

AFTER THE REFERENDUM:

Learning from the Fight for Justice for
Australia's First Nations people.

October 2024



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The SEARCH Foundation acknowledges and pays respect to all First Nations People and Elders, past and present, of the Country on which we live and work. We recognise their ongoing connections to their Country and cultures. We acknowledge that this land was never ceded, was taken without consent, without Treaty. and without compensation.

Cover image: *Open your heart to our voice*. Corflute placard on a house fence in Tennant Creek, NT, Source: Central Land Council, Alice Springs, NT, Australia (2023).

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Preface

Across the continent, on the morning or afternoon of Saturday October 14, 2023, Referendum Day, many of us left the comfort of our homes for a voting booth - in metropolitan areas, regional cities, rural and remote towns and communities. Many people had already voted. We were voting on the country of Australia's First Nations people, never ceded, many of us to hand out how to votes leaflets for Yes, and some of us to then scrutineer the count.

We had worked for months in our communities, in community markets, at railway stations and travel hubs, in community organisations and on the streets, doorknocking and leafleting. We'd displayed banners and placards, and organised numerous public meetings, rallies and walks across the country.

People of all ages came to vote, many after knocking on from their Saturday jobs, while shopping, after taking kids to sports, or on their way to social commitments. Sadly, only a few of the places where we were voting had any indication of their tens of thousands of years of connection with the lands of First Nations people.

The voters generally weren't rude. Many didn't need to take the Yes or No How to Votes. They knew what they were going to do. Some were triumphalist, some displaying 'Trumpist' ignorance and aggression, and wanting to explain to us (and anyone else who would listen) why they were voting No. And some clearly appreciated the opportunity to vote Yes to a proposition that would have provided recognition of the true history of this nation and the need for some real and substantial change.

Many punters seemed resentful and angry that they had to exercise their democratic right to vote at all and weren't taking How to Votes from anyone.

We were doing our darndest but not confident. Many No campaigners, with Vote No placards featuring Jacinta Nampijinpa Price (as though she somehow represents First Nations views) left early. No need for them to stay to the end.

The count was swift and brutal. The final vote of 60 percent No and only 40 percent Yes was heartbreaking. Only the Australian Capital Territory voted majority Yes. States we hoped would support a majority failed to do so. For many of us, the vote in our own communities was deeply disappointing.

So, we comforted ourselves with food, drinks and friends, checking the incoming results on the phone or TV, and trying to sit with the loss as we grieved, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander friends, families, and allies who had so much vested in the outcome and a significant new opportunity to strengthen sovereignty, self-determination and justice.

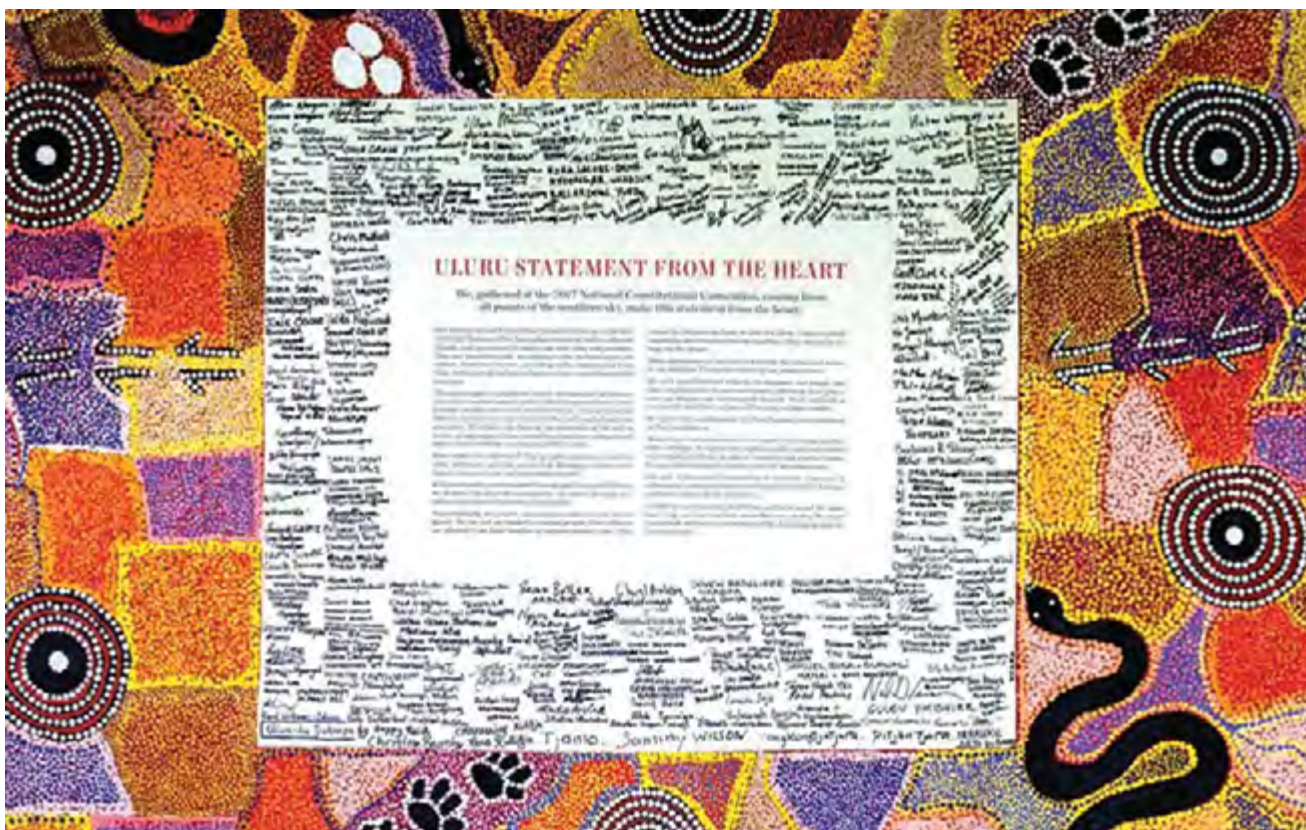
The passing parade on the TV screens told the story that Australians had rejected the First Nations leaders' very modest call for Constitutional recognition of a Voice to parliament. The media pack were still interviewing and filing stories. Fingers were being pointed and self-serving theories expounded on what happened and why. Voting night was not the night for snap judgements. A deep and considered analysis would be needed - but after the loss and grief of a respectful silence.



Respectful Silence Gadigal Country, Ashfield Park, October 2023

So, after the silence: what happened? Why did it happen? What have we learned and where to from here? And how do we find answers to these questions? We begin this document with the words of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* as it is this powerful and emotional statement, drafted after many years of consultations and struggle, which is the spiritual and political call for solidarity between Australia's First Nations people and the wider community.

The statement banner (below) was created at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention at Uluru, 50 years after the 1967 Referendum. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives from all parts of the continent and adjacent islands gathered to create a message for the Australian people. The Statement features the signatures of hundreds of attendees at the National Convention. It is bordered by paintings of important Tjukurpa (Dreaming stories) by Maruku artist and Uluru traditional owner Rene Kulitja, and Mutitjulu artists Christine Brumby, Charmaine Kulitja and Happy Reid.¹



Uluru Statement from the Heart

¹ NT Library & Archives. (2021) Uluru Statement and Uluru Handback poster on display. <https://lant.nt.gov.au/announcement/uluru-statement-and-uluru-handbackposter-on-display>

Uluru Statement from the Heart

We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from 'time immemorial', and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness.

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: the coming together after a struggle. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

Summary

The rejection of the Voice Referendum proposal was traumatic for First Nations people and for their millions of allies across the continent. Since the referendum there have been conversations and organising across the country, in communities, cities and forums. Millions of conversations about 'what went wrong' and what are the next steps in the continuing struggles for human rights for First Nations people.

Thomas Mayo, a Kuarareg Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human rights advocate, author, union organiser, and signatory to the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* described the proposal to create a constitutionally recognised voice to parliament as "a very practical reform, it's a coherent Voice that our parliament must listen to".

The referendum emerged from decades of community organising, consultations, negotiations and advocacy leading up to it. Tens of thousands of activists from diverse backgrounds and politics worked together in hundreds of local groups across the country to attempt to win the voice to parliament.

This analysis is based on research, conversations, survey responses, and interviews with campaigners involved at all levels of the Yes Campaign; activists living and working in metropolitan, urban, regional and rural cities and towns and in First Nations communities. Some 40 campaign activists contributed to the writing of the stories and the analysis. We have attempted to create a best fit narrative with the observations on the ground and the facts as we have been able to unearth and argue them.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart

The 2023 referendum to create a constitutionally-enshrined First Nations Voice to Parliament was part of a continuum of more than two hundred years of anti-colonial resistance and struggles for justice by First Nations peoples. The First Nations National Constitutional Convention, held at Uluru, NT, in May 2017, attended by delegates selected from

communities across the country issued the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* calling for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Australian Constitution and a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making and truth-telling between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In fact, there was repeated rejection of the Voice proposal firstly by Prime Minister Turnbull in October 2017, and reiterated by the next conservative Prime Minister Morrison.

The Referendum

In May 2022 the newly elected Labor government announced it would hold a referendum for a constitutionally enshrined Voice to parliament in its first term of office. The Voice Referendum was the first referendum of the 21st century.

On 14 October 2023, Australians voted in a referendum seeking approval for an amendment to Australia's Constitution - to recognise Australia's Indigenous people through establishing a body called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.



A Proposed Law

The Referendum Campaigns

Well before the practicalities of a referendum were upon us there was overwhelming support (about 80% according to some polls²) for the 'idea' of a constitutionally enshrined Voice. When Prime Minister-elect Anthony Albanese announced on 21 May 2022 that the Labor government would organise a referendum on the Voice, that level of support had declined to around 60%, and was down to below 50% by July 2023, and 40% in the final vote on October 14, 2023. Throughout the campaign there was only minimal shift towards Yes against the continuing shift from Yes to No.

The Results

Sixty percent of voters voted No - a total of 9.45 million Australians. The main reason given for voting no by 66% of No voters was that the Voice would divide the country.

Forty percent of voters voted Yes – a total of 6.28 million Australians. Seventy six percent of these voters considered 'the Voice would bring better outcomes for First Nations People'.

The Yes vote did not achieve the double majority needed to win a referendum – a majority of votes across the nation, and in a majority of States. The ACT was the only state or territory voting majority Yes.

What Happened?

The referendum occurred in a political environment of conservative neo-liberal politics that has driven growing alienation and disenchantment with government and mainstream politics. That general trend was exacerbated by the historical and political circumstances in which the referendum took place. Those particularities include:

- Deep ignorance of the truth of Australia's colonial history and the trauma of colonialism on First Nations people

- The historical legacy of racist attitudes that despite significant progress in recent decades, remain deeply entrenched in parts of Australian society and are reinforced by systemic settings in our laws and social system
- A 'cost of living' crisis that has intensified economic and social gaps
- Social polarisation driven by fear and misinformation campaigns
- Decades of attacks on cultures of collectivism and solidarity that promote social connection and empathy with disadvantaged groups.

The No Campaign

The No campaign, based on lies, distortions, misinformation, and a call to ignorance ("If you don't know, vote No") was effective. The reasons for the majority No vote include:

- Deliberately fostered divisions among Australians about the need to redress Australia's traumatic colonial legacy and extreme levels of disadvantage experienced by First Nations people.
- Confusion amongst many Australians about equality of treatment for everyone and the need for 'special rights' (particularly the right to self-determination) to redress embedded disadvantage for First Nations people.
- The absence of bipartisan support from major political parties.
- The failure of the Yes campaign to refute the deliberate or unintentional No campaign lies, distortions, disinformation and misinformation that engaged with and encouraged ignorance about First Nations peoples, particularly messages pushed out through social and mainstream media.

2 Morris, S. (2024, August 23). Friday essay: how an unholy alliance of the separatist left and reactionary right rejected the Voice's 'sensible middle way'. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-how-an-unholy-alliance-of-the-separatist-left-and-reactionary-right-rejected-the-voices-sensible-middle-way-236508>

- The split of progressive unanimity in support for the Voice fostered by so-called 'progressive No' forces, which was utilised by the conservative No campaign to regurgitate stereotyped claims of disunity amongst First Nations people.
- The failure of the Yes campaign to appreciate the rhetorical power of, and thus to neutralise, conservative claims that there was a need to concentrate on the cost-of living crisis to the exclusion of all else.

The Yes Campaign

Winning the referendum posed the challenge of organising a 'people's movement' grounded in and building from the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* process.

The formal Yes23 campaign, and wider informal activist campaigning, primarily used a 'community organising' model that united tens of thousands of First

Nations people and their non-Indigenous allies to involve, educate, mobilise, and organise to build the power to win. Yes23 supported local organisations and captains to become leaders and community organisers. Kitchen Table conversations were used, particularly in the early stages.

Greater use of a field-organising model involving microtargeted campaigning would have directed more campaigners into unfamiliar communities to recruit supporters and had an impact on the outcome. The trade union movement was effective when unions got involved.

In short, Government and the Yes campaign were late starting, lacked information about the referendum process, lacked a 'cut-through' simple compelling explanation of the need for a Voice, and failed to win majority support from people living outside inner-metropolitan areas.

First Nations campaigners Response to the No Vote

In an Open Letter published after the week of silence following the referendum result, First Nations campaigners concluded:

Rejection of constitutional recognition will not deter us from speaking up We have an agenda for justice in pursuit of our First Nations rights that sorely need a Voice...³

More recently, commentary by some leading First Nations campaigners (while expressing anger, devastation, hope, and everything in between) has coalesced around some critical themes in response to the No vote:

- The No vote was 'no' to a *constitutionally-enshrined voice to parliament* and not 'no' to *self-determination through voice, truth and treaty*
- The urgent need to implement and strengthen self-determination and community-control to address the social justice issues of poverty, housing, health and education.

And looking forward:

- Staying true to the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*
- Building hope
- Building on the more than 6 million Yes voters
- Building belonging through shared purpose and transcending toxic politics
- Recognising and supporting the next generation of First Nations leaders in their continuing struggle.

3 The Uluru Dialogue. (2023, October 24). Open letter: A statement for our First Nations People and our Country. <https://ulurustatement.org/statement-for-our-people-and-country/>

Marcia Langton, Yiman and Bidjara anthropologist and geographer, and Foundation Chair of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne, has drawn attention to the federal government's new focus for Indigenous policy which pivots away from the rights-based self-determination approach of the Uluru Statement from the Heart to a First Nations Economic Partnership with the Coalition of Peaks⁴. This partnership has the potential to accelerate the pace of change in overcoming entrenched Indigenous disadvantages. Langton points out that the announcement by Albanese at Garma is a stepping away from implementation of Makarrata and truth-telling.

Pat Anderson, Co-Chair of the Referendum Council 2025-2017, and the Uluru Dialogue (current), called out the PM on his seeming backdown on Makarrata. ⁵She is calling for progress on the unfinished business of truth-telling. Some truth-telling is ongoing and new initiatives are underway.

For guidance, Reconciliation Australia's four pillars of practice are:

- First Nations community led, responsive to the needs and aspirations of First Nations people
- Place-based Truth-telling- building local relationships and change
- Strengths-focused Truth-telling to generate respect and understanding of First Nations cultures and knowledge and
- Action-oriented Truth-telling to ensure injustices cannot continue or be repeated.

As Megan Davis, Cobble Cobble and South Sea Islander international human rights lawyer, highlighted shortly after the referendum:

We six million are bonded together now.
There is power in our voices. Collectively, we
the people believe in recognition and rights.
Those Australians who accepted the offer of the
Uluru Statement from the Heart, and listened
to the dialogues, now make up an Australian
chorus, six million voices in unison, who march
on in a movement of the Australian people for
a better future.⁶

The Emerging Landscape

First Nations Yes campaigners and supporters of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, point universally to the critical importance of the truth-telling processes.

- Truth-telling and advocacy will continue, with struggles to establish new governance structures to empower First Nations communities to exercise self-determination over their community services and Country (but outside of a constitutionally-enshrined voice).
- Under the banner of Allyship, initiatives to reconnect with the activists and networks across and amongst the 20,000 activists and six million Yes voters are underway.
- Finding allies who can campaign with people living and working in communities with lower levels of education, lower incomes, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, and in regional, rural and remote communities will be critical.

4 Langton, M. (2024, August 14) Marcia Langton A way forward after the Voice. *The Saturday Paper*. <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/comment/topic/2024/08/24/way-forward-after-the-voice>

The Coalition of Peaks (www.coalitionofpeaks.org.au/) is a body representing more than 80 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations that have responsibility for policies, programs and services related to the Closing the Gap agenda across health, education, justice, and other areas.

5 Chandler, B, Fuller, K, Moss, S. (2024, August 8). Indigenous leader questions prime minister's commitment to Makarrata truth-telling commission. *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-08-08/first-australian-allyship-summit-hears-concerns-makarrata/104198904>

6 Davis, M. (2023, December) Truth after the Voice, *The Monthly*. <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2023/december/megan-davis/truth-after-voice#mtr>

- First Nations people and allies will continue to tackle economic disadvantage, improve education, housing, health and justice outcomes, and campaign for climate justice and protection of people and Country vulnerable to environmental change.
- The outcome of the referendum has emboldened conservative political parties to walk away from treaty processes that they had previously committed to, e.g. in Queensland. First Nations people and allies need to protect, develop, and strengthen these processes at national, state and local levels.
- Conservative forces are attempting to push back on the practice of acknowledgement of Country, labelling it as 'virtue signalling'. These expressions of truth-telling need to be defended, refreshed and extended.
- The well-bankrolled right-wing lobby group Advance (formerly Advance Australia) is credited with much of the success of the No campaign. Advance was also involved in the campaigns to save Australia Day and against the Labor Government's 'net zero' climate policy, and opposes the transition to renewable energy, initiatives to strengthen democratic 'misinformation' laws, and legislation to protect First Nations cultural heritage.
- The right-wing and their campaign organisation Advance Australia are emboldened by their success in the Voice Referendum and have indicated they will use techniques they successfully utilised during the referendum campaign (e.g. geotargeting messaging) to target progressive candidates (particularly Greens) in the lead up to the next Federal election, and progressive policies generally.
- Socialist and progressive forces can learn from the referendum experience and develop our capacity to campaign strategically and promote real solutions to real problems beyond the inner-metro strongholds.

- Equally, campaigners must be informed by developments outside of Australia. Throughout this report, we have reiterated the role of the globally connected populist right on the Voice referendum. The impact of extreme right-wing groups on world politics is resurgent and dynamically changing. In our own region, for example, the conservative coalition in New Zealand has recently slashed Māori-controlled health, education and language programs and curtailed longstanding rights enshrined in the Waitangi Treaty. In effect, these actions recolonise by stealth, a proud indigenous nation.
- We cannot rule out the grim prospect of similar processes in Australia. Not only should we be alert to reactionary global and regional assaults on human rights (and much else), but we should also learn from them and form active relationships of solidarity with the movements which oppose them.

An extensive Annotated Bibliography accompanies this document and is available on request from the SEARCH Foundation.

Introduction

This report from the SEARCH Foundation's Voice, Treaty, Truth Working Group (VTTWG) looks towards the achievement of justice for First Nations People, a goal towards which First Nations People will continue to lead.

As Thomas Mayo defiantly declares in his book, *Always Was Always Will Be*:

Ultimately, we all should want to leave the next generation a little wiser, with a more peaceful, fairer world. This is the vision we fought for in 2023, and we will not lose sight of it. To achieve our goals for the future, we must take action.⁷

This document has been prepared by the SEARCH Foundation, an activist organisation fighting alongside First Nations people communities for justice, as part of our aspirations for a democratic, ecologically sustainable and socialist Australia. We regard ourselves as comrades and allies of First Nations people in their more than 250 years of resistance to colonisation of Australia which has had devastating impacts on the health of Country and people.

The SEARCH Foundation's VTTWG has been meeting regularly over many years. The members of the working group are First Nations⁸ and non-Indigenous activists with decades of experience fighting for self-determination, human rights and justice for First Nations people within the Australian colonial settler state.

We live and work at the grassroots in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote communities, and in policy and program development, across land rights, land management, health, housing, legal, education, youth, union, climate justice, and economic and social development issues.

This analysis is a reflection on the role of various participants and organisations at different levels of

the campaign on the outcomes of the referendum, the way the campaign was organised, the roles of different organisations, and our experiences as campaigners working with First Nations leaders and communities in many different situations across the country.

The lessons we can learn from the campaign will help progressive and socialist activists win future struggles for justice for First Nations people, and Australians generally, as we all face many serious challenges to build a safe and healthy future.

SEARCH invited members and supporters to join an editorial group and/or make contributions to our collective analysis of the Voice campaign. The core Editorial Group met weekly by Zoom from early June 2024. All potential and actual contributors were able to access these meetings to discuss and debate contributions.

Some thirty members - activists and First Nations people - made written or verbal contributions to the analysis. A survey of SEARCH members received a good response from members who had been active in the Yes campaign. The survey responses informed the drafting of this document.

The analysis in this document constitutes the 'best fit' of contributions made to the editorial group. Not all contributors, including SEARCH members, will necessarily agree with all of the analysis.

The final draft was debated and endorsed by the VTTWG as a contribution to the ongoing conversation on how we can work with our strengths as socialist and progressive activists, and deal with our weaknesses, so that we can, together with others, build the power to achieve justice for First Nations people, and win future progressive issues.

⁷ Mayo, T. (2024). *Always Was, Always Will Be: The Campaign for Justice and Recognition Continues*, Hardie Grant.

⁸ We generally use the term First Nations, rather than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or Indigenous Australian in this document.

A Referendum to amend the Australian Constitution

On 14 October 2023, Australians voted in a referendum seeking approval for an amendment to Australia's Constitution to recognise Australia's Indigenous people in the document through establishing a body called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

A change to the Australian Constitution requires a double majority consent from the Australian electorate, only obtained through a referendum. The 2023 Referendum asked voters to consent to a proposal:

To alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. Do you approve this proposed alteration?

Voters could answer "Yes" or "No".

The Voice Referendum was the first referendum of the 21st century. The proposal was rejected by a 60% majority nationally and by a majority of voters in every state counted for the purpose of referendums. It thus failed to secure the double majority required for amendment by section 128 of the Constitution⁹. Importantly, the overwhelming majority of First Nations voters supported Yes for the change.¹⁰

The 2023 Referendum's No result is part of a continuum of more than two hundred years of anti-colonial resistance and struggles for justice by First Nations peoples and their supporters. Since invasion and occupation, First Nations communities have resisted occupation and have engaged in campaigns to defend and win back traditional land, achieve self-determination, to gain human rights and justice, and to close the gaps between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians in health, economic, education,

justice, imprisonment and other social indicators of well-being.

The referendum took place in an environment conditioned by decades of conservative neoliberal politics that had given rise to growing alienation and disenchantment with government and mainstream politics by the general population. The cost of living and housing crises intensified economic and social gaps during the referendum campaign, diverting attention and eroding goodwill for other, progressive, reforms. Into this environment of social polarisation, a No campaign based in racism and deliberate misinformation, designed to engender fear and lack of empathy towards disadvantaged groups, and fuelled by anti-Voice media, proved impossible to overcome.

The campaign for the Voice activated tens of thousands of First Nations people and their non-Indigenous allies to involve, educate, mobilise, and organise to build the power to win what Thomas Mayo, described as "a very practical reform, it's a coherent Voice that our parliament must listen to."¹¹

The campaign is over, the referendum was lost, but the struggle continues.

This paper aims to contribute to understanding the politics and organising that underpinned the Voice Referendum campaign. It is an overview of significant elements of the campaign based on research, conversations, interviews, and a survey of SEARCH members and fellow campaigners involved at the local and national levels of the Yes Campaign. The analysis includes 'Stories' from various geographical and social settings, including metropolitan urban, regional, rural cities and towns, and First Nations communities. The 'Stories' highlight locality-specific campaigning, challenges, achievements, and the opportunities that emerged.

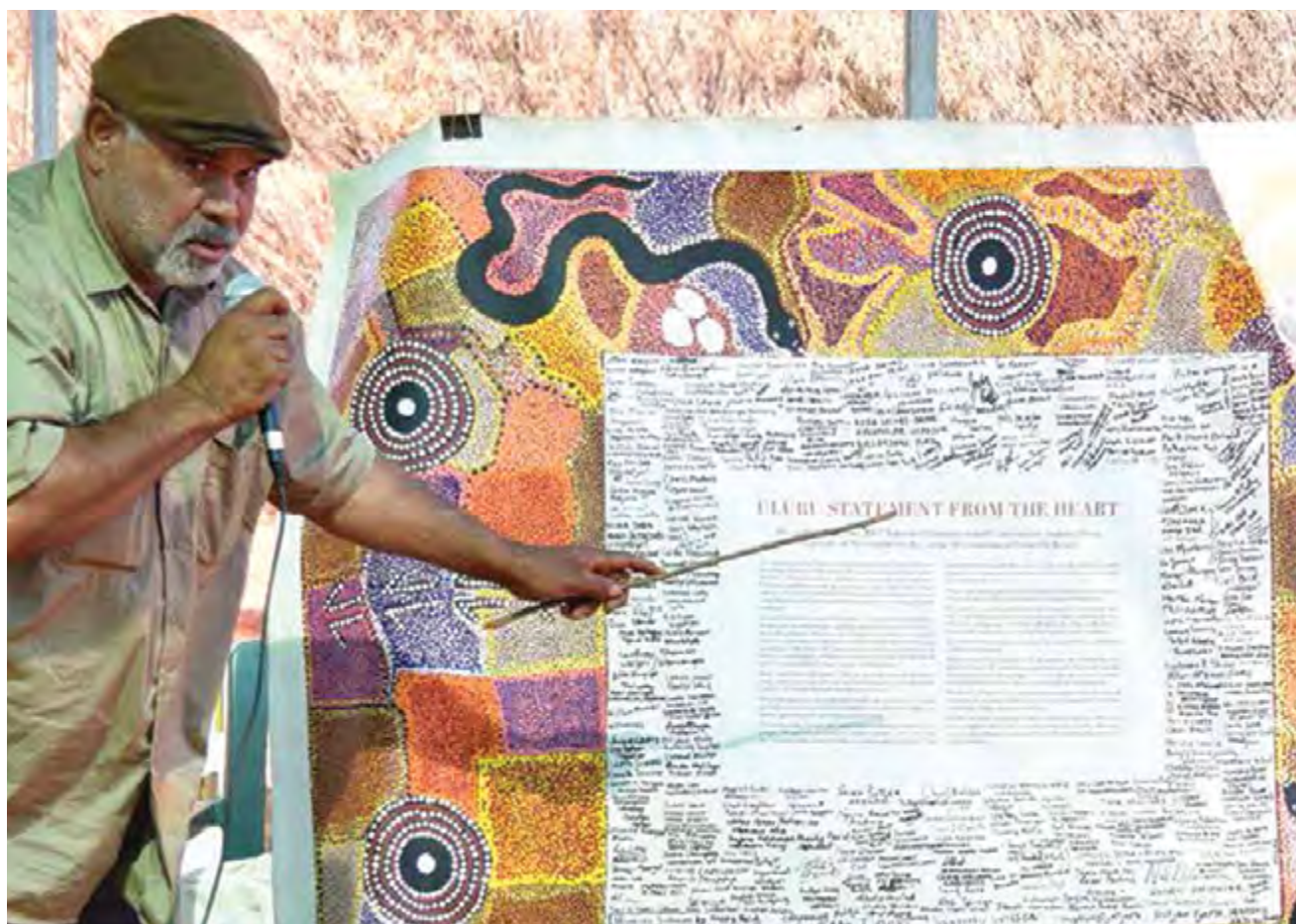
9 Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.apf.gov.au/constitution>

10 Beazley, J., 2023, Indigenous communities overwhelmingly voted yes to Australia's voice to parliament, The Guardian, 15 October 2023

11 Lee, C. (2023). Thomas Mayo on finding a voice. *The Australian TAFE Teacher* 57(1) 5-7 <https://www.aeufederal.org.au/news-media/the-australian-tafe-teacher>

Read in conjunction with other more detailed voting analyses, such as those of Biddle et al (2023), Carson et al (2023), Gunstone (2024), Rowse (2024)¹² and others, this document contributes to the process of identifying the important lessons that can be learnt from the referendum campaign; lessons that can inform our engagement in First Nations' and other campaigns for justice, seeking a life free from violence, protection of ecosystems which sustain healthy life, and for social and economic democracy, human rights and justice for all.

An Annotated Bibliography provides an extended reading list of material focusing on post-referendum analysis and commentary, particularly from First Nations Yes campaigners, and is available from the SEARCH Foundation.



Former Central Land Council chair Sammy Wilson explains the Uluru Statement.

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- 12 Biddle, N, Gray, M, McAllister, I, & Qvortrup, M. (2023, November 28). *Detailed analysis of the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum and related social and political attitudes*, ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2023/11/Detailed_analysis_of_the_2023_Voice_to_Parliament_Referendum_and_related_social_and_political_attitudes.pdf
- Carson, A., Strating, R., Jackman, S., Grömping, M., Hayman, P. & Gravelle, T. (2023). *Influencers and Messages: Analysing the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum Campaign*, La Trobe University. https://opal.latrobe.edu.au/articles/report/INFLUENCERS_and_MESSAGES_Analysis_of_the_2023_Voice_to_Parliament_Referendum_Campaign/25604352
- Gunstone, A. (2024). *Reflections on the Voice: During and After the Campaign*, Australian Scholarly Publishing.
- Rowse, T. (2024, June 28). Why did Australia reject the Voice? Inside Story. <https://insidestory.org.au/why-did-australia-reject-the-voice/>

The Uluru Statement from the Heart – an invitation to the Australian people

The 2017 *Uluru Statement from the Heart* called for:

...the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution ... a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.¹³

This statement was the culmination of many years of community and parliamentary processes to determine how to recognise First Nations people in the Australian Constitution and for First Nations people to be 'heard' by governments.¹⁴

There was a formal period of dialogues within and between First Nations communities, in 2015-2016, culminating in the First Nations National Constitutional Convention in May 2017, convened by the bipartisan-appointed Referendum Council. This Convention, held at Uluru in the Northern Territory, brought together 250 delegates selected from participants in regional dialogues held around the country over the previous six months.¹⁵ The Convention released the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* on 26 May 2017.

As well as calling for the establishment of a First Nations Voice to Parliament, the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* called for the establishment of a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making and truth-telling between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



Mural, Crystal Street, Petersham, Sydney (July 2024)

- 13 First Nations National Constitutional Convention, 2017. Uluru Statement from the Heart, Uluru, NT. <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/view-the-statement/>
- 14 Morris, S. (2024). Broken heart: a true history of the Voice Referendum. Black Books.
Johnston, J., (2024), History of Constitutional Recognition, ANTAR. <https://antar.org.au/resources/history-of-constitutional-recognition/>
Australian Human Rights Commission. (& Indigenous X, 2023), The history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples advocating for the right to be heard. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/history-aboriginal-and-torres-strait>
- 15 For detailed discussion of the various government negotiations and consultations, and the First Nations Dialogues process leading to the Uluru Statement and subsequent Referendum see for example: Morris, 2024, and Australian Referendum Council (2017, June 30). *Final Report of the Referendum Council*. Australian Government - Department of the Prime Minister & Cabinet <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20231028001428/https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/final-report.html>

The major parties - consultation, negotiation and betrayal

A referendum only occurs following a parliamentary procedure set out in section 128 of the Australian Constitution. That procedure has meant that referenda easily become the site of political disputation between the major political parties. The Voice Referendum did not stand outside this tradition, very quickly becoming embroiled in party politics, despite the invitation in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* being issued to the Australian people, not politicians.

Conservative opposition

Prior to May 2017 and the release of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, there had been years of consultation and negotiation across political parties, First Nations people and non-Indigenous experts in the field of constitutional law to develop a proposal for constitutional recognition of First Nations people.

Liberal Party parliamentarian Julian Leeser helped conceive of the Voice, and Noel Pearson and others at the Cape York Institute “collaborated with constitutional conservatives in 2014 to develop a compromise proposal”.¹⁶

Thus, the referendum proposal already represented a compromise outcome, recognising diverse opinions in the First Nations Dialogues and a political need to allow space for any possible honest conservative support in the consultation and negotiation stage to keep conservatives onside. Shireen Morris, constitutional lawyer, involved in the negotiation over many years, commented:

The Indigenous-owned Voice became automatically viewed as progressive, which risked alienating the right. This was a weakness in the framing, but also reflected the relative quietness of its conservative co-creators, who in the face of Coalition resistance did not always loudly celebrate their contributions to the reform, nor the national opportunity the Indigenous-conservative convergence had created – though at times they tried.¹⁷

The Voice proposal faced almost immediate opposition from the then Liberal National Party (LNP) coalition government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. In October 2017, in a joint statement Malcolm Turnbull (PM), Nigel Scullion (Indigenous Affairs minister), and George Brandis (Attorney-General) gave three reasons for rejecting the invitation of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, with Turnbull declaring:

Our democracy is built on the foundation of all Australian citizens having equal civic rights - all being able to vote for, stand for and serve in either of the two chambers of our national Parliament - the House of Representatives and the Senate. A constitutionally enshrined additional representative assembly for which only Indigenous Australians could vote for or serve in is inconsistent with this fundamental principle. It would inevitably become seen as a third chamber of Parliament.¹⁸

Turnbull further stated,

The Referendum Council provided no guidance as to how this new representative assembly would be elected or how the diversity of Indigenous circumstance and experience could be fairly or democratically represented.

16 Morris, S. (2024, 23 August). Friday essay: how an unholy alliance of the separatist left and reactionary right rejected the Voice's 'sensible middle way'. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-how-an-unholy-alliance-of-the-separatist-left-and-reactionary-right-rejected-the-voices-sensible-middle-way-236508>

17 Morris, S. (2024, 23 August)

18 Turnbull, M. (2017, October 26). *Response to Referendum Council's report on Constitutional Recognition*. Media Release.

Moreover, the government does not believe such a radical change to our Constitution's representative institutions has any realistic prospect of being supported by a majority of Australians in a majority of states.¹⁹

This position was aligned with the policies of the right-wing Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), which specifically identified four reasons to reject the Referendum Council recommendations in their Parliamentary Research Brief of 28 July 2017, distributed to all parliamentarians:

- Indigenous Australians already have a voice to parliament.
- A voice to parliament for one race is divisive and undemocratic – we are all equal.
- The voice to parliament is vague.
- The Constitution is a rulebook – this change is radical.²⁰

Though Turnbull later retreated from these views, the damage persisted, and his claims about the divisive nature of the Voice and it being a third chamber of parliament became significant tropes of the No campaign.

Turnbull's LNP successor as PM, Scott Morrison, echoed these points (as did No advocates during the referendum campaign). In 2019, Morrison ruled out offering Australians a vote to enshrine the Indigenous Voice into the Constitution.²¹ He falsely claimed there was no 'mainstream support' for constitutional recognition.²²

On October 29, 2019, the Minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt, proud Noongar, Yamatji and Wongi man, announced the commencement of a co-design process to develop local, regional and national elements of an Indigenous voice. He established a Senior Advisory Group to co-design options for a model that aimed to ensure Indigenous Australians were heard at all levels. The Senior Advisory Group was co-chaired by prominent First Nations human rights and social justice campaigners and academics, Tom Calma, Aboriginal Elder from the Kungarakana tribal group and a member of the Iwaidja tribal group, and Marcia Langton.²³

In November 2020, then Indigenous Australians Minister, Ken Wyatt, those involved in the Voice co-design process and public law experts opposed to this model, were saying that the *Uluru Statement from the Heart's* call for constitutional enshrinement – or protection – of the Voice, was going unheeded and being deliberately 'muted'.²⁴

By March 2021, that same Indigenous Australians Minister committed the government to legislate a Voice to Parliament. This went against the original government level consultations specifically for recognition of First Nations people in the constitution. Further, Voice proponents had explicitly asked for a constitutional provision for a Voice leading to a legislated Voice structure, rather than a legislated Voice in the absence of a constitutional requirement for a Voice. If included in the Constitution, every successive government would be required to ensure that a Voice structure would exist. In the absence of a constitutional provision, any subsequent government could simply abolish the Voice.

19 Turnbull, M. (2017, October 26)

20 Breheny, S. (2017, July 28). *Four Reasons to Reject the Referendum Council Recommendations*, Parliamentary Research Brief, Institute for Public Affairs. <https://ipa.org.au/publications-ipa/research-papers/four-reasons-reject-referendum-council-recommendations>

21 Harris, R. (2021, March 18). 'Not our policy': Scott Morrison rejects push for Referendum on Voice. *Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/not-our-policy-scott-morrison-rejects-push-for-referendum-on-voice-20210318-p57bxc.html>

22 Knowles, R. (2019, March 19). Prime Minister says no 'mainstream support' for constitutional recognition, ignores Uluru Statement, *National Indigenous Times*. <https://nit.com.au/19-03-2021/1854/prime-minister-says-no-mainstream-support-for-constitutional-recognition-ignores-uluru-statement>

23 National Indigenous Australians Agency – NIAA. (2019, October 30). *Indigenous voice co-design process announced*. <https://www.niaa.gov.au/news-and-media/indigenous-voice-co-design-process-announced>

24 Appleby, G. (2021, January 22) An Indigenous 'Voice' must be enshrined in our Constitution. Here's why. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/an-indigenous-voice-must-be-enshrined-in-our-constitution-heres-why-153635>

Nothing emerged during this period of Coalition government for legislation for the Voice or for constitutional change. Effectively the Coalition government stymied the process.

As Morris noted:

In the end, most of the Coalition did not seem to care how much Indigenous people had done to address conservative concerns. They cared about their political fortunes over and above principles. And the radical centre cannot survive without protagonists who care about principles.²⁵

Labor support

It was finally the newly elected Labor government that gave official federal government support to the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*. Prime Minister Albanese promised, in his election night speech on 21 May 2022, that the Labor government was committed to a constitutionally-enshrined First Nations Voice to parliament, and that his government would organise a referendum on the Voice, as proposed in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, as one of its highest priorities.²⁶

First Nations activists and their allies generally welcomed the new government's commitment to important social change which had both symbolic and practical value. The commitment acknowledged and supported many years of consultations and advocacy by First Nations leaders.

The downside of Albanese's announcement on the night of the Labor Government election was the linking of the Voice Referendum proposal with the Labor

Government. The years of multi-party and expert Indigenous and non-Indigenous consultations on constitutional recognition, the First Nations Dialogues, the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, were 'lost' in the party politics that enveloped the Voice proposal and referendum campaign.

Bipartisanship denied

In the months following Labor's announcement, the Coalition ran a fake political campaign around bipartisanship. Echoing the Turnbull Government's 2017 absolute rejection of a constitutionally-enshrined Voice in November 2022, National Party (NP) leader, David Littleproud, affirmed that the NP would not support the Voice. He was loudly supported in this by Northern Territory Country Liberal Party (CLP) Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price (from April 2023 Federal Coalition's Shadow Minister for Indigenous Australians) who argued that, rather than a Voice:

What we need now is practical measures and we have to stop dividing our nation along the lines of race.²⁷

Using similar language to that used by Turnbull in 2017, Leader of the Opposition, Peter Dutton continued to sow doubt about the Voice. On 7 January 2023, Dutton issued a letter to PM Albanese that set out 15 questions about the design of the Voice; declaring the Liberals could not say whether they would endorse the Voice or join with the National Party and One Nation in opposition.²⁸ It was clear Dutton was engaging in political wedging and disruptive "will he /won't he" posturing about Federal Opposition support for the Voice.²⁹ Finally, in April 2023, Dutton announced the Coalition would campaign against constitutional

25 Morris, S. (2024, August 23)

26 Morse, D. (2022, May 24). Anthony Albanese promised action on the Uluru Statement from the Heart. So, what is the proposed Indigenous Voice to Parliament? *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-24/federal-election-anthony-albanese-indigenous-urulu-statement/101092816>

27 Worthington, B. (2022, November 28). Nationals to oppose Indigenous Voice to Parliament, *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-11-28/nationals-to-oppose-voice-to-parliament/101706466>

28 Brewster, A. (2023, January 8). Opposition Leader Peter Dutton says the Indigenous Voice to Parliament Referendum will fail without more detail. *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-01-08/indigenous-voice-referendum-opposition-peter-dutton/101835590>

29 Rowse, T. (2023, January 23). Peter Dutton's questions: Have critics overlooked what the opposition leader *didn't* ask? *Inside Story*. <https://insidestory.org.au/peter-duttons-questions/>

recognition of a First Nations Voice to parliament.³⁰

This signaled the official end to Opposition posturing about, and any possibility of bipartisanship on the part of the Opposition.

Dutton's announcement that the Opposition would oppose the Voice was no surprise, reflecting the pattern of outright conservative opposition, obfuscation, and undermining of the Voice over the previous five years.

Conservatives and elements of the media suggested that Labor was determined to "go it alone" and not seek bipartisanship.³¹ Frank Brennan, Jesuit priest, human rights lawyer and Yes supporter, was outspoken in criticising the Labor government for a 'flawed process'.³² He criticised the government for exhibiting 'hubris' and not working harder to seek bipartisan support.

Brennan's criticisms, amplified by conservative media, denied the years of consultations and compromises attempting to get bipartisanship, especially by First Nations leaders.³³

In May 2023, echoing the IPA, Dutton declared in parliament that the proposed Voice to Parliament would:

re-racialise our nation.... At a time when we need to unite the country, this prime minister's proposal will permanently divide us by race.³⁴

Without bipartisanship it is very difficult to win a referendum, yet these were the conditions in which the campaign for the referendum would take place. Yes campaigners knew we had a real fight on our hands. Morris noted "an unprincipled union between the separatist Indigenous left and the reactionary right" and described the determination of Labor and First Nations people to go ahead in the face of the loss of bipartisanship as "radical hope".³⁵

Popular support

Regular polling about voter preferences for a constitutionally enshrined Voice to parliament, from the time of the release of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, demonstrated a solid majority of support up until April 2023. At the time of PM Morrison's statement that there was no mainstream support for a constitutionally-enshrined Voice, public opinion was strongly behind the establishment of a constitutionally-recognised Voice to Parliament. According to a survey of constitutional values in 2021:

Over half of all respondents (51.3%) said they would be in favour of enshrining the Voice via constitutional change. Only a quarter (26.3%) said they would still be in favour of the Voice as only a legislated reform, with no constitutional recognition.³⁶

30 Butler, J. (2023 April 5). Peter Dutton confirms Liberals will oppose Indigenous voice to parliament, *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/apr/05/peter-dutton-confirms-liberals-will-oppose-indigenous-voice-to-parliament>

Dutton's announcement was in the immediate wake of the Liberal's calamitous loss in the Aston by-election. While there can be no doubt that Dutton was set on the No course anyway, the need to deflect attention from the loss made it opportune for him to do it then, and for nearly all potential sentiment for Yes in the Liberal party room (other than Leeser) to knuckle under.

31 Rowse, T. (2023, January 23). Peter Dutton's questions: Have critics overlooked what the opposition leader *didn't* ask? *Inside Story*. <https://insidestory.org.au/peter-duttons-questions/>

32 Brinkworth, J. (2023, March 31). Wording critical to Voice Referendum: Brennan. *The Southern Cross*. <https://thesoutherncross.org.au/news/2023/03/31/wording-critical-to-voice-referendum-brennan/>

33 Harris, R. (2023, June 3). Father Brennan tells Albanese and Dutton to find common ground on Voice. *Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/father-brennan-tells-albanese-and-dutton-to-find-common-ground-on-voice-20230602-p5ddd0.html>

Davis, M. (2023, September 15). Voice failing at upcoming Referendum will be a reflection of Albanese government's political hubris: Frank Brennan, *Sky News*. <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/voice-failing-at-upcoming-referendum-will-be-a-reflection-of-albanese-governments-political-hubris-frank-brennan/news-story/4796107ead88b19ae955ef70c76a65d0>

34 Ortolan, M. (2023, September 5). Peter Dutton opposes the Voice to Parliament — but not all Liberal leaders agree, *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-05/peter-dutton-voice-to-parliament-yes-no-vote-referendum/102797582>

35 Morris, S. (2024, August 19)

36 Deem, J. (2021). The Latest Australian Constitutional Values Survey. *Indigenous Constitutional Law*. <https://www.indigconlaw.org/home/the-latest-constitutional-values-survey>

In April 2022, the ABC's Vote Compass found almost three-quarters (73%) of respondents supported "an amendment to the Constitution to establish a representative Indigenous body to advise Parliament on laws and policies affecting Indigenous peoples."³⁷

At the time of Albanese's announcement in May 2022, polling indicated that support for Constitutional amendment to establish a First Nations Voice to parliament was strong across class, cultural and political party divides. In an Essential Poll, support for the Voice was roughly 53% in support, 22% neutral, 17% opposed, and 7% undecided.³⁸ There was a similar breakdown in support and opposition to establishing treaty and truth-telling processes.³⁹

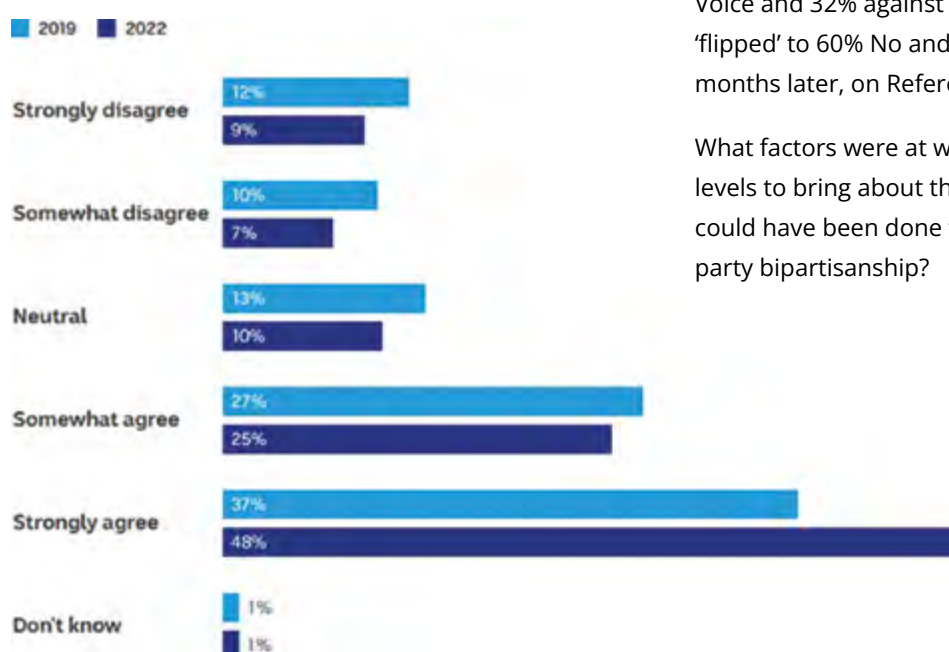


Figure 1. Results of surveys in 2019 and 2022 on amending the Constitution to establish a First nations Voice to Parliament.

Along party lines there was strong support, with 76% of self-identified Greens voters in support, 62% of ALP voters, and 57% of minor party and independent voters. Even amongst LNP voters, supporters of the Voice outnumbered opponents by 43% to 38%.⁴⁰ Yes supporters took heart that a larger proportion of LNP voters supported rather than opposed the proposed constitutional amendment.

However, from April 2023 and Dutton's announcement of opposition to the Voice referendum, support identified voters had been steady at around 75-80% until April 2023, but also began to fall to about 60%.⁴¹

So, the crucial question is how this initial strong support amongst the Australian public of 68% supporting a Voice and 32% against (on a two-party preferred basis) 'flipped' to 60% No and only 40% Yes, some seventeen months later, on Referendum Day, October 14, 2023.⁴²

What factors were at work at the micro and macro levels to bring about the slide in Yes support? What could have been done to counter the lack of major party bipartisanship?

37 Wellauer, K., & Brennan, B. (2022, May 4). Vote Compass data finds most Australians support Indigenous Voice to Parliament — and it has grown since the last election. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-04/indigenous-voice-to-parliament-vote-compass/101031774>

38 Essential Report (2022, May 31). *The Essential Report*. <https://essentialreport.com.au/reports/31-may-2022>

39 Essential Report (2022, May 31)

40 Essential Report (2022, May 31)

41 Nicholas, J. (2023, November 29). How the Indigenous voice Referendum could have passed with bipartisan support – in charts, *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/datablog/2023/nov/29/indigenous-voice-referendum-failure-why-bipartisan-support>

42 Essential Report (2022, May 31)

The campaign

Tragically, most Australians are ignorant of, or even disinterested in the history of colonisation and life conditions of First Nations people in Australia - the generations of resistance and struggle, the appalling human rights record of many Australian governments towards First Nations people, the basic human right of Indigenous people to self-determination, and the need for targeted initiatives to overcome structural disadvantage.

Further to this, many voters are ignorant of the Australian Constitution and the role and processes of referendums in changing the Constitution. The last referendum in Australia was the failed Republic Referendum held in 1999, twenty-four years earlier.



An expression of frustration – various locations in various forms.

The critical task of the referendum Yes campaign was to inform, educate and convince a double majority of Australians (a majority across the nation and a majority of states) that a constitutionally-recognised First Nations Voice to parliament would make a significant and positive difference in the lives of First Nations people, and benefit all Australians.

Ninety-seven per cent of Australians are non-Indigenous, and there is no question that racism is an embedded feature of Australian society that was alive and kicking hard in the campaign for the First Nations Voice to parliament. The No campaign was underpinned and amplified by the colonialist mindset, ignorance, and racist narratives that dominate Australian mainstream culture.

Overcoming entrenched and structural racism and ignorance requires public education about the true history of this country, and civics education about Australian governance, democracy and how to achieve a just society for all.

This requires a counter-hegemonic narrative to that perpetuated by powerholders in the media, government, and education institutions.

There are many models for building successful social movements. Bill Moyer's 1987 Movement Action Plan, though now quite dated, is still very pertinent to the fight for justice for First Nations people.

Moyer's guidance about social movement building that is relevant to the Voice campaign includes:

Publicly show that the social conditions of First Nations people violate values, traditions, and self-interests of the general public

- Effectively counter powerholders' denials about the problem, social myths, and justifications for the status quo, including dispelling the myths perpetuated by the IPA and other opponents that a constitutionally-enshrined First Nations Voice to parliament was unnecessary and divisive

- Involve, inform and mobilise large sections of the public in actions that challenge powerholders' policies and promote alternative visions and solutions, through targeted information and effective organising, including community outreach, activist training, protests, rallies, marches, etc.
- Enable the movement's organisations and leadership to nurture and empower grassroots activists and promote participatory democracy within the movement.⁴³

National and state umbrella organisations, including Yes23, Australians for Indigenous Constitutional Recognition, Uluru Dialogue, From the Heart (later merging with Yes23), Uphold and Recognise, Liberals for Yes, and Empowered Communities for Yes were some of the organisations mobilising the campaign. This plethora of peak Yes groups confused even experienced campaigners at grass-roots level. Yes23 was the largest of these organisations, with a national office, campaign coordinators in each State capital, and in some major regional centres, for example Cairns in Queensland. Yes23 started to present itself in visible form from about May 2023. But even then, who was speaking for what was often unclear.

Pre-existing grass roots community groups such as ANTAR, Reconciliation Australia and their network of local groups across Australia, political activists, church and other community-minded groups all worked through these organisations' umbrella groups to do the footwork for the Yes campaign. Arguable, Yes23 did not effectively consult and reach out to many established local groups, some with more than 30 years of entrenchment in their communities. The result was duplication of effort, poor coordination for some months, and a minimising of opportunities for the post-referendum reinforcement of local organisation.



Yes support across the community.

Despite the problems, tens of thousands of Australians who had never campaigned before joined over 200 local Yes23 groups across the country to support the Voice.

The following sections and the campaigners' Stories, included later in this analysis, provide details about the effectiveness of the Yes campaign in building a broad social movement as per Moyer's guidelines identified above.

Creating divisions: Equality versus equity

One of the unrelenting lies and deception of the No campaign that needed to be countered was about equality. This issue became central to popular understandings about the dangers of the Voice. The No campaign used the racist trope that the Voice was divisive as it would deliberately favour one group of Australians (First Nations people) over others.

The referendum campaign showcased Australians' differential engagement with the concepts of 'equality' and 'equity', and how each relate to addressing the historic legacy of colonialism, its traumatic impact on First Nations people and the systemic disadvantage faced by their communities.

43 Moyer, B. (1987). *The movement action plan: A strategic framework describing the eight stages of successful social movements*. <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/moyermap.html>

When distinguishing between 'equality' and 'equity' the Australian Human Rights Commission notes that equality recognises that, as humans "...we all have the same value ... the same rights, ... and have the same access to opportunities." In contrast, equity goes beyond equality and is about everyone achieving equal outcomes, recognising "... we all start from a different place ... we need to look at what individual people and communities need in order to achieve equity".⁴⁴ Both sides of the referendum campaign implicitly contested community understandings of these two principles to advance their case for Yes or for No.

The No campaign took advantage of ignorance. With First Nations people making up only 3-4% of the population, few non-Indigenous Australians have relationships with First Nations people or understand the challenges First Nations people face in the Australian colonial settler state.

Yes campaigners argued that the Voice was a mechanism to redress historic genocide and injustices and enhance self-determination, a fundamental equity issue. The No campaign argued that the Voice went beyond 'equality' and was therefore divisive. Hence the slogan "Don't vote for the voice of division".

Academic and reconciliation activist, Andrew Gunstone, found that:

- 97% of respondents agreed with the statement that "As far as possible, all Australians should have equal rights and opportunities."
- Only 45% agreed that "Indigenous people should be entitled to special rights, such as native title."
- Only 42% want the federal government to "negotiate a treaty with Indigenous people."
- Only 32% agreed that special rights should be in the form of "reserved seats in parliament".⁴⁵



Multicultural support was widespread.

These findings indicate that most people do want 'equality' for all Australians, including First Nations people, but there is a lack of commitment to 'equity' - targeted initiatives to overcome disadvantages faced by First Nations people.

The federal government's Closing the Gap strategy was introduced in 2008 and since then Closing the Gap annual reports have identified and recorded First Nations peoples and communities' systemic disadvantage in health, education, employment, justice, safety, housing, and other social indicators of well-being. The latest in this series of reports was 2020.⁴⁶ In July 2020 agreement was reached between state and federal governments, the Australian Local Government Association, and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks) to replace the existing Closing the Gap Strategy with a new National Agreement on Closing the Gap designed to transform "... the way governments work with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to improve outcomes".⁴⁷

44 Australian Human Rights Commission (2022). *Let's talk about equality and equity*. <https://humanrights.gov.au/lets-talk-about-equality-and-equity>

45 Gunstone, A. (2024). *Reflections on the Voice: During and After the Campaign*, Australian Scholarly Publishing.

46 National Indigenous Australians Agency (2020) *Closing the Gap National Report* <https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/>

47 Coalition of Peaks (2023) *National agreement on closing the gap* <https://www.coalitionofpeaks.org.au/national-agreement-on-closing-the-gap-2020>

The Voice was promoted by the Coalition of Peaks as a means of redressing the disadvantages reflected in the Closing the Gap reports. The Voice was a chance to give First Nations people a constitutionally enshrined voice in decisions affecting their lives, a means of moving beyond simple 'equality of rights' to achieve 'equity in outcomes'.⁴⁸ It is worth noting that even under this new agreement the disadvantages experienced by First Nations peoples and communities was deepening rather than improving. The Productivity Commission's first review of progress on the National Agreement on Closing the Gap was released early in 2024 and its key message was that "... fundamental changes are required to deliver on the Agreement".⁴⁹

Despite the well-documented disadvantages experienced by First Nations people, the Yes campaign was unable to effectively counter the No campaign assertion that the Voice would give 'unfair advantage' to a section of Australian society over all other groups.

This was not helped by the 'call to ignorance' of the No campaign with its toxic political discourse of lies and deceptions and misleading simplistic non- solution to complex problems: "If you don't know vote No", which was used to sow seeds of doubt and divide the public.

Too little, too late and no cut-through

Widespread enthusiasm surrounded the Albanese announcement of the new government's intention to implement the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full in May 2022.

It has also been noted that there was a "plethora" of community-based Yes campaign organisations, whose very numbers confused voters, which were slow to mobilise, and failed to coordinate with well-established groups. Some Yes supporters have since become strong critics of the Government for failing to mobilise a community-based campaign.

There is a need to be very clear in this regard.

The Government's job – constitutionally, but also politically – was to steer the mechanics of the referendum, including the question wording, and decisions about what information would be provided to voters, through Parliament. And it is true that most Australians remain woefully ignorant of the structure and institutional responsibilities of the various levels of government and their agencies. For making so little effort to overcome this level of ignorance, government can certainly be criticised.

It should also be recalled by their critics that the government also had to resist pressure, not just from the Right but from some respected voices (notably including Mick Gooda⁵⁰) to remove the wording about Voice being able to make representations to Executive Government, i.e. senior levels of the bureaucracy. The government could very easily have caved on that question and to their credit they did not. Some Government actions could have been quicker, and certainly some senior ALP members and representatives could have been more vocal and active, but they are not responsible for the shortcomings of the community-based campaign.

There was a catastrophic delay in forming a Yes campaign organisation. It was February 2023, some nine months after the announcement that a referendum would take place, before an organisation, Yes23, which would campaign nationally for a Yes vote and support and fund local Yes23 groups was established.

The official Yes campaign launch in May 2023, in Adelaide, gave hope that finally there would be concerted action, but by the time the campaign was really cranking up, the polls were on a downwards trajectory. Actual logistical support for campaigning at local level was just not there (attested in some of the Stories below). Local activists were effectively starved

48 Coalition of Peaks (2020)

49 Productivity Commission (2024) Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Final Report. <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/closing-the-gapreview/report>

50 <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/i-m-terrified-we-ll-lose-voice-advocate-pleads-for-compromise-to-save-referendum-20230517-p5d93f.html>

of physical resources, and hence partly disempowered, for much of the first six months of 2023.

An earlier start to a strong Yes campaign may have been able to hold onto the early support, by educating on the need for a Voice, and counter the racist misinformation from the Dutton-led Opposition and the No campaign, though this will never be known. This delay certainly created a media vacuum in which the Federal Opposition blustered and stalled about bipartisanship; and muddled the waters with questions and claims designed to create confusion amongst voters about the purpose and reach of the Voice.

Seasoned First Nations' campaigner Larissa Baldwin-Roberts, Director of GetUp said in hindsight that she believed "... delays were fatal. There was such a huge delay in getting a campaign out the door."⁵¹

When the campaign did begin, its messages lacked detail, clarity and cut-through, and according to Labor strategist and pollster Kos Samaras:

[The Yes campaign] were relying on techniques that were really suited to people who are super engaged with regards to this referendum and living in the inner parts of our cities.

People voted No because they have not engaged with the Referendum, and [didn't] have enough information.

It was a communication problem that was created by the Yes campaign so [the No campaign] didn't have to do anything⁵²

The prominent No slogan "If you don't know, vote no" seemed to stick with many Australian voters. [The No

Campaign] just basically capitalised on the lack of information.⁵³

According to former Labor strategist and RedBridge pollster, Kos Samaras, the messaging did not cut through to outer suburbs and regions where people are least connected to politics, do not pay much attention to political news, are less aware of the referendum or the issues, and were therefore confused by the Yes campaign. 'Late migrants' who arrived in the last 15 years generally were favourable to Yes, but children of migrants arriving in the 1950s and 1960s were overwhelmingly No.⁵⁴

Progressive disunity and solidarity

Differences of view about the Voice Referendum among left and progressive activists emerged during the referendum campaign.

From the date of the Uluru Statement (2017) until Australian Greens Senator and Spokesperson on First Nations, Justice and Sport, Lidia Thorpe's statement of November 2020. It seemed there was general unity across the progressive left to support the Voice Referendum. This occurred not only in the Greens party but also among some left activists and organisations. The Greens initially supported the Voice to Parliament from the inception of the proposal in the Uluru Statement from the Heart in May 2017, and urged all parties to do the same.⁵⁵ Again in 2018, in their Minority Report of the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (2018) the Greens stated they "wholeheartedly support the establishment of such a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament".⁵⁶

51 Brennan, B. (2023, November 1). Inside the delays and disagreements that doomed the Yes campaign ahead of the Voice Referendum. ABC News <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-11-01/yes-campaign-delays-disagreements-whatwent-wrong/103045380>

52 Angelo, G. (2023, October 14). Looking back at the Voice Referendum with Kos Samaras, The Wire. <https://www.thewire.org.au/story/looking-back-at-the-voicereferendum-with-kos-samaras/>

53 Wellauer, K., Williams, C. & Brennan, B. (2023, October 16). Why the Voice failed. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-16/why-the-voicefailed/102978962>

54 Angelo, G. (2023, October 14)

55 Rachel Siewert (Senator) (2017, May 17). *Australian Greens respond to the Uluru Statement from the Heart*. Media Release. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22media%2Fpressrel%2F5305250%22>

56 Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, (2018). *Minority Report to the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Former_Committees/Constitutional_Recognition_2018/ConstRecognition/Final_Report/section?id=committees%2Freportjnt%2F024213%2F26868

Some Greens politicians, including South Australian Greens Senator Hanson-Young, and many members, campaigned in the spirit of this 2018 position throughout the campaign.

However, in the period leading to the election of Labor in May 2022 and the announcement that a referendum for a constitutionally-enshrined First Nations Voice to parliament would take place, differences emerged within the Greens. The opposition to the Voice within the Greens was strengthened with the establishment in 2020 of the First Nations Network as a formal group within the Greens party (often referred to as the Blak Greens). This preceded a shift in Greens policy to advocate introducing a treaty prior to a Voice to parliament. The Blak Greens, led by then-Greens Senator Lidia Thorpe, issued a statement, supported by the Greens party in November 2020:

If constitutional recognition proceeds without Treaty discussions being advanced, it in fact makes recognition less likely to succeed. We know how difficult it is to get constitutional reform in this country. Any reform process needs to have grassroots support if it's going to stick. Having constitutional recognition discussed as part of the grassroots treaty discussion process would make it more likely to succeed.⁵⁷

Along with the Greens, some other progressive activists declared they were 'undecided' or even not supporters of the proposed referendum. These differences nominally centred around the concept of sovereignty, the racist nature of the constitution and Australian governance of First Nations peoples, the weakness of the Voice as a reform that would provide only 'advice' to government rather than having decision-making powers, and the claim that Treaty should come before

Voice, thus reversing the order of the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

In July 2020, Dani Linder, Bundjalung/Kungarakany/Yorta Yorta woman, lawyer, and legal academic at the University of Queensland, and Amy Maguire, co-Director of the Centre for Law and Social Justice at the University of Newcastle refuted Lidia Thorpe's approach, saying:

Preserving the sequence proposed in the Uluru Statement respects the cultural authority of the reform process.

And diverging from a consensus outcome undermines the integrity of the consultative process that led to it. It can also devalue the standing of those elders who together designed the proposed reforms....

.... A political voice and standing – if constitutionally entrenched – can bring many more First Nations voices into the political arena and progress the unsettling of the Australian legal system.⁵⁸

In August 2022, Senator Lidia Thorpe attacked the Voice proposal in parliament, this time calling it “a waste of money”, echoing LNP Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, who said “I think this whole thing is certainly a waste of resources.”⁵⁹

The media leapt on these comments to declare falsely that there was widespread division within the First Nations community. In contrast to the media-perpetuated myth of division, Victoria's First Peoples Assembly co-chair and Nira illim bulluk man of the Taungurung Nation, Marcus Stewart, reaffirmed the prevailing strategic view among First Nations people and their allies:

57 Goreng Goreng, T. & Thorpe, L. (2022, November 27). *Blak Greens leading our party to Truth, Treaty and Voice*. <https://greens.org.au/magazine/blak-greens-leading-our-party-truth-treaty-and-voice>

58 Linder, D. & MacGuire, A. (2020, July 8). Lidia Thorpe wants to shift course on Indigenous recognition. Here's why we must respect the Uluru Statement, *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/lidia-thorpe-wants-to-shift-course-on-indigenous-recognition-heres-why-we-must-respect-the-uluru-statement-141609>

59 Collard, S. (2022, September 1). Referendum on Indigenous voice to parliament a 'complete waste' of money, Lidia Thorpe says, *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/sep/01/referendum-on-indigenous-voice-to-parliament-a-complete-waste-of-money-lidia-thorpe-says>

Treaties take a long time to negotiate ... I don't think it's a matter of waiting for one and then the next, but I do think we need Voice to look at how those others will work.

We've got an opportunity now, to meet that moment in history. To see a successful Yes vote, not to drag it down with division.⁶⁰

In fact, considerable progress had been made on treaties at state level in the lead up to the Voice referendum, particularly in South Australia and Victoria. Unfortunately, since the loss of the referendum, conservative parties (LNP in Queensland and Victoria, and the CLP in the NT) have withdrawn previous bipartisan support for treaty processes. Greens Senator Lidia Thorpe declared she would not support a Voice until she was "satisfied that First Nations sovereignty is not ceded" but failed to declare her support even after being reassured.⁶¹

This concern had already been emphatically denied by Professor Megan Davis, a Cobble Cobble woman, constitutional lawyer and an adviser to the government on the Voice:

A referendum to establish a Voice to Parliament will not impede an unceded, unextinguished sovereignty asserted by First Nations people.⁶²

Tim Rowse, Emeritus Professorial Fellow and political scientist highlighted:

The contest between the Yes and No campaigns has been an opportunity for the Australian public to learn about First Nations' political diversity. What has become increasingly clear is that the Yes/No contest has been a misleading guide to that diversity.⁶³

Many Greens members were angry about the position adopted by Senator Thorpe and the Greens leadership, arguing that the leadership had become beholden to the Blak Greens and unable to deal with the dissenters (who were also the dissenters at Uluru in 2017).⁶⁴ The return of the Greens leadership to rhetorical support for the Voice to realign with the Uluru Statement from the Heart provoked the departure of Senator Thorpe from the Greens in February 2023.

The actions of Lidia Thorpe and her undue influence on the Greens leadership, together with the so-called 'progressive No' position adopted by a minority of First Nations radicals and allies was fodder to the media and reverberated through the referendum campaign. On the left, the split in the progressive vote led some activists to disengage from the campaign, even though many voted Yes anyway on voting day. In support of the so-called "progressive No" position, some progressive unions adopted 'Blak sovereignty-type' No positions, influenced by uncritical support for First Nations caucuses within their ranks, leading them also to be passive in the campaign.

More dangerous and significant, the differences in views on the left were taken up by the No campaign as an example of 'the crime of divisiveness' amongst First Nations peoples. The No campaign used differences of opinion within progressives, and between First Nations Yes and No campaigners to fortify the narrative that 'First Nations people are divided on the Voice'. This trope is constantly used against First Nations people as a sign of weakness and a reason to deny, disbelieve and dismiss. In this instance it was used to encourage doubters to vote No. The disarray in the Greens over this period and the emergence of two conflicting public positions from the progressive left on the Voice Referendum points to a larger problem of the left in our ability to deal with significant differences of viewpoint,

60 Collard, S. (2022, September 1)

61 Belot, H. (2023, January 31). Lidia Thorpe welcomes sovereignty assurances over voice but remains undecided. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/jan/30/lidia-thorpe-welcomes-sovereignty-assurances-over-voice-but-remains-undecided>

62 Rowse T (2023, October 6). A steady path to sovereignty? Inside Story. <https://insidestory.org.au/a-steady-path-to-sovereignty/>

63 Rowse T (2023, October 6)

64 Latimore, J. (2022, April 24). Greens position on Uluru statement loses Aboriginal voices. *Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/greens-position-on-uluru-statement-loses-aboriginal-voices-20220420-p5aer8.html>

particularly when it concerns differences of viewpoint amongst First Nations peoples. Many progressive activists, including members of SEARCH, were challenged by whether the referendum for Voice, and how the campaign was being waged, was the best way to advance the aspirations of the Uluru Statement from the Heart. There were some who shared the concerns of Arrernte woman, Celeste Liddle:

.... after so many years of experience, of living through every single Indigenous body that has existed and seeing them all be ripped apart by one government after another, I am not sure I buy that having one written into the constitution is going to make a lot of difference.⁶⁵

However, for most progressive activists, abstaining or voting No was not solidarity with First Nations friends, family and communities. It showed no respect for the outcomes of years of First Nations communities' consultations across the country, nor the extensive negotiations and thoroughly considered options and strategy, designed to achieve positive outcomes in the current political environment.

Solidarity demanded getting behind the Yes campaign to win a constitutionally-enshrined First Nations Voice to parliament achieved through a referendum.

Some First Nations leaders who were initially for No changed positions from No to Yes. Meriki Onus, a Gunnai-Gunditjmara woman and an organiser for the Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance, said the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria showed how a federal body could work:

We've seen an example in Australia where a body similar to the Voice to parliament already functions, and I think that they do really good work and there's amazing opportunity there. So, I would be leaning towards a Yes.⁶⁶

Mililma May, Danggalaba Kulumbirigin Tiwi woman, chief executive of Uprising of the People, a Darwin-based group that acts for Indigenous young people in detention, changed her mind and became an "active educator" for Yes because she feared that a majority No would be a powerful crushing of the aspirations of the vast majority of First Nations people:

The idea of a No vote in the Northern Territory scared me in that it could mean a majority of Australians do not care about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices. And that fundamentally felt wrong to me...

I was [initially] scared that my sovereignty would be impacted. And I was wary of trusting the government after Australia's history. Moving beyond those fears, I realised that sovereignty can't be impacted by voting Yes. And I think it's healthy to have a level of mistrust of the government, but in a way that can make the government accountable.⁶⁷

It took the Greens party 16 months to resolve the conflict with Lidia Thorpe over their No position, and to return, at least rhetorically, to their original pro-Voice policy and re-engage with the Yes campaign.

The impact of the Greens and other so-called 'progressive No' attacks on the Voice proposal⁶⁸ is difficult to determine, but there are good reasons to suggest it was a factor that influenced the outcome of the referendum:

65 Liddle, C. (2023, May 10). Voices beyond Yes and No. Eureka Street. <https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/voices-beyond-yes-and-no>

66 Crowe, D. & Massola, J. (2023, September 29). 'Blak sovereignty' leaders switch to Yes, isolating Lidia Thorpe. *Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/blak-sovereignty-leaders-switch-to-yes-isolating-lidia-thorpe-20230926-p5e7tk.html>

67 Crowe, D. & Massola, J. (2023, September 29)

68 Some small left organisations provided outlets for the Greens while they vacillated on their Voice position, and while they actually opposed.

- Considerable energy was spent during 2022 and 2023 to get the national leadership of the Greens to support Yes in the Voice Referendum. This energy could have been used in other forums, or even in getting a campaign up and running.
- The effects of 'Blak Greens' and other so-called Progressive 'No' attacks on the Voice were not felt only, or evenly predominantly, amongst Greens voters but amongst LNP and other voters precisely because it fed into the narrative that 'Aboriginal people are divided on the Voice'.
- The combined denunciations of the Voice by such organisations and individuals, over a period of some years prior to the vote, undoubtedly had a demobilising effect on young progressive voters on campus and elsewhere who would otherwise have been not just Yes voters but potential Yes campaigners.
- Even when the Australian Greens reversed their position and eventually came out in support of Yes, their momentum and engagement was never regained, despite the efforts of many Greens members and some state-level branches. Many elected Greens MPs did not campaign in their electorates in support of the Voice (in the Queensland electorate of Ryan, for instance). Adam Bandt and much of the national leadership did not contribute to the Yes campaign as they could have.
- Some progressive unions' activists were influenced by their First Nations caucuses and the 'Blak sovereignty' No positions, leading them to be passive in the campaign.

Being a genuine ally for First Nations people, and other people fighting for justice, often involves creating spaces of solidarity and mutual support, agreeing on shared values and goals, negotiating policies, strategies and tactics. Sometime this requires creating safe spaces and 'voices' (like Blak and LGBTQI+ caucuses), but good allyship also involves respect, critical engagement between members and leaders, and courage to challenge non- strategic or simply wrong-headed policies and actions. Thomas Mayo identifies that:

We should never blindly follow what anyone says without questioning and assessing it.⁶⁹

Bernice Reagon Johnson, African-American social rights activist, historian, and founder of the all-Black female a cappella ensemble *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, described this challenge:

If you're in a coalition and you're comfortable, you know it's not a broad enough coalition.⁷⁰

Building powerful coalitions and alliances is essential to winning First Nations human rights, self-determination and justice, but also to win social, economic and ecological justice for all people and the planet, and to stop the rising threat of neo-fascism.

The media campaign

The Yes campaign had a huge task in front of it to reverse the dominance of the discourse about divisiveness being peddled in Australia's highly concentrated right-wing traditional media, and social media.

The avalanche of toxic misinformation, lies and conspiracy theories was disturbing and disheartening for Yes campaigners who worked so hard in their communities. While there is a lack of data about the extent to which the traditional media (newspapers, TV and radio) and social media influenced the outcome, it is likely to have been substantial, and not helped by the Yes campaign lacking a consistent strategy and its

69 Mayo, T. (2024). *Always Was, Always Will Be*. Hardie Grant. (p.107)

70 2Thanks. (2024, July 18). Bernice Johnson Reagon has joined our ancestors. *Daily Kos*. <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2024/7/18/2255241/-Bernice-Johnson-Reagon-has-joined-our-ancestors>

messaging being fragmented rather than focused on simple, consistent themes.⁷¹

It is generally agreed that the No campaign was more effective on social media and enjoyed overwhelming support in conservative and right-wing traditional media, especially News Ltd outlets⁷²:

Both the Yes and No camps understood the value of messaging across both legacy media and the major social media platforms, but the No side did it far more effectively. Backed by the right-wing activist group Advance, No was earlier to focus on social media, and quicker and more adept at harnessing the power of the fastest growing social media site in Australia, TikTok, to reach younger voters. It used storytelling, authentic voices and personalisation, and focused its campaign – with apparent success – around two high-profile and articulate Indigenous leaders, Jacinta Nampijinpa Price and Nyunggai Warren Mundine (of the Bundjalung and Yuin people). ‘No’ messages were amplified by Sky News Australia, which had a vast reach through its YouTube channel and reposting of its stories by commentators and conservative politicians on social media.⁷³

The Yes campaign spent more on social media, but the Yes core messages were more disparate than the No messages. The No campaign focused on its stronghold states in Queensland and Western Australia, and the possible flip-state, South Australia. And further, the No

ads covered just seven themes, and all were negative, while the Yes message was dispersed across 33 different themes.⁷⁴

Denigrating cartoons, memes and headlines put forward by ‘respectable’ journalists and media outlets plagued prominent Yes campaigners⁷⁵. In a campaign funded by right-wing think tanks in Australia and overseas, lies replaced truth-telling, and right-wing opinions posing as journalism became the stories of the day at the expense of impartiality and balance. In place of the hard work of journalistic integrity and research, Muller⁷⁶ argues many mainstream media fell back on the:

discredited and outdated ... ‘he said/she said’ journalism ... [whereby] damaging content is presented as a plausible point of view, someone else is quoted as opposing it, and the public is left to figure out the truth for itself. This is against the public interest. Lies and misrepresentations are not just another set of truths.

The mainstream media gave disproportionate platforms to Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price and Nyunggai Warren Mundine, the First Nations conservative voices of the No campaign. Promoted by the media as credible representatives of First Nations people, the views of Price and Mundine were rejected by the vast majority of First Nations people.

71 Tlozek, E. (2023, October 13). ‘Lion’s share’ of Voice coverage focused on Yes campaign hasn’t translated to support, researchers say. *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-13/voice-social-media-research-yes-no-support/102970898>

72 Carson, A, Strating, R. & Jackman, S. (2023, September 12). The ‘no’ campaign is dominating the messaging on the Voice Referendum on TikTok – here’s why. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/the-no-campaign-is-dominating-the-messaging-on-the-voice-referendum-on-tiktok-heres-why-212465>

73 Carson, A, Grömping, M. & Jackman, S. (2023, August 30). Voice Referendum: is the ‘yes’ or ‘no’ camp winning on social media, advertising spend and in the polls? *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/voice-referendum-is-the-yes-or-nocamp-winning-on-social-media-advertising-spend-and-in-the-polls-208956>

74 Carson, A, Grömping, M. & Jackman, S. (2023, August 30)

75 Mayo, T. (2024). Always was always will be

76 Muller, D. (2023, October 15). How did the media perform on the Voice Referendum? Let’s talk about truth-telling and impartiality, *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/how-did-the-media-perform-on-the-voice-referendum-lets-talk-about-truth-telling-and-impartiality-214961>

Even Laura Tingle, ABC senior journalist and staff-elected board member, declared the ABC's obsession with so-called 'balance' distorted coverage of the issues and was "nuts".⁷⁷

Myths promoted by the No campaign included: the voice is legally risky; the voice will force treaties; there are no details; the voice will allow the UN to take over Australia; the Australian Electoral Commission will tamper with your votes; Australians will lose ownership of homes; postal votes are a way for the Australian Electoral Commission to "rig the Referendum"; pencils are distributed at polling stations so votes can be changed, and the Constitution is invalid, so the referendum is invalid too.^{78 79}

Many First Nations people and their allies were shocked at the strength of the hatred and vitriol, lies and distortions, which were the tropes of the No campaign. Social media platforms exploded with false claims about the Voice.

The No campaign ran three different social media strategies, each targeting different groups of Australians with apparently contradictory messages:

- Firstly, claiming the voice would be "radical", "dangerous", "a big deal" and 'completely changes the way our democratic parliamentary system functions.'

- Secondly, messages targeting younger people under 34 years old highlighting so-called 'progressive No' arguments against the Voice, including that the Voice should be much stronger, and that the current model was too weak to change outcomes for Aboriginal people.
- Thirdly, messages focused on middle-aged voters, with all ads shown to users aged between 35 and 64, with a greater skew towards a female audience, that portrayed itself as a neutral news source about the vote, but only posted news articles highlighting criticism of or scepticism about the Voice.⁸⁰

The one-way drift from Yes towards No was relentless as the campaign progressed. In a climate of unrelenting lies, abuse, and misinformation, very few people switched from voting No to Yes over the campaign.

Of those who said that they would have voted No to the Voice when asked in January 2023, only 4.8 per cent ended up voting Yes. In the opposite direction, 42.0 per cent of those who said that they would have voted Yes when asked in January 2023 ended up voting No in October 2023.⁸¹

Follow the money

It is worthwhile to 'follow the money' to understand the class and sectoral interests, networks, and agendas at play behind the No campaign – and to expose these networks for strategic targeted disruption.

77 Koziol, M. (2023, October 14). 'This is nuts': Tingle calls out false balance at ABC over Voice coverage. Sydney Morning Herald <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/this-is-nuts-abc-s-tingle-laments-cost-of-obsession-with-balance-in-voice-debate-20231013-p5ebzk.html>

78 Remeikis, A & Butler, J. (2023, October 12). Voice Referendum: factchecking the seven biggest pieces of misinformation pushed by the no side. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/oct/12/indigenous-voice-to-parliament-referendum-misinformation-fact-checked>

79 Besser, L. (2023, October 17) The Voice campaign was infected with disinformation. Who's in charge of inoculating Australians against lies? *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-17/voice-referendum-infected-disinformation-australians-lies/102981108>

80 Butler, J. & Evershed, N. 2023. *No campaign runs opposite claims on Indigenous voice across different social media pages*, *The Guardian*, 14 July 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/jul/14/no-campaign-social-media-strategy-indigenous-voice-referendum>

81 Biddle, N, Gray, M, McAllister, I, & Qvortrup, M. (2023, November 28)

While the Coalition pushed for equal funding of the official Yes and No campaigns, the Albanese Labor government decided not to allocate public funds to the Yes campaign, even though a constitutionally-enshrined First Nations Voice to parliament was government policy.

Instead, it decided to provide \$1 million to fund a neutral civics education campaign about the referendum process and \$9.5 million to fund 'facts of the voice'.^{82 83}

According to published figures from the Australian Electoral Commission, the Yes campaign had five times the registered funds of the No campaign. The two major Yes campaign groups - Australians for Constitutional Recognition and the Uluru Dialogue group - received \$58.59m combined and spent \$54.13m.⁸⁴

While most funds for the Yes campaign came as small donations from volunteers, from trade unions, social groups and political organisations, some of Australia's largest, but least credible, corporations (including the ANZ, Westpac, NAB and Commonwealth banks, gas and mining companies BHP, Rio Tinto and Woodside Energy, and consumer-hostile Qantas and Wesfarmers) made \$20 million of well-publicised donations.⁸⁵

This raised questions for Yes campaigners about whether it was truly a grassroots campaign or a campaign of the economic and political elite. It raised questions about what these companies gained in the public domain from these donations, and whether the Yes campaign aligning with corporate elites alienates more voters than it persuades, and simply reinforces the perception the campaign was an "echo chamber of elites talking to elites".⁸⁶

The No campaign, particularly through the conservative lobby group and the leading organiser of the No campaign, Advance (formerly Advance Australia), also received millions from corporations and philanthropists, including Clive Palmer's Minerology, former mayor of Newcastle Jeffrey McCloy, former BHP CEO, Marius Kloppers and the IPA-funding B. Macfie Family Pty Ltd.⁸⁷ Simon Fenwick, who donated \$700,000, has also funded conspiracy theorist candidates and anti-left campaigns, dismisses human-induced climate change as "alarmism", and runs an investment fund focused on Indigenous land projects.⁸⁸

It wasn't just philanthropists who bankrolled the No campaign. Analysis by The Guardian of federal politicians' advertising data in Meta's ad library indicated that "... Coalition politicians have spent over four times more on Facebook ads about the voice than Labor politicians." ⁸⁹

82 Morse, D. (2023, May 3). Federal government commits more than \$1 million to Voice Referendum education campaign. *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-05-03/voice-parliament-referendum-education-campaign-funding/102300112>

83 Karp, P. (2023, March 6). Labor approves \$9.5m for 'facts of the voice' but says it is not funding de-facto yes campaign. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/mar/06/indigenous-voice-to-parliament-labor-approves-millions-for-facts-of-the-voice-but-says-it-is-not-funding-de-facto-yes-referendum-campaign>

84 Butler, J. (2024, April 2). Yes campaign groups received more than five times as much in donations as no side in voice Referendum. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/apr/02/voice-referendum-australia-donations-yes-no-campaign-groups-funding>

85 Hutchinson, S. (2024, April 5). The corporate cost of the Yes campaign. *Australian Financial Review* <https://www.afr.com/politics/the-corporate-cost-of-the-yes-campaign-20240403-p5fh1e>

86 Karp, P. & Butler, J. (2023, October 15). 'Echo chamber of elites': outer urban areas ignored by yes campaign, Labor MP Mike Freeland say. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/oct/15/echo-chamber-of-elites-outer-urban-areas-ignored-by-yes-campaign-labor-mp-mike-freeland-say>

87 Crowe, D. (2023, September 15). Revealed: The elite money behind the No campaign *Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/revealed-the-elite-money-behind-the-no-campaign-20230913-p5e4eh.html>

88 Begley, P. (2023, October 10). Major No donor looking to defeat the Voice is an investor in Indigenous land ventures. *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-10/no-voice-campaign-donor-simon-fenwick-indigenous-ventures-730/102955688>

89 Evershed, N., Bogle, A., Butler, J., & Nicholas, J., 2023, Coalition no campaigners spending four times more on voice Facebook ads than counterparts, 1 September 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/sep/01/coalition-no-campaigners-spending-four-times-more-on-voice-facebook-ads-than-counterparts>

Ominously, along with its connection to Advance, the No campaign was linked into national and international climate denial, libertarian, free-market groups through right-wing Australian organisations like the IPA, the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) with connections to the Atlas Network, a non-government umbrella organisation based in the US state of Virginia.

The Atlas Network coordinates 515 public policy research institutes and provides training, networking, and grants for groups around the world.⁹⁰

The CIS is an Australian member of the Atlas Network along with other right-wing and climate denialist ‘think tanks’ around the globe. The Atlas Network receives funding from activist climate-deniers (including the Koch Brothers), the Exxon Foundation and other fossil fuel and other extractive industry corporations.⁹¹ Atlas network members share ideas between think tanks via various publications, including the quarterly Freedom’s Champion magazine, podcasts, and books.⁹²

Organising to win

Winning the referendum posed the challenge of organising a ‘people’s movement’ grounded in and building from the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* process.

The greatest campaign challenge was to win the support of unconverted voters beyond the higher-income, higher-educated residents of inner metropolitan suburbs, and to engage and convince non-Indigenous Australians living in the outer suburbs, regional centres, rural towns and remote communities of the benefits of voting Yes.

As early as December 2022 it was reported that an organisation would be formed to support and fund local groups to campaign nationally for a Yes vote.

The formal Yes23 campaign, and informal activist campaigning, employed models of organising, known as ‘community organising’ and ‘field organising’.⁹³ Both are forms of grassroots organising that have gained prominence since the 1970s Chicago-based community campaigning led by Saul Alinsky. They sit alongside the long organising traditions of the workers, civil rights, feminist, anti-colonial movements and other social movements whose aims are to alert and inform people about injustice; and to mobilise people to act and/or vote for a cause. These models are based on building relationships, developing leadership, training activists, gaining and mobilising resources, democratic decision-making and behaviours, and taking actions including door-to-door canvassing, phone banking, campaign rallies and events that disrupt powerholders’ business-as-usual.

While community and field organising can be seen as versions of the same thing, it is helpful to distinguish each and their relevance to the challenges of the Voice campaign.

At its simplest, community organising is about rippling out from the centre. The Yes campaign demonstrated the limitations of the community organising model when it only involves supporters working within their own communities with people of similar demographics and ideas: risking the ‘converted talking to the converted’. As already highlighted, the tragic level of ignorance within the Australian population about the conditions of disadvantage faced by First Nations peoples and communities, combined with the lack of knowledge about the Australian constitution and referenda was probably a community education task beyond the time and the limited resources available.

90 Walker, J. 2023. Silencing the Voice: The Fossil-fuelled Atlas Network’s Campaign against Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australia. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies*. 15 (2): 105-125. <https://eprints.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/mcs/article/view/8813>

91 Westervelt, A. & Dembicki, G. (2023, September 12). Meet the Shadowy Global Network Vilifying Climate Protesters, *The New Republic*, <https://newrepublic.com/article/175488/meet-shadowy-global-network-vilifying-climate-protesters>

92 Atlas Network. (2024). *Who We Are*. <https://www.atlasnetwork.org/our-mission>

93 Ganz, M. (2019). *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement*. Oxford University Press. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283815940_Back_to_grass_roots_Peak_union_councils_and_community_campaigning

Whelan, J. & McLeod, J. (2016). *People Power Manual: Community Organising Guide*, The Change Agency. <https://commonslibrary.org/community-organising-guide/>

Community organising works well in a particular locality where there is a high level of common interest in local needs, for example a shared commitment to protect the local environment, community service or workplace rights. It was important in building the Sydney Alliance and other local and regional community social justice campaign networks in Australia⁹⁴, and the successful community campaigns for the Teal Independent candidates in recent Australian elections.⁹⁵

In the Yes campaign Kitchen Table Conversations (KTC) were a form of community organising used to build local supporter networks. The KTC model is based on one simple idea: "... that engaging people in the kind of open and honest dialogue that women have had around kitchen tables for centuries has the power to create real change".⁹⁶

The KTC method of community organising has a track record of success in Australia, notably in the 1980s and into the 1990s in building and sustaining the movement in support of Indigenous Reconciliation. As developed then, particularly by the Women's Reconciliation Network, it played an important role in helping generate a layer of very committed reconciliation activists, often in suburbs and towns where there had been no prior organisation on these issues.

But it was applied as one method among others, and with a recognition that it was a slow road. It was not designed for national-scale, time-bound mobilisations in a deeply ignorant and highly politicised environment. The KTC model is a useful tool to mobilise early-stage campaigners but was not sufficient to be the main community organising approach for the Yes campaign.



Yes campaign rallies and marches encouraged supporters but were too late to effectively demonstrate and mobilise support

94 Tattersall, A. (2015). The global spread of community organising: how 'Alinsky-style' community organizing travelled to Australia and what we learnt. *Community Development Journal*. 50(3), 380-39

95 Barnes, A. & Balnave, N. (2015) Back to grass roots: Peak union councils and community campaigning. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 26(4), 577-595;

Barnes A. & Markey, R. (2015) Evaluating the organising model of trade unionism: An Australian perspective. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*. 26(4), 513-525.

96 Crooks, M. & McPherson, L. (2021). Kitchen Table Conversations: a guide for sustaining our democratic culture. Victorian Women's Trust. <https://www.vwt.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/KTC-Guide-2021-DIGITAL-v11.pdf>

The Yes campaign used online data entry and tracking systems, but it is not clear how effective this was, particularly in actively directing campaigners and campaign resources to strategic communities. That is, directing resources to soft-Yes, soft-No, CALD, or outer urban, regional and rural communities, and to follow-up wavering voters.

The Yes campaign tracked shifts in opinion, but the data provided to grassroots campaigners was overly optimistic, and arguably campaigners and resources were poorly allocated to arrest the shift in the non-supporting communities.

In contrast to community organising, field organising involves very targeted campaigning and strategic allocation of personnel and resources. Field campaigners analyse data to identify the people, places, streets, and households to hold targeted door knocking and conversations, often entailing several visits. Field organising activist mobilisation and action ripple out with targeted messages in specifically identified 'high priority' communities.

Field organising requires multiple roles: volunteer and canvassing directors, digital organisers and data managers. Field organising coordinators recruit supporters willing to work in targeted communities (sometimes hostile communities), and provide campaigners with training, resources and support. Like community organising, field organising uses rallies, phonebanks, community events, fundraisers, door knocks and streets stalls; as well as generating content and organising supporters through social media platforms to build support and power.

Key issues have emerged from the organising approach of the Yes campaign:

- A stronger focus on the field organising model was needed to mobilise more Yes campaigners to campaign more effectively in strategic communities (including outer-urban, regional, rural, remote and CALD communities), supported with better-targeted communications and resources.

- Many local campaigners felt that the Yes campaign lacked transparency to its electorate-level volunteers and lacked methods to receive and respond to feedback from the grassroots as the campaign progressed.
- The quick winding down of the central coordinating organisation(s) of the Yes campaign undermined the opportunity to sustain the grassroots solidarity movement built from the referendum campaign.
- Many local groups took the initiative to retain links with supporters and reconstitute themselves as local 'First Nations allies' groups to provide on-going solidarity beyond the referendum. These organisations now need support to sustain local and national networks and campaigns.

Trade union solidarity

The trade union movement is experienced in field organising. Many union leaders and rank and file members identified common ground between the struggles for workers' rights and First Nations peoples' rights and got involved early and deeply.



The Yes vote on a Voice to Parliament is simply union business.

Sally McManus, ACTU Secretary, declared union solidarity on the following basis:

The union movement was built on amplifying voices so they can be heard.

We know we get better outcomes in the workplace when bosses listen to workers, just as we know doctors get better outcomes when they listen to patients. It stands to reason then that policymakers listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's voices on issues that impact their lives will also lead to better outcomes.⁹⁷



AMWU For Yes.



30,000 people March for Yes in Sydney.

97 Australian Council of Trade Unions [ACTU] (2023, August 30). *Union movement to mobilise for Voice referendum*. <https://www.actu.org.au/media-release/union-movement-to-mobilise-for-voice-referendum/>

Aboriginal community-controlled health, housing, language, alcohol rehabilitation, land councils, child and family centre, arts and culture centre are critical services for the Wumpurrarni community, who also own the town's major retail businesses - the supermarket and BP service station.

Tennant Creek was the only town in the NT where there was a Yes vote majority (by nine votes). Other towns of the NT have a higher proportion of non-Indigenous residents. Tennant Creek is in the Lingiari electorate which covers all the NT outside of Darwin - many Top End and Outback Aboriginal communities - and the towns of Alice Springs, Katherine, and Darwin's rural fringe. The Lingiari vote was 56% No and 44% Yes.

Remote mobile polling booths' results from Lingiari shows the largely Indigenous communities returned Yes votes ranging from at least 60% to up to 90%. The vote in Solomon electorate, which includes Darwin and the adjoining city of Palmerston (combined population 122,000), was 36% Yes, 64% No.

The Central and Northern Land Councils led the Yes campaign in Jurnkurakurr/ Tennant Creek, supported by an informal alliance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous community activists.

This alliance mobilised early, with banners and placards prominently displayed on the Land Councils' main street offices and on houses around town. Campaigners held street stalls and BBQs at Peko Park, the community meeting place in the centre of town, and at other community events including the small fortnightly community market and the very popular local AFL grand final.

At a day-to-day level people are pre-occupied with essential day-to-day issues around poverty, health, housing, community safety and justice. So, getting the Yes message out to people for whom English is not their first language, have low literacy, and who are deeply distrusting of governments, was challenging.

Many people thought the referendum was about Covid or the Intervention. There is great hostility to the Intervention and the resultant loss of community control over governance and services.

Many people were unable to vote across the NT's vast Outback because of lack of remote polling booths.

The land councils distributed information across many remote Aboriginal communities and outstations. People might have their issues about land councils, but they trust them and other Aboriginal community-controlled organisations a lot more than government.

Between early May and late September 2023, the Central Land Council (CLC) held 72 Voice information sessions in the southern half of the NT that were attended by 2,300 people. These meetings were a combination of presentations, Q&A, and conversations with local language speakers. The CLC also distributed a special issue of its *Land Rights News* focused on enrolment and misinformation about the Voice.



Warumungu Traditional Owner, Jimmy Frank Jupurrurla speaks for the Voice.

Warumungu Traditional Owner, Jimmy Frank Jupurrurla (in photo above), identified the Voice as just one part of the ongoing struggle for First Nations rights and self-determination:

We don't really have control in our communities. We need something more permanent, having a say in the parliament – whether it's housing, whether it's justice or health.

ATSIC was a strong voice for us. It has been taken away from us. The Constitution is like the Bible. It's very hard to take out what's in the Constitution. Getting our voice into the Constitution is getting our foot in the door. It's a first step, but a huge step. It's really important for us, especially in the Northern Territory. Our ancestors fought for our country; they built a foundation for us. We should vote Yes because we've got nothing to lose.

In Jurnkurakurr, Indigenous and non-Indigenous campaigners, working together, visited the 25% of households living on the town camps/ community living areas that surround the town to talk, listen, and provide campaign t-shirts, posters, and other materials.

The local campaigners distributed CLC materials, as material from the Yes campaign was hard to get and arrived late. The CLC struggled to keep up with the demand for materials and information sessions, including from communities that requested they return a second time to meet with residents who'd missed out on earlier sessions.

The Howard-era restrictions on government-funded organisations engaging in advocacy led some Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and non-Indigenous community service NGOs that receive almost 100% of their funding to service the First Nations community refused to hang Yes banners on their premises, claiming "it was political".

Many people said they saw Northern Territory senator and prominent No campaigner Warlpiri woman Jacinta Nampijinpa Price as "ridiculous", and not representing Aboriginal people but speaking for white racists.

The referendum has failed but local Wumpurrarni are more politically aware, and determined to continue to advocate for stronger local control and self-determination outside of the Voice. People recognise the stakes are high and they can't rely on government or whitefellas (Warumungu: *Papulanyi*).

State campaigns: The tide had turned

Every state voted No to the Voice, and only the ACT voted majority Yes. Votes cast in the territories are included in the national total for the purposes of determining a national majority, but the territories are not counted for the purposes of determining a majority of states.

Every seat in South Australia and the Northern Territory voted No as did all but three seats in Queensland and all but two seats in both Western Australia and Tasmania.

The South Australia campaign and its results

From the outset, leaders of the Yes campaign identified South Australia as crucial to its success. The state's long association with Aboriginal civil liberties (the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA), later FCAATSI, started in Adelaide in February in 1958); its history of liberal social reforms, including in Aboriginal policy, such as the first land rights act in the country under the Dunstan Government, in 1966; it was the place where Faith Bandler and Charles Perkins launched the highly successful Yes campaign for the 1967 Referendum; and South Australia had already legislated a Voice to Parliament under the leadership of a Peter Malinauskas and the Attorney General, Kyam Maher, who is of Tasmanian Aboriginal descent. For these and other reasons, the leaders of the Yes campaign assumed South Australia would lead the country in resounding support for Yes.

SEARCH comrades attended the initial training days/ launch held in Adelaide in late February 2023. We reported to the VTTWG on that event, celebrating its optimistic atmosphere and enthusiasm, while expressing some apprehension at the proposed community development program at the heart of the

campaign (kitchen table conversations) and the focus and experience of some of the campaign's leaders, noting that these were initial observations.

After the launch, the campaign took a while to take off in SA, possibly because of staffing issues in the State office of the Yes23 campaign. It took some time to appoint a state coordinator. The first appointment was a 22-year-old who made up for her limited experience with an enormous commitment to the campaign. Later, a more seasoned organiser joined the office.

In the early phase of the campaign, from March until about August, several small uncoordinated groups emerged to support the campaign, mainly pre-existing reconciliation groups and other NGOs which had historically supported Aboriginal rights as part of their wider activist work, and some electorate-based groups. In the absence of sufficient materials from the Sydney-based Yes23 campaign, these groups developed their own resources and training, and independently organised their community conversations.

The campaign ticked up in South Australia after another launch in the northern suburb of Elizabeth at the end of August 2023, attended by the PM. It was a hugely enthusiastic event, in the words of the Guardian "filled with Indigenous and non-Indigenous campaigners, union officials, retired people – and one guy in a South Sydney Rabbitohs jersey".

Until that event, the main political parties and trade unions were not so conspicuously involved with the campaign. ALP sub-branch meetings, MPs and party staffers did not appear to know why there was a lack of mobilization, but many thought it may have been out of deference to the authority of the major campaign and its community-based strategy, which did not encourage the involvement of politicians and established parties.

Some campaigners thought that it was because the Yes campaign planned the period from February to September as being the community development phase and, after that, the active campaign phase.

After the August launch, a productive collaboration developed between the ALP, the Greens and Unions SA,

along with other campaign groups, particularly the pre-existing reconciliation groups. Paid officers of the two parties provided an organising infrastructure for the campaign, many acting as electorate-based campaign captains. This new team coordinated rallies, training, printing and distribution of pamphlets and posters, leafletting, door knocking and booth arrangements. Certainly, the campaign assumed new energy at that point, boosted by the massively attended 'bridge walk' in September, organised by the Yes23 campaign. The Yes campaign claimed that the turnout of over 15,000 marchers reflected overwhelming support for Yes. After that, there were more rallies involving crowd pulling politicians, trade unionists (including ACTU Secretary, Sally McManus) and the leading Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander campaigners, most prominently, Thomas Mayo.

The frustration of some Adelaide campaigners, at the apparent opacity and the unresponsiveness of the Yes23 campaign leadership was more than balanced by one of the most encouraging aspects of the campaign - the strong solidarity between activists regardless of party affiliation or none. There was a significant number of campaigners new to politics. Would the campaign have a radicalising impact on those people in the longer term?

Membership of the SEARCH Foundation's Voice Treaty Truth Working Group (VTTWG) was extremely valuable throughout the campaign. Our SEARCH Statement was important and useful, and the regular Zoom meetings were a source of valuable information about the campaign, an opportunity to share analyses of what was happening, and comradely support (especially as the polls crashed). The distinctive Chips Mackinolty-designed Yes badges, distributed by SEARCH, were hugely popular with campaign comrades and Yes supporters.

In South Australia, exceptionally high expectations of a Yes vote were confounded. The following table taken from the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods analysis of the referendum tells the story⁹⁹. Only Queensland exceeded the percentage of No votes returned in South Australia.

99 Biddle, N., Matthew Gray, M., McAllister, I., & Qvortrup, M. (2023)

State/Territory	Yes		No		Informal	Turn out (%)
	Number	%	Number	%		
New South Wales	2,058,764	41.0	2,957,880	59.0	57,285	90.8
Victoria	1,846,623	45.9	2,180,851	54.2	39,038	91.0
Queensland	1,010,416	31.8	2,167,957	68.2	27,266	88.3
South Australia	417,745	35.8	748,318	64.2	11,478	91.7
Western Australia	582,077	36.7	1,002,740	63.3	13,454	87.5
Tasmania	152,171	41.1	218,425	58.9	3,967	92.0
Northern Territory	43,076	39.7	65,429	60.3	820	71.5
Australian Capital Territory	176,022	61.3	111,192	38.7	2,237	91.4
Australia	6,286,894	39.9	9,452,792	60.1	155,545	90.0

Figure 2. National, state and territory Voice referendum vote outcomes.

Each state showed broadly similar ‘spatial patterns and geographical predictors’ and ‘demographic and socio-economic predictors’ of the vote. While no SA electorate voted Yes, the highest Yes results were in Adelaide’s CBD and the inner suburban electorates, and higher No votes in outer suburbs, as well as regional South Australia, save for booths in Aboriginal communities, where the Yes vote was high. South Australia has an aged population by national standards and that appears to have favoured the No vote too.

As to the result itself, the following comments by the authors of this study are interesting:

There is no evidence in the data to suggest that Australians are against the idea of constitutional recognition in general. Of those who were willing to give an opinion as to what their vote would have been if the referendum was just about recognition, those who would vote Yes outnumber those who would vote No by a margin of almost five-to-one. The vote also did not signal a lack of support for reconciliation, for the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders having a voice/say in matters that affect them, truth-telling processes, or for a lack of pride in First Nations cultures. All of these notions were supported in our survey by around eight-in-ten Australians, or even more.

We did find, however, that compared to the start of the year, Australians are far less satisfied with democracy, less confident in the government, less satisfied with the direction of the country, and less satisfied with their own life.¹⁰⁰

The conclusion of the ANU study argues that transition conditioned the referendum result. Voters were susceptible to the misinformation and fear tactics of the No campaign, which depicted the Voice to Parliament as racist, privileged in its influence over other citizens and was divisive. Faced with these complexities, voters changed their minds over the course of the campaign and bought into the mantra “If you don’t know, vote No”. The Yes campaign had no persuasive answer to the tactics and rhetoric of the No campaign. In that context, the supposed progressive history of South Australia, and its already legislated Voice, were not enough to deliver the resounding Yes vote confidently predicted at the start of the campaign.

The campaign in Western Australia

Many progressive activists thought the 2022 election signaled a positive change towards Indigenous rights and went into the Yes23 campaign with optimism and hope.

100 Biddle, N., Matthew Gray, M., McAllister, I., & Qvortrup, M. (2023)

The WA progressive community was energized early. Indigenous, union, student, migrant, religious, LGBTQIA+, and environmental organisations, along with the ALP, the Greens, Teals, and other left parties were active and committed, and organised inspiring and well-attended community meetings throughout WA.

Activists knocked on doors, phone banked, leafleted and put-up corflutes promoting the Yes23 campaign.

A huge Walk for Yes and rally of thousands of people, held in September 2023, starting around the statue of Indigenous AFL star, Nicky Winmar, at Perth Stadium and crossing the Matagarup Bridge, was a rallying moment for supporters to show their presence, and created unity that inspired.

Walks earlier in the campaign could have been inspiring shows of solidarity and used to recruit participants into the field campaign.

Once Dutton withdrew bipartisanship for the Voice, we were outflanked by the racist campaign which successfully played on people's fears and ignorance.

The fear campaign was amplified in WA when the ALP state government was attempting to improve the state's heritage laws after Rio Tinto blasted and destroyed a sacred site at Juukan Gorge in the Pilbara in May 2020. A high profile well-funded racist campaign was run which implied that giving Indigenous communities better cultural protection rights would endanger citizens' livelihoods and even put claims on people's homes! The legislation was repealed.

