

Politicians must face the truth: Indigenous Australia doesn't accept symbolic recognition

White leaders have always sought to simplify Indigenous responses to top-down propositions. Perhaps that's why they don't understand the Referendum Council's recommendations for a voice in parliament



'The Referendum Council consulted widely enough to demonstrate there could never be significant Indigenous support, let alone consensus, at the grass roots level for Recognise amid so many more priority questions.' Co-Chair of the Indigenous Referendum Council, Pat Anderson. Photograph: Paul Miller/AAP

Paul Daley
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There are many Indigenous Australias, multiple nations whose immediate country is as diverse as the tongues in which they speak.

Some politicians don't understand that – never really have. Since colonial days they wanted to deal with a “chief” – or however else they might term a leader – who might strike a deal with them supposedly on behalf of all others. You know, vast tracts of land and water in exchange for axes, flour and tobacco?

Such deals – like John Batman's purported “treaty” – weren't worth the breath wasted on them.

White leaders – politicians, cops, soldiers, judges – have long sought to simplify Indigenous responses to top-down propositions – the answers to which were critical, given the white-black power imbalance – to Indigenous physical and cultural survival.

I haven't got room here to examine how that dynamic has played out in, for example, discussions around land rights and native title rulings, truth telling about the killings of many tens of thousands of Aboriginal people on the colonial frontier, and deaths in custody and stolen children, and in negotiations over cultural theft and ethical treatment by the state of Indigenous ancestral remains (the government will not commit to a dignified national keeping place for remains that are currently warehoused in cultural institutions).

But at the end of a week when the politicians' desire for a simple yes/no response on so-called "constitutional recognition" from some Indigenous representatives was dealt what is probably a fatal blow, it's worth considering where all this business about a positive nod to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the constitution began.

Rewind nearly a decade to October 2007, when Australia's second longest serving prime minister, John Howard – not, to understate, a great friend of First Nations people – was on the ropes after nearly 11 years as PM. The great pretender of Liberal politics, Peter Costello, couldn't summons the fortitude to challenge him and so profound were the questions about Howard's atrophy and absence of plan or foresight that Kevin Rudd seemed to provide the answer.

But Howard suddenly conjured something that was accepted, without too much immediate consideration, as a bit of heartfelt political vision when, on a most generous retrospective assessment, it was heavily bifocal.

Here's how the man who embraced and perpetuated the term "black armband" history in relation to acknowledging frontier violence, suddenly saw it all on the eve of the 2007 election abyss:

I sense that the Australian people want to move ... towards a new settlement of this issue, and I share that desire, which is why I'm here tonight.

I announce that if I am re-elected, I will put to the Australian people within 18 months a referendum to formally recognise Indigenous Australians in our constitution, their history as the first inhabitants of our country, their unique heritage of language and culture, and their special, though not separate, place within a reconciled indivisible nation.

My goal is to see a new statement of reconciliation incorporated into the preamble of the Australian constitution. If elected, I would commit immediately to working in consultation with Indigenous leaders and others on this task.

A few Indigenous leaders gave their cautious, qualified support, while from the regions to the cities Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders people, only about half of whom vote, asked why the hell they'd want to be recognised in the founding document of the settler state anyway? That sentiment has not changed.

Still the proposition, so undefined it gathered questions like moss as it rolled through successive parliaments and outlasted another four prime ministerships, became increasingly vexing. The Recognise organisation – publicly bankrolled for millions of dollars to promote only one side of the nebulous proposition – managed to outrage both the shock-jocks of Jurassic Park who wanted no such blackening of the constitution *and* many, many Aboriginal Australians where people wondered how recognition could possibly take priority over fixing their developing world living conditions and the social and economic inequities that have characterised their lives since invasion.

Many media voices, having failed to engage with the importance of frontier history to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (many of whom want a public process of truth telling as a national priority) lazily viewed Recognise through a black (yes)/white (no) paradigm (witness the pathetic, reductive TV treatment featuring Andrew Bolt and Linda Burney) when in fact the intra-Indigenous debate and consideration was always so much more nuanced, respectful and, yes, complex.

Are we there yet?

I think so. The simple, largely symbolic recognition proposal favoured by the political class will probably die with Malcolm Turnbull's leadership or what remains thereof, after the Referendum Council this week called **only for an Indigenous voice to parliament to be constitutionally enshrined.**

The council's recommendation was, ironically perhaps, the end result of a broad government-designed consultation that was conceived to streamline the desired outcome – yes or no to recognition and, if yes, well what should the amendment be? Instead the council consulted widely enough to demonstrate there could never be significant Indigenous support, let alone consensus, at the grass roots level for Recognise amid so many more priority questions.

Turnbull's response was most telling.

It was, he said, "very short on detail but a very big idea".

Short on detail, that is, like the decade-old recognition proposal. Yet still not quite simple enough.

All of which made me smile. And left me wondering if some of those Indigenous Australians hadn't just addressed the white fella boss men in the way in which that they'd spoken down to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people since 1788.