

The whole recognition process has a deep colonial resonance

Why did the federal government persist with the charade of Indigenous consultation if it never had any intention of change beyond symbolism?



'Malcolm Turnbull will now go down as the prime minister with the tin ear. And the tin heart.' Turnbull at Garma. Photograph: Lucy Hughes Jones/AAP

Paul Daley
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Barely two days after the federal government, under cover of a ministerial scandal, put out the trash with its rejection of Indigenous pleas for a constitutionally enshrined voice to parliament, Malcolm Turnbull's legacy in black Australia is all but fully defined.

In the linguistically and culturally diverse urban, regional and remote communities that comprise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia, Turnbull will now go down as the prime minister with the tin ear. And the tin heart.

Yes, to many Indigenous Australians Turnbull will now be remembered as the Tin Prime Minister. He is the leader who purportedly asked Indigenous Australians what

they wanted ... only to blithely dismiss their answer as soon as they gave it at Uluru in May.

The Uluru statement reflected the sentiment expressed at dozens of earlier community meetings across Australia to roundly reject symbolic acknowledgement of First Nations in the commonwealth constitution.

Much of the establishment media, like the government and the federal opposition – which shrouded genuine mainstream debate in the cloak of bipartisanship, having already reduced “recognition” to a black (yes)/white (no) issue – had little sense (surprise!) such sentiments even existed.

Few bothered to ask why Indigenous people would want symbolic recognition in what many regard as the founding document of the settler state – as opposed to the many practical measures, sadly lacking, that might actually improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human outcomes. If such a document was to acknowledge the Indigenous, they were saying, it would have to do so in a way that would amplify – rather than merely note – the black voice.

At the grass roots and at the later Uluru meetings of delegates, there was an overwhelming preference for treaties, a process of national truth-telling about this country’s appalling historical treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – and, not least, that voice to parliament, enshrined in the constitution.

Turnbull’s response? It was, he said, “very short on detail but a very big idea”.

Turnbull, who knows something of referendums from his time in the Australian republican movement, was obviously, from the start, unwilling to dare again. It’s an obvious segue to the general yawning vacuum of conviction politics and reform under his leadership, such as it is. But I’ll leave that to others.

With such a deliberately glib, patronising and ambiguous response after Uluru, however, the proposals for the voice to parliament – regardless of what it might look like – was stone dead from that moment.

Later, after the referendum council supported the Uluru statement in its report, Turnbull, speaking at Garma, kicked the can down the road, stalling his government's formal response.

Turnbull never looked remotely comfortable at Garma – the most accommodating of blackfella forums for white politicians, who will always be welcomed there and listened to, no matter how platitudinous their utterances. Little wonder really. The decision had likely already been made.

How do we know?

Go no further than the response of deputy prime minister, Barnaby Joyce, back in May when the ink was not yet dry on the Uluru Statement calling for a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous voice to parliament.

“It's not going to happen,” he said.

And yesterday the minister for Indigenous affairs, Nigel Scullion said: “The option that they think has been slapped from their hands was never available. It was never available to them, and would've caused a great deal of damage to our relationship had we pursued it,” he said.

Which begs an obvious question: why did the federal government persist with the charade of consulting Indigenous people on so-called constitutional recognition if it was never willing to accommodate change beyond the merely symbolic?

I've written previously about how “Recognise” – for all the tens of millions of dollars spent on it by successive governments – was a white political construct, dreamed up by John Howard (never a friend of Indigenous Australia) in an attempt to slither out of a political jam, that attached itself to successive governments.

For all the years that the (now abandoned) Recognise movement flourished with bipartisan protection, black communities were never properly asked if they wanted anything much of what it was offering (never, of itself, entirely clear). And when they

were, as part of the Uluru and referendum council process, they said, resoundingly, “No”

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Indeed, the government’s stultifying response betrays an attitude reminiscent of the old mission vicar: only we know what’s really good for *them* (see Scullion above).

There is a misconception in Australia that – without treaties or any form of formal truth-telling about the reverberation into the present of past wrongs, and without defined Indigenous input to the legislature – Australia is still fixed, somehow, on a steady path to reconciliation.

But there is no clear path to reconciliation at all at present, for there has never been an initial, formal conciliation.

Now, thanks to the government of Malcolm Turnbull, Australia just took several big steps backwards on that convoluted black/white frontier. Some reckon he’s broken the hearts of Indigenous people while, in reality, that was done long ago.