



Mathurin Hybrid Initiative

**Global Advisory
Report**

**Australia's Voice to
Parliament: How the
referendum Became
Bitter, Divisive and
Marred in
Disinformation**

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On Saturday 14 October Australians struck down the first attempt at constitutional change in 24 years, instigating a major setback for First Nations people and reconciliation efforts. The government's 'Voice to Parliament' proposal failed to gain the necessary 'double majority' required to enact constitutional change, failing to reach both an overall majority of the electorate and the states.

The proposal

The Voice to Parliament was recommended by the historic 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart. This document was the collaborative effort of more than 250 Indigenous leaders, calling to action several reforms which would improve the lived experiences of Indigenous Australians. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people - who make up 3.8% of Australia's 26 million population - have inhabited the land for at least 65,000 years but are not mentioned in the constitution and by most socio-economic indicators, they are the most disadvantaged people.

According to the Uluru statement, Indigenous Australians feel "powerlessness" when tackling structural problems to improve their lives. These problems include having shorter life expectancy than non-Indigenous Australians, disproportionately poorer health, lower educational attainments, and higher incarceration rates. Coupled with a history of brutality and discrimination, these structural challenges have led to a sense of marginalisation among the Indigenous community. The Voice proposal was considered a right step forward in reconciliation efforts and breaking down the structural problems faced by the community.

The centrepieces for this proposal were constitutional recognition and an advisory body to parliament. When Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced his plan to hold a referendum back in March, he stated that the Voice would enshrine "recognition" that Australians "share this great island continent with the world's oldest continuous culture", adding that "Our nation's birth certificate should recognise this and be proud of it". This proposal also called for the establishing of an advisory body to parliament which would make representations to MPs and policy makers on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The campaign

Despite a positive start for the Yes campaign, with a majority in favour back when the referendum was announced, support for the proposal began dwindling as the campaign progressed. The Yes campaign argued that it was necessary for a better future for Indigenous communities emphasising recognition, listening and better results. On the other hand, the No campaign discredited the proposal as not delivering meaningful change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and for being divisive.

There was no shortage of high-profile voices in the campaign, largely in support of the yes campaign including universities, athletes, celebrities, local and multinational

companies. However, despite this, the yes campaign ultimately failed to convince the electorate. The campaign quickly became a highly charged touchstone for the country's national identity and was dominated by subjects not initially set out in the Uluru statement.

The conservative no campaign controversially repeated the catchphrase "If you don't know, vote no", encouraging audiences who are unsure about what it all means to reject the proposal instead of finding the information required. Within this campaign was a considerable cohort who maintained that Indigenous people would be the beneficiaries of special privileges, claiming that the referendum was about introducing "racial privilege". These allegations were consistently dismissed by constitutional and legal experts, but the no campaign and its activist repeatedly exploited the lack of understanding on the issue to push the idea of the nation being divided and a hidden agenda to undermine the non-Indigenous population. Another cohort within the No movement, led by Aboriginal Senator Lidia Thorpe and the Indigenous-run Blak Sovereign movement, rejected the proposal for being ineffective. This movement called for a legally binding treaty between First Nations peoples and the Australian government to be prioritised. "This is not our constitution, it was developed in 1901 by a bunch of old white fellas, and now we're asking people to put us in there - no thanks," Thorpe declared in reaction to the result.

Unfortunately, as is increasingly common in democracies around the world, disinformation was rife in this referendum campaign. Leading up to the referendum date, the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) was forced to rebuff several claims and conspiracy theories including one that alleged it was coercing yes votes from dementia sufferers. It was also reported that the AEC struggled to get posts threatening violence and spreading disinformation taken down of the social media platform, X, ahead of the referendum. Outside of social media, the AEC was forced to rebuff the accusation put forward by opposition leader, Peter Dutton and the former PM, Tony Abbott, that the decision to not count crosses on the ballot was a ploy to "stack the deck" against the no campaign, despite this being a well-established rule for six referendums over the last 30 years.

Ultimately, the proposal was defeated with 60.8% against and was defeated by an overall majority in all six of Australia's federal states. The no campaign's message resonated strongly with many voters. The defeat can be attributed to the lack of clarity of what the Voice would like in practise coupled with disinformation and fearmongering on the part of the no campaign. If Australia had voted Yes, then the next step would have been deliberation on the legislation to enact the proposal. However, the absence of a thorough end picture for the Yes movement undermined their campaign.

What next?

More than 80% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people supported the proposal and the defeat represents a significant setback for their efforts at reconciliation and

recognition. Immediately after the referendum defeat, Indigenous leaders called for a week of silence and reflection. Campaigners and supporters of the Yes movement have promised to continue advocating for the cause, and Thorpe's camp are doubling down on their effort for a formal treaty. A series of interviews conducted by ABC News reveals many Indigenous Australians feeling disappointed and devastated, and questioning whether Australia is going in the right direction for Indigenous people. Some are concerned about the result's implications on South Australia's state-based Voice to Parliament, fearing that the 64.6% defeat in the state may have numbered the days of its own Voice before it even begins. The South Australia government are adamant that the result would have "no impact whatsoever", but the atmosphere is sombre for some Indigenous communities.

The result may also be a setback for Australia's relations with the Pacific. According to RNZ Pacific leaders had a keen interest in the referendum, and the rejection of the proposal would have a negative impact on how Australia is perceived in the region. PM Anthony Albanese admitted that the defeat was heard: "When you aim high, sometimes you fall short. We understand and respect that we have". Peter Dutton regarded the result as "good for our country" and proclaimed that Australians had rejected "the prime minister's divisive referendum". The two leaders are now searching for a way forward, with Albanese focused on finding alternative ways to deliver for the Indigenous communities and Dutton looking to expand on his increased political clout.