The WA referendum results were disastrous. Only 36.73% voted Yes. Out of the fifteen WA electorates only the Perth and Curtin electorates achieved a Yes majority. Perth is an ALP-held seat with a high Greens vote, and Curtin has a Teal MP, Kate Chaney, who ran a vigorous Yes campaign in her electorate.

The usually progressive Fremantle electorate had a No majority. The WA Indigenous community voted Yes.

Almost a year on from the referendum, and Indigenous activists and their allies are continuing to campaign hard around issues in WA. Land Councils and other Indigenous organisations are generally getting stronger and more effective, and NAIDOC week in July 2024 saw more events that were bigger and better attended than in previous years.

Importantly there is a generational shift in understanding and support. While, in the Voice vote nationally, only 25% of voters over 75 years-old voted Yes, it is encouraging that 58% of the 18-24-year-old cohort voted Yes.

The key lessons and opportunities from the campaign are: Don't give up! We might have lost this battle, but the war is not over.

Metropolitan campaigns: Inner and outer differences

The result saw an urban-rural political divide, but also an inner and outer metropolitan divide, with inner-city seats voting Yes and outer metropolitan seats voting No.

The strong Yes vote in the inner metro is closely linked to education, income, age and gender. According to Emeritus Professor of Sociology Andrew Jakubowicz from the University of Technology Sydney:

Having higher education in particular contributes to someone's likelihood of voting Yes...But it's been shown in other situations, where people who are more cosmopolitan and globally oriented are likely to be supportive of something like this, as they were in relationship to the same-sex marriage plebiscite.¹⁰¹

101 Roe, I. (2023, October 15). The No victory in Voice to Parliament Referendum reveals more than a divide between urban and regional Australia. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-15/nsw-votes-no-indigenous-voice-referendum-demographics-result/102976968>

Jagajaga electorate in Wurundjeri country, Victoria

Jagajaga electorate, in the north-eastern suburbs of Melbourne / Naarm, achieved a good majority for Yes, 55% (with one booth at 70%, and the suburb of Eltham with over 60%). The result in the adjacent Cooper electorate (closer to CBD) was even better. But the result showed we were clearly in a bubble, with electorates further out all negative.

The ALP provided good logistic support in the Victorian electorate of Jagajaga and was active in arranging supplies of campaign materials from the Yes23 group.

The local Yes23 volunteer group led on-the-ground campaigning, with support from the local State ALP MP Vicki Ward and Federal ALP MP Kate Thwaites and her office, who took part in door knocking and leafletting. Victorian SEARCH members were mainly spread out across metro Melbourne and concentrated on assisting the Yes23 effort and met together on less than a handful of occasions.

Our local leadership was a collective of ALP branch members, Reconciliation Group leaders, one ANTaR representative and volunteers who worked effectively. However, the ALP public face was not strongly visible except for the occasional press coverage of statements from Albanese and Linda Burney. The local state MP and staffers spent time on logistics while encouraging and supporting the volunteer group. They endorsed the campaign via social media but did not come out with strong public support press statements, deferring to the Yes23 leadership. Local Government Area (LGA)-based Reconciliation groups - Reconciliation Banyule, Reconciliation Nillumbik and Monty Allies (in the suburb of Montmorency) have been leading forces on this issue before and after the Yes campaign. Nillumbik Council is adjacent to Banyule Council. In the electorate of Jagajaga, the volunteer group grew to approximately 240, with nearly double that number of Facebook supporters and displayers of corflute signs.

While door knocking and leafletting at train stations and shopping centres across the electorate, volunteers found a huge gap in general understanding of Australia's true history.



Jagajaga Yes Campaign launch



On the fence? Find the facts here!. Jagajaga electorate

Denial of the colonial history of this nation, and the role of successive governments, gives effect to what anthropologist WEH Stanner described as '*The Great Australian Silence*'.

Post-referendum, there was momentum behind a community push for Banyule City Council to be the first of 79 LGAs across Victoria to adopt an Aboriginal Self Determination strategy. A unanimous vote of Council, on 15 July 2024, adopted the strategy with commitments to:

The development of the seven-year Aboriginal Marriageil Strategy [which] will significantly contribute to creating a safe and equitable environment for local First Nations community members to thrive in their daily lives.

Considerations have been given to the historical knowledge that colonisation has intergenerationally impacted all First Nations people and Council acknowledges its role in needing to support the community to feel more included and provide services and employment that are culturally safe.¹⁰²

102 Banyule City Council (2023) Marriageil Strategy 2024 -2031: Aboriginal Self- Determination. https://hdp-au-prod-app-ban-shapingbanyule-files.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/5417/2049/2170/Marriageil_Strategy_2024-2031.pdf

The strategy's main aim is for Council to recognise and enable Aboriginal self-determination. The word Marrageil in the Woi-wurrung language translates to Power Strategy. It acknowledges the 'four enablers' needed to achieve self-determination, set out in the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023 (VAAF) and the Self- Determination Reform Framework:

- Prioritise culture.
- Address trauma and support healing.
- Address racism and promote cultural safety; and
- Transfer power and resources to communities.

The Victorian ALP Government has also been proactive in development of Treaty which will be overseen by the Treaty Authority established in June 2022.

The *Treaty Authority and Other Treaty Elements Act 2022* (Treaty Authority Act) was enacted by the Victorian Parliament on 23 August 2022, following a historic agreement reached between the Government and the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria (First Peoples' Assembly).

The former First Peoples' Assembly Co-Chairs Marcus Stewart and Aunty Geraldine Atkinson addressed members of Parliament prior to debate of the law, calling on them to listen to the voice of First Peoples in Victoria.

The Act allows for the creation of the Treaty Authority as an 'independent umpire' to oversee negotiations between the Government and First Peoples in Victoria. The Treaty Authority's role will ensure a fair treaty process that can realise positive outcomes for all Victorians.

The legislation is the result of engagement and negotiation between the Victorian Government and the Victorian First Peoples' Assembly, the democratically elected body representing Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians to progress the elements required for treaty in Victoria.

With the referendum over, the Victorian First Peoples' Assembly and local Indigenous groups are not leaving it to government but are now working with Ally groups to further engage the Victorian community, including at Local Government level.

As an example, local Indigenous leaders asked key Allies in Naarm's (Melbourne's) North-Eastern suburbs to assist with planning a public talk and Q&A event on Treaty for 200 people to further this intent. Strategically it was held before Local Govt Elections due in October 2024, to influence the policy platforms of Council candidates.

A leading First Nations Elder had notably requested that politicians not be invited as presenters but may attend. Several Ally groups (Reconciliation Banyule and Reconciliation Nillumbik) and volunteers from the Yes23 campaign, with support from their respective local councils, organised a venue and publicity to ensure as many attend as possible. Networking was extended to Latrobe Uni, in the hope of getting a younger demographic to hear what First People's leaders are saying about Treaty, and ultimately support work towards it.

Organising in Whadjuk country, Perth

It was uncertain from the beginning of the campaign for a Voice which way voters in Western Australia would fall. From the earliest days of the campaign, the polls showed nearly a third of voters were undecided, and activists regarded this as a generally weak Yes that could be turned to strong No during the campaign.

Some Perth activist supporters of the Voice mobilised during the Federal election campaign in early 2022, leafleting and talking to commuters at Cannington Railway station in the Swan federal electorate, where there was a 13% swing to the ALP.

Plenty of Noongars live in the electorate, but those engaged during 2022 had little knowledge about what the Voice was about, or what a referendum was, whether voting was compulsory, what the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* was.

This discrepancy in knowledge between sections of the community became clearer during the campaign. It took a lot of time for the campaign to properly take off in WA, and it was generally progressive unions, Unions WA, a few community organisations and local governments (such as Fremantle) that led the way. Their activism was followed later by the ALP and formal Yes campaign.

Some prominent Noongar leaders, including Jesse Fleay (a Noongar writer and researcher, and a signatory co-author to the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*), were speaking out.

There was little evidence of a Yes campaign until April or May and it was only in May 2023 that a WA state coordinator was appointed, only six months before the vote.

The coordinator who was eventually appointed was an experienced non-Noongar campaigner, with Kyra Galante, a Noongar ambassador, working alongside him. Volunteers started to step up, and some Unions provided staff resourcing.

Yes23 set up headquarters in the office of Unions WA, with campaign materials warehoused in the United Workers Union. Some campaigners were seconded from union roles and ALP party office roles to work solely on the Yes Campaign.

There were few local Yes groups established in Perth, most were in progressive strongholds including Fremantle, Victoria Park and Mt Lawley. The ALP took the lead in coordinating campaign resourcing and supporting Federal MPs to campaign.

Several leaders and political parties made notable efforts towards building local participation. From the ALP this includes Josh Wilson (left MP for Fremantle), Sue Lines (left Senator for WA), Louise Pratt (left Senator for WA), and Zaneta Mascaranhas (left MP for Swan). Other notable efforts include Kate Chaney (Teal Independent for Curtin), and Dorinda Cox (Greens Senator for WA). Eventually, each Federal electorate had its own Yes group, however some of these were set up dangerously close to the referendum date.

Yet, even in the generally progressive community of Fremantle, the vote for Yes was only 47%, while the vote for No was 53%. This is attributed to the demographic contrasts within the electorate, with the community in and around the gentrified suburb of Fremantle generally white, and well off, with higher-educated, higher income and more resilient to economic stress, while the communities to the east are more working class, lower-education, lower income and stressed by the cost of living and housing crisis, and not

so aware of the need and value of a Voice.

Only two Federal electorates in WA voted majority Yes, and these were the electorates of Curtin, held by Teal independent, Kate Chaney, and the inner-city left and student stronghold seat of Perth, held by Left ALP member Patrick Gorman.

The young union campaigners in Perth adopted a 'field-organising' model, rather than a 'community-organising' model of campaigning.

There are a lot of voters of South Asian heritage, and a significant Middle Eastern Australian community, in the Perth electorate of Swan. These communities are diverse within themselves but, like other communities, campaigners found many people lacked knowledge of the referendum process, the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, or the rationale for a constitutionally-enshrined Voice, even though people knew about Aboriginal disadvantage.

Campaigners were successful in shifting awareness when they were able to make a connection between the need for a Voice and the Indian political situation, particularly the quotas for women in the Indian parliament. People understood the need for 'special treatment' for disadvantaged communities, and that meant they were able to reject the argument that special treatment of First Nations people was a threat to 'equality'.

While there were many positive conversations, the actual vote in these targeted communities is not yet known and relationships need to be strengthened to find out more.

The campaign generally was too short, and with too few human resources, to effectively reach many communities through an effective field campaign, but there were positive results from where it did happen.

Inner West Sydney

Inner West Sydney is an inner city LGA located on the lands of the Gadigal and Wangal people. The area is broadly progressive with a Labor led Inner West Council (Council), the rest of the council's make-up being Green and Independent. It covers the home of the Prime

Minister, and the Council campaigned strongly for the Voice from soon after the announcement of the referendum. An early Council initiative (with input from SEARCH) was a program to educate and train activists for the campaign. The federal electorate of Grayndler covering most of the Inner West delivered the second highest vote in the country (after Melbourne) in support of the Voice – 74%.

Despite the early Council initiatives, the campaign got off to the same frustratingly slow start Yes23 local groups experienced more widely. In response to this, SEARCH members, together with other supporters, began to campaign on their own initiative, leafleting railway stations with available resources (mostly from Unions NSW). Recognising that the Inner West was likely to be pro-Voice, this group mainly focused its efforts outside the Inner West area on stations leading out through south-western Sydney.

When Inner West Yes23 became established, activists across the LGA were allocated to separate groups, with strong representation in Newtown and Marrickville (Midjuburi). The Marrickville group in particular was led and driven by local non-aligned activists – truly inspirational women – and local meetings attracted very large numbers.

Partly because of these numbers the group took on a range of activities – it maintained a stall throughout the campaign at the very busy Addison Road markets, Members lobbied local shop owners to display Yes posters and corflutes. Other members chalked street stencils for Yes across the area. The group promoted local events organised by council, including a multi-cultural panel and helped staff a Yes stall (organised by ALP branch members) at a large local queer street festival. To engage local workers, the group held a number of lunch time BBQs in local industrial precincts, with speakers from the locally based NSW peak Aboriginal Family and Children body, AbSec.

Like the earlier informal initiative, the Marrickville Yes group also continued leafleting morning commuters at stations almost daily. And like that early initiative, it established a ‘flying squad’ to send activists to support under-resourced groups across Sydney. These ranged from the neighbouring electorate of Barton – Linda

Burney’s seat – to Penrith at the foot of the Blue Mountains. Most of these under-resourced local groups were coordinated by the local ALP branch. As well as morning station leafletting, this support mainly involved door knocks, lunch time stalls in Lakemba and pre-polling and voting booth work.

While these were formally facilitated by the Marrickville group, many members also participated in one or both of the two phone banking centres (one organised by Unions NSW and the other by the Inner West Council).

Most of this range of campaigning was common to the campaign across the country with some geographical difference. Its unique features were the strong role played by Council, the easy access to the campaigning resources of Unions NSW, the knowledge (without being complacent) that the progressive nature of the area was likely to deliver a strong ‘Yes’ vote, and the numbers and energy of local activists engaged. And, as a result of all of this, it had a capacity to help campaign across much more challenging local areas.

This last role to some extent allowed a more realistic sense of how the campaign was going outside the inner-city bubble. It also showed that, amongst the constant busyness, key campaigning tools like door knocking and phone banking seemed to simply be going through the motions, without the time to really change views. While each door knocker collected data, it was hard to see how it was then used to better target the campaign. Even on pre-polling or polling booths in places like Penrith (in the seat of Lindsay which voted 69% No) a mixture of civility and a lack of real engagement permitted an entirely unrealistic hope that there would be a solid level of Yes votes.

Because the Marrickville Yes 23 group had poured so much energy and commitment into the campaign, the referendum result initially left members profoundly devastated. But follow-up meetings renewed members’ commitment to work as First Nations allies, particularly on truth-telling. And if there is a legacy, even though many had years of community and other campaigns behind them, this sharpening of commitment to First Nations people’s struggles is significant even though the aim of maintaining the group has not been realised.



Yes: Norton Street Leichhardt

Regional campaigning: Some wins, many losses

Only two seats in regional cities across Australia voted Yes: Cunningham in Wollongong and Newcastle, both in NSW.

Campaigning on Dharawal country, Illawarra, NSW

Wollongong is about 80 kms south of Sydney and is mostly in the Cunningham electorate which recorded a Yes vote of 51.86%.

The role of local organisations in supporting the campaign was illuminating.

ALP and Greens councillors dominate the Wollongong City Council, though the city's lord mayor (a Uniting Church Minister) is an independent. Like many NSW city, municipal and shire councils, Wollongong's local government passed supportive resolutions on the release of the Uluru Statement from the Heart. The NSW organisation of councils did likewise.

On 23 January 2023 two campaigners (also ratepayers) asked the then Lord Mayor about what plans the Council had to support the Yes campaign. They were told that Council did not get involved in such political campaigning.

Despite this statement, the mayor spoke at the Yes23 rally held in Wollongong in support of the Yes Campaign and the Greens councillors marched.

At no stage was there ever any household material produced by Council in the lead up to the referendum.

Unlike the local government, the South Coast Labour Council was important in supporting Yes activists, including organising discussions with many religious leaders in the area.

Labour Council Secretary, Arthur Rorris put it simply in his Illawarra Mercury opinion piece:

Politicians who have lost touch with the people who elected them and the strong conviction they are not listening to what we are saying, what we want done to fix the essential services that we elected them for and expect them to deliver. I guess we shouldn't be surprised that the suggestion of including this point in our Constitution, to require our politicians to listen to the voices of the people most affected by their decisions, has gone down like a lead balloon with some of our elected representatives who are not used to the idea.... If the idea of listening is so foreign to some of our politicians or they are so out of practice, we can throw in the hearing aids but surely this is not Nobel Prize territory, it is common sense.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Rorris, A., 2023. Voice Referendum: it's not rocket science, Illawarra Mercury, September 2, 2023. <https://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/8331500/voice-referendum-its-not-rocket-science/>



"Yes" supporters at Port Kembla with visiting Minister for Indigenous Australians, Linda Burney.

Kabi Kabi/ Gubbi Gubbi country: The Sunshine Coast and Noosa in Queensland

Queensland Sunshine Coast, located on Kabi Kabi/ Gubbi Gubbi country is Australia's fastest growing regional centre, stretching from 50 to 200 kms north of Brisbane.

It is a long coastal and hinterland strip of commuter, tourism and farming, towns, suburbs and country, where beautiful ocean, forest, and the dramatic Glasshouse Mountains backdrops are rapidly merging into Brisbane's northern urban sprawl. The beauty hides the region's deep legacy of Liberal National Party (LNP), One Nation and Clive Palmer's political toxicity.

The Sunshine Coast, with a population of 407,000 in 2023, is Australia's ninth largest city, behind Gold Coast (735,000), Newcastle (526,000) and Canberra (503,000), and with a growth rate of 35% over the last 12 years.

The region's demographics are shifting as young families escaping Brisbane's housing crisis begin to outnumber retirees escaping from Melbourne and Sydney's cold, but the median age of the Sunshine Coast is still 6 years older than the nationwide median.

Twenty per cent of the region's population lives in the relatively prosperous Noosa shire in the north of the Sunshine Coast, and along with the smaller towns Gympie, Maryborough, and many small rural villages up to Hervey Bay and Kgarri (formerly Fraser Island), is in Wide Bay electorate.

The Sunshine Coast Reconciliation Group (SCRG), formed in 1997, is based in the Fairfax and Fisher electorates, which along with the Wide Bay electorate are long-standing conservative LNP seats.

The SCRG and N4Y (Noosa for Yes) each had roughly 250 supporters, the majority well- educated 'professionals' – teachers, lawyers, health industry workers, the majority women, many retired, while some worked. Many had extensive experience in publicity, business, and communications, and some as political organisers in community organisations or trade unions. Some active members were members of the ALP and the Greens, but the parties had virtually no organised presence in the regional campaign.

Some respected leaders of the Kabi Kabi/Gubbi Gubbi community, which recently won a Native Title claim (attracting racist trolling on social media) were involved in the campaign. Noel Pearson and Stephen Mam,

the First Nations person coordinating the Queensland campaign, live in the Sunshine Coast and joined local mobilisation meetings of supporters during the campaign, as well as Jade Richie, a Goreng Goreng spokesperson for the Yes campaign, each attracting about a hundred supporters, and got some local media publicity.

The Sunshine Coast groups waged a community organising-type campaign, including kitchen table conversations early in the campaign. These were helpful early mobilisations, but solidarity didn't have a sufficient ripple effect to deeply involve the wider community. The campaign organised market and street stalls, letterboxing, community rallies, and articles and letters in the local media.

There was little public presence of a No campaign until the end of the campaign when LNP activists emerged to staff polling booths.

Local LNP MPs, Wide Bay's Lew O'Brien and Fairfax's Ted O'Brien (the Shadow Climate Change and Energy and champion for nuclear power, though none in his electorate) were actively campaigning for No, made resources available, and sponsored visits of Jacinta Nampijinpa Price.

The Sunshine Coast has more than its fair share of 'sovereign citizens' and conspiracy theory believers, hung up about government control, Indigenous people having special rights to take land, banks going cashless, 5G, the COVID vax and lockdowns, often expressed with hostility to our campaigners. 'Sovereignty' activists, some presenting as 'Blak No' humbugged local market operators, Yes campaigners and shoppers who backed our campaign.

Hostile No supporters stole, graffitied and vandalised Yes placards outside houses and intimidated sympathetic businesses from displaying Yes material.

In April 2022, during the federal election One Nation and the LNP were prominent at a 'Freedom Fest', held in Maroochydore whose purpose was to:

Join like-minded Freedom Keepers for a day of inspirational and educational speakers, relax and enjoy heart fulfilling music and vibes, connect and empower each other & browse freedom stalls while building community.

While, at times campaigning created unpleasant environments for our people (and voters), campaigners stuck to their work, against the odds.

The Yes vote in Wide Bay was 75% No/25 % for Yes, in Fairfax 65% No/35% for Yes, and Fisher 69 % No/ 31% for Yes. Wide Bay was the eighth worst electorate in Queensland; Maranoa with 84% voting No, being the worst.

Out of almost 150 polling booths Fairfax, Fisher and Wide Bay only three voted majority Yes. These booths were in the wealthiest suburbs of Noosa Heads (54% Yes/46% No) and Peregrine Beach (60% Yes.40% No) and the Aboriginal community of Cherbourg (58% Yes/42% No).

Yes campaigners were disappointed with the poor results, but not surprised. Most felt positive about having waged a well organised grassroots campaign.

Noosa's unique Yes quilt was a highlight of the local campaign. The quilt was a passion project of mental health occupational therapist Manny Holmes, and local women had spent hundreds of hours designing and creating blocks for the quilt and assembling it.

The quilt went on a "goodwill tour" of the shire before Voice Referendum polling closed on 14 October and may end up as part of a national museum collection in Canberra.

The next challenge for Yes campaigners in Queensland is to protect and extend the treaty-making process that the state ALP government and the LNP Opposition both committed bipartisan support to in May 2023, but from which the LNP withdrew its support in October 2023, following the Voice Referendum. The LNP won the Queensland state election, held on 26 October 2024.



Quilt made by Noosa for Yes supporters in the Noosa Quilters group Qld.

Rural and remote communities: Deeply entrenched conservatism

There were strong campaign groups in many of rural communities, but they were fighting against the tide of deeply entrenched racism and prejudice.

The strongest No vote was in rural and remote electorates, with the exception being First Nations communities. Nationals' leader, David Littleproud's regional Queensland seat of Maranoa had the highest No vote in the country — topping 80 per cent.

Gumbaynggirr country in mid-coast NSW

Page is a large (20,000 sq.km.) rural electorate in northern NSW, stretching 200 km along the coast, bordering Richmond to the north and Cowper to the south. It includes the towns of Casino, Grafton, Kyogle, Lismore, Nimbin, and Woolgoolga. This Story is of only one small part of the electorate, the coastal strip from Red Rock in the North to Emerald Beach in the south.

Page is a National Party (NP) stronghold. The Nationals dominate community life, including local councils, the farming and business community, churches, schools,

and sporting clubs, and they hold both the local State and Federal seats. In contrast, the left or labour movement is almost invisible, with no union offices, few union activists and until very recently (since the campaign) no local ALP branch. There are no State or Federal ALP, Green or Independent politicians with offices in the electorate.

There is, however, a significant First Nations population, represented by the Coffs Harbour Land Council further south, and some strong Indigenous community-controlled organisations there and in Grafton to the north. Many of these organisations spoke up strongly in support of the Yes campaign and took part in some of the local campaign activities.

There was also an undercurrent of 'Blak No' feeling, usually expressed as pro-Treaty and against trusting governments about anything. The No campaign's use of 'Blak No' slogan had some impact with people in this group. This small but vocal 'Blak No' movement in turn affected some potential supporters in the non-Indigenous population including among local Greens members and supporters.

Local activists formed a Yes23 group numbering 110 people, of whom over 50 took part in one or more of our actions. Members were generally over forty years of age, with most of the most active members retirees. The group had 'village' captains in each of the five main villages of the area: Red Rock, Mullaway, Safety Beach, Woolgoolga, Sandy Beach and Emerald Beach who took responsibility for mobilising their members. The group produced a weekly newsletter sent to all members using the Yes23 database system, and distributed yard signs, undertook door knocking and phone banking, organised weekly group events. The group organised and participated in Kitchen Table sessions and volunteered for polling booth rosters on the day.

The group had strong community visibility, and the campaign looked and felt like success as it rolled out events such as coffee mornings, flash mobs and market stalls every week which received good local media coverage. The Pat Farmer Run and a forum with Thomas Mayo, attended by over 100 people with strong presence from local Elders, got good coverage.



Woolgoolga & Surrounds for Yes group beach walk in support of the Yes vote

The local group also participated in some larger joint rallies and forums with the Coffs Harbour Yes 23 group and maintained a network with other groups in the Page electorate and Cowper electorate to the south.

In contrast, the No campaign was almost invisible, until polling day, when suddenly National Party stalwarts who clearly had a 'mass organisation' ready-made for the task, overwhelmed most sites.

The polling results were in line with the national trend 60/40, but some were significantly worse. One booth which usually votes ALP in elections was 50/50. Following the vote, supporters felt very disillusioned. When Yes23 instructed local groups to close our databases, the local captains sent an invitation to everyone to 'opt in' to an ongoing solidarity group. Forty-six supporters signed up and held a couple of meetings but no further actions due mainly to the absence of direction from the national leadership. A Facebook page is maintained to advertise events held by local Indigenous organisations.

Organisers of the local campaign have questioned if it was worth the enormous effort it took to develop and maintain this campaign over more than 12 months.

On the positive side, despite the overwhelming National Party presence, Yes campaigners demonstrated there is a group of non-Indigenous people in the area willing to act in solidarity with First Nations peoples and to publicly challenge the suffocatingly racist hegemonic values of the far right.

But we also need to take notice of the fact that the Yes23 organisation, and the ALP, put virtually no effort or resources into this rural area, presumably because National Party strongholds are seen as unwinnable and therefore not worth the effort (even though, in referendums, unlike elections, every NSW vote counted towards the ultimate outcome).

Over the last 30 years the hard right has drawn much of their strength from its conservative rural heartlands. It was the National Party which pushed the Liberals into a No position at the start, and it was the Nationals who promoted Jacinta Nampijinpa Price into parliament after the IPA had spent several years developing her as a leader. Warren Mundine also originally hails from this region.

Rural Australia is a complex story where workers have been seriously marginalised by neo-liberalism

characterised by a depressed economy, dwindling population, fractured social and cultural life, devastating climatic conditions, diminishing social services, poor health and low education attainment levels. They are easily attracted to and distracted by the simplistic slogans and analysis offered by people like Dutton and Joyce, as was evident during the referendum campaign.

However, there are pockets within these electorates where there's a slow demographic shift towards a more green or independent voter, and the referendum campaign suggests it's time socialists (and the Left) began to better understand rural Australia and shift some of their organising resources into these regions.

Campaigning on Yuin country in South Coast NSW

In early March 2023, an Indigenous writer living in Moruya invited a group of friends to start a group to campaign for Yes in Moruya. Nine friends came together and met monthly until after the October 14th vote at different people's houses, usually sharing a meal (usually soup), and making plans and decisions. Most of the members were retired and not originally from Yuin country. Most were able to use their own money to create the initial resource material for the campaign.

Decisions were made by consensus, with each meeting beginning with a Welcome to Country and a few comments by a senior local Aboriginal elder.

Even before the first meeting, a member took the initiative and designed and had printed, bumper stickers, and little business cards with the Aboriginal flag on one side and on the other vote Yes info.

The group had a ream of the Uluru Statement from the Heart printed and, through activists near Bega further south, ordered 'VOTE Yes' T-Shirts and a double-sided question and answer sheet. The group also obtained many orders of the popular badges designed by Chips Mackinolty and distributed by SEARCH.

The Moruya Yes Group (MYG) raised donations on stalls and at events, with goods priced to allow for a very small profit which helped cover the cost of free items given away if people really didn't have the money.

While there were a range of opinions within the group about money, it was the view of one campaigner (a SEARCH member) that; firstly, people value what they pay for and don't just discard it the way they often do with things that are thrust upon them; secondly, they feel connected through making a contribution; thirdly, it means that all members of a group are financially equal if we are not dependent on those with money for the group's survival; and finally, perhaps most importantly, the group can then pay for new orders. In this case the MYG Group was able to order big banners which could not otherwise be afforded.

Campaigners hung two 15-meter banners on the Air Raid Tavern facing the Princes Highway, the main street of Moruya and, later three smaller big banners were placed in other locations.

MYG members organised a stall at Moruya's Saturday markets, which after the end of cold weather they alternated with a local ALP Yes campaign group. The stall volunteers had to contend with a hostile anti-vax group who sometimes set up a "Forest of the Fallen" (i.e. victims of vaccination) across the footpath.

Despite their good intentions and with an ALP-style top-down structure, the Yes23 head office took quite a few months for their campaigning to get going and become functional. The MYG promoted the Yes23 Campaign and handed out the Yes23 campaign material. However, they found most of the Yes23 leaflets, badges, etc. had a corporate air, and MYG continued primarily using locally-produced materials.

Until Yes23 made material available at a discount, if ordered by affiliated groups, it was relatively expensive compared to the cost of what MYG produced locally.

MYG made a big effort to arrange speaking engagements for Aboriginal members. The Moruya Golf Club agreed to host MYG Indigenous member, Bunja Smith (also a golfer and known to them).

Other members addressed a tiny meeting of the Moruya Chamber of Commerce. The CWA agreed for two members to address the association's monthly meeting with the proviso that they would only talk about their personal experiences and not directly about the vote. Other organisations were approached but declined to have a speaker on the grounds of a policy of being 'non-political'. The local Catholic church was quite resistant (although MYG members did hand out material to parishioners after the service), but the Anglican church and its rector the Rev. Linda Chapman were fully supportive. We did not approach other churches.

At the beginning of May, MYG organised a packed meeting (ostensibly hosted by the Greens but appealing to a wider attendance) addressed by Bunja at the Red Door Hall of the Anglican Church. Most of those attending were already on side or willing to be so. Among the audience was the state ALP MP Dr. Michael Holland who was supportive, and, importantly, Paul Spooner, a member of the ALP who helped organise rosters for people to hand out at pre-poll and on voting day.

Importantly, Paul put out a call for people to join the campaign and 40+ people formed small groups to plan campaign activities. Supporters from Narooma and Bateman's Bay decided to start local Yes groups, helped with MYG campaign material.

The Moruya Yes Group was the only local campaign group on the Far South Coast to have Aboriginal members, although some other kooris were involved in campaigning.

The majority of Yes campaigners were educated middle class ALP or Greens members (many originally from Canberra and comfortably well off), and do not readily mix socially with other groups of people in the area (e.g. tradies, farmers, retail staff, young people, the unemployed, etc.). Consequently, the local campaign was somewhat limited to rallying the willing.

On October 14th, the results from booths in and around Moruya recorded a total of 46.79% votes for Yes, higher than the NSW vote of 41.04% and the national vote of 39.94%. The majority of Aboriginal people in the Eurobodalla Shire voted Yes and Mogo, a centre of Indigenous people had the highest Yes vote in the Shire at 61.4% for Yes.

MYG campaigners' reactions to the loss of the referendum varied but, after the dust had settled, they had another soup night, a party where they gave awards, and laughed a lot. The struggle continues!

Allies: Solidarity in action

The two stories below are among many that can be told of solidarity with First Nations Voice advocates.

Inner-western Sydney Symphony Orchestra: Water dripping on stone

The Orchestra Inc. instituted a verbal Acknowledgement of Country a decade ago.

For the last three years the Orchestra Committee has been working on refreshing the Acknowledgement of Country to make it more relevant to the place of their music-making and the nature of the community enterprise.

As the referendum campaign started, the Orchestra Committee decided not to move a formal motion of support for the Voice as they felt at that stage there would be insufficient support amongst the Orchestra members.

The arguments against adopting a formal motion of support for the Voice put up included:

- 'The Orchestra is not political' (from a program committee that had already dropped any Russian composed works post the invasion of Ukraine)
- 'It is outside the core business of the Orchestra' (despite us rehearsing and playing on the land | of the Gadigal and Wongal clans and providing a string quartet to grace the Council's citizenship ceremonies).

In this context, we continued innovating and programmed a musical Acknowledgement of Country (Turimi Nulay) performed at the start of each concert by a string quintet with a narrator.

Turimi Nulay was composed by Deborah Cheetham Fraillon and has words in English and the Gadigal language.

The performance at Petersham Town Hall to a capacity crowd at the concert just prior to the Referendum Day was a big success. Many of the Orchestra and choirs wore the Chips Mackinolty designed SEARCH sponsored Yes badges and there were shouts of “vote Yes” from the audience. We programmed the piece again for our post referendum concerts in November where again it was very well received.

The end of year social get-together of the Orchestra turned into an impromptu but wide-ranging discussion on the referendum and the Yes campaign. The views expressed by these tertiary-educated citizens of largely the Inner West were in summary:

- First Nations people they know personally have been hard hit by the result and are hurting.
- Orchestra members are also sad and grieving and shocked by the racism that has surfaced.
- This was a big defeat which has put the campaigns for justice for First Nations Peoples back a generation or more.
- At the point at which the Nationals declared their opposition (and the possibility of bipartisanship disappeared) the referendum was lost
- Many Australians have no personal contact with First Nations people and their issues have no relevance to their lives so there was an indifference to the issues.
- The referendum propositions at their core were simple but the lack of specificity on the detail was fertile ground to enable uncertainty, misinformation and lies to be generated and spread.

- The official printed “Yes” and “No” cases were almost incomprehensible even for people with a tertiary education and a high level of literacy.

The No campaign, constructed around fear of the unknown and mistrust of the Albanese government, gave people many excuses for racism and encouragement to vote No.

Programming the musical Acknowledgement of Country has taken the Orchestra and their audiences on a positive journey. There was a resolve that in the face of the right-wing attempts to roll back the practice of Welcomes to, and Acknowledgements of Country, the Orchestra will continue to program Turimi Nulay (in a variety of arrangements to keep it fresh) and other works by First Nations composers as a way forward through what has been a big setback for First Nations people and progressive forces.

SEARCH: Socialist campaigners for First Nations justice

The SEARCH Foundation is a small organisation of activists committed to fighting for a democratic, ecological socialist Australia. SEARCH has deep and longstanding solidarity connections in First Nations struggles, through its historic connections with the former Communist Party of Australia and members' current activism in First Nations advocacy work around Australia: in communities, unions, government, and First Nations community-controlled education, health, housing and justice organisations.

SEARCH acknowledges that, given its small size and limited capacity, it can only have a very modest influence in First Nations' justice campaigns, but critically, as part of a cooperative effort of progressive and socialist activists, SEARCH members participate in many different types of grassroots organising and community action in all states, contribute to a significant collective impact.

SEARCH supported leading First Nations activists and their campaign for the Uluru Statement from the Heart's call for a constitutionally-enshrined Voice, as well as treaty and truth-telling before, during and since the referendum.

SEARCH activists played important roles at many levels of the Yes campaign, including as local community campaign leaders (or captains) and as active members of community, union, and other campaign groups.

SEARCH members established a Voice Treaty Truth (VTT) working group which met fortnightly (sometimes weekly) during the campaign and continues to meet to collectively encourage, advise, and support each other to engage with the campaign.

SEARCH recognised