wagga Wagga one group of participants felt that the introduction of the seats “may be seen as divisive in our current political climate” (Bilney briefing, Wagga Wagga). Mr Bilney explained that certain sections of the media would take up the issue and cause greater division between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (Bilney briefing, Wagga Wagga). One Dubbo participant also argued

that dedicated seats could cause division “within Aboriginal communities” particularly regarding the representation of indigenous issues (Lancaster evidence, Dubbo).

Mr David Pross said the Committee should contemplate a possible “backlash from uninformed non-indigenous Australians, who already feel disadvantaged due to the economic environment” (Submission 16).

There was some concern that the NSW community was not ready for an initiative such as dedicated seats, and that without extensive education, further division could occur in the community. While Aden Ridgeway declared support for dedicated seats, he did suggest that there was potential for a backlash response from parts of the community and certain sections of the media that believe Aboriginal people are “being treated specially”. Mr Ridgeway placed strong emphasis on the need for education to overcome community concerns (Ridgeway evidence, 26 September 1997).

Professor Garth Nettheim, Visiting Professor of Law and Chair of the Indigenous Law Centre at the University of New South Wales told the Committee that he had some problems with the idea of designated seats and “thought it would probably be difficult to persuade the people of New South Wales at this stage to accept it”. He suggested that if Aboriginal people felt it was the best option to improve representation in Parliament, then a lot of work would need to be done “to persuade the state electorate why this should be done and how it might be done” (Nettheim evidence, 26 September 1997).

The Committee heard only limited reference to the possible negative impact of dedicated seats on reconciliation in general between Aboriginal people and the wider community, and the formal steps being taken to achieve this mutual reconciliation. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation told the Committee that the initiative could be counterproductive to the process of reconciliation between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities if there was not a considerable education campaign leading up to a referendum (Submission 25).

6.4 CONCLUSION

The Committee heard a wide range of arguments both for and against the establishment of dedicated seats in the NSW Parliament. The variety of issues discussed in submissions, and those raised by witnesses and in evidence indicates the complex nature of the proposal and the serious difficulties in adjudicating over the contradictory views.

One of the key arguments for dedicated seats was their symbolic value to Aboriginal people, as the original owners of Australia and the potential for the initiative to assist the processes of reconciliation. A number of submissions and witnesses to the Inquiry outlined other practical advantages such as providing Aboriginal people with the opportunity to contribute to legislative change and policy decisions on issues

concerning Aboriginal people. For others, an Aboriginal Parliamentary Member could have a positive impact on Aboriginal communities by providing leadership and role models and encouragement to participate in the political process.

A strong argument against dedicated seats is that they would be seen to be undemocratic by the wider community and tokenistic and patronising by Aboriginal people. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people expressed their concern that dedicated seats may contravene the democratic principle of 'one vote one value' and that other unrepresented groups may think they deserve seats in Parliament. Another issue that concerned many people at the consultation meetings was the potential for the initiative to invite a backlash and increase racism within some sections of the NSW community.

While a majority of people at the community consultations supported the introduction of seats, many acknowledged there were a number of potential problems inherent to the proposal. For most people, an extensive education campaign would be necessary to inform the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities as to the issues involved, before the introduction of seats.

The Committee concludes that there is some way to go before there is consensus in the New South Wales community on whether there should be dedicated seats in the NSW Parliament. However, the Committee supports continued and informed debate in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities about the advantages and disadvantages of the introduction of dedicated seats to the NSW Parliament.