

To avoid another dead end, we need to know who's driving this Recognition bus

The Recognise campaign has asked us to support change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people while bypassing us. Can Uluru change that?



'One thing is for sure, that the constitutional reform process, just like native title, has been disastrous and divisive within communities. And while it looks nice and shiny from the outside, its wheels are just about ready to come off.' Photograph: YouTube, Recognise AU

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The day after the historic Uluru Statement was declared from the centre of the continent, the government-funded Recognise campaign debuted its new advertisement. The short film follows a bus making its way down a winding road, picking up various historical figures to mark leaps in the “Australian” story – from the women’s vote, to Gallipoli, and the 1967 referendum.

The bus then takes a turn to pick up a group of blackfellas on the side of the road, with the narrator announcing: “now it’s our turn to do something great, our chance to do something our kids can be proud of”. The destination sign is flipped to Recognition.

The passengers get on this bus, despite not truly knowing the end destination, how long the ride will take, or what the cost is. And one crucial element goes unnoticed – who is the bus driver? Who is truly driving this vehicle on a winding detour around the beaten track of black activism, a path walked on foot by previous generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

The fact this ad campaign came out straight after the Uluru Statement is not a coincidence. It is aimed at drawing attention away from this well-worn track and back

on the road paved by government for the past seven years, a road bypassing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in favour of a destination designed by government, and promoted by its Recognise campaign. It is a road that was completely rejected by delegates at Uluru, who instead called on a constitutionally-entrenched “voice” in parliament and a treaty commission.

The Recognise campaign was not invited to the Uluru consultations, and this in itself says something about its role in the process. The campaign has swallowed millions of dollars in government funding, in a time where Aboriginal-controlled organisations around the country have been threatened by cuts, and have tried to navigate the fallout of the Coalition’s disastrous Indigenous Advancement Strategy.

It has been instrumental in fuelling cynicism and division within Aboriginal communities around this issue. In comparison to the black members of the Referendum Council, who designed an entire consultation process to ask First Nations people what they actually wanted, the Recognise campaign ignored Indigenous people who disagreed with its approach.

Its polls do not show the sizeable opposition to its campaign by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, many of whom feel it is a departure from true Aboriginal aspirations of treaty, or from those who do not want to be recognised in the coloniser’s founding document at all.

The Uluru statement was an attempt to actually drill through the acres of public relations spin by Recognise, and decide on the path that First Nations people actually want to take. Unfortunately, only one page of the full statement has been released, and the detail around the model of the “voice” and the process to treaty has not been fully fleshed out.

The result has been a vacuum. The cynicism from community which has been building over the past seven years has filled this space. Many people are fearful that what happened at Uluru has sold out our rights, because there has been a lack of information about the substance of the dialogues, what was put up as a model, and what was rejected.

Many are also cynical of the Uluru Statement because they do not feel they were given a voice by the Referendum Council at all. For example, in my own region of central Queensland, many mob found out about the process when they saw delegates at Uluru on the television, not exactly a great way to build trust.

In this information blackout, theories have abounded about what the Uluru Statement actually means.

But in my view, we have to get back to that crucial question: who is now driving this bus? It definitely is not the black members of the Referendum Council, who were planning more consultations, including in Queensland, which has one of the highest concentrations of Aboriginal people in the country. The reason this couldn’t happen?

The federal government holds the purse strings.

Meanwhile, its Recognise campaign, geared towards the models that the Uluru Statement rejected, has a tokenistic “recognition” round in the NRL, and has been funded to conduct “rides for recognition”, and various “recognition roadshows” around the country, aimed at signing up support to a question we don’t know yet.

It makes you wonder – given how much money the federal Coalition government, and previous Labor governments, have pumped into this question of constitutional reform, specifically centred on a preamble, are they really going to abandon it now that the Uluru delegation has rejected it?

Will the Coalition and Labor change their course, or will they keep driving down the pre-determined route on the white man’s sat nav?

One way of finding out is to ask the four black parliamentarians, who are our current “voice” in parliament. None have come out fully in support of the Uluru Statement’s position.

I submitted questions to ALP Senator Patrick Dodson, minister for Indigenous health Ken Wyatt, ALP Senator Malarndirri McCarthy and ALP MP Linda Burney.

At the time of publishing, only Dodson and Burney had got back to me.

While both said they would wait on the outcome of the Referendum Council’s report, they also did not back down from other forms of recognition, which were rejected at Uluru.

“In terms of whether I accept the rejection of both symbolic reform and removal of the race power, I don’t think it’s as simple as that,” Dodson said in a written statement.

“Constitutional change and treaty have never been mutually exclusive – one does not come at the expense of the other. But I would also say that nothing about the constitution is symbolic. The words in the constitution become powers that the government used to make laws. They are words with real power.”

Burney said: “To embark on constitutional reform and not to address the archaic race powers would be to miss an opportunity ... Dealing with the race power is not ‘symbolic’. That characterisation is flawed given that the Uluru model is said to be a compromise precisely because removing or amending the race powers was too substantial to win conservative support.”

Given there is currently a suffocating political bipartisanship on this issue, one wonders what our black parliamentarians will back if the Coalition and ALP refuse to support the Uluru Statement, and instead continue their long-held support for a change to the preamble.

We only have to look back down that road, not the shiny, tarmacked one in the Recognise ad, but the well-worn track that runs parallel and is much less easy to traverse. In all the decisions made by government affecting us, how often have they lied? How often have they dispossessed us, how often have they reneged on already one-sided agreements? How often have they used the very race powers in the

constitution to deny our own rights, and why would government ever seek to amend this so it doesn't happen again?

Why would they back a treaty process, when the current political climate is aimed at bypassing the Aboriginal right to free, prior and informed consent?

And we have to also ask our black politicians, who are part of their party machines, and not elected by Aboriginal people themselves (a situation the Uluru Statement seeks to rectify) – who are you going to listen to? Will you be supporting your party, even if it ends up focusing solely on a preamble, or will you support the rejection of this divisive process by your brothers and sisters nationwide?

One thing is for sure, that the constitutional reform process, just like native title, has been disastrous and divisive within communities. And while it looks nice and shiny from the outside, its wheels are just about ready to come off.

So we need to start looking above what is happening. We need to look at who truly has the power in all this. Because unless we begin to centre our attention on who is driving this bus, we will end up at another dead end. And we'll be forced to go backwards on foot to regain the ground we have lost.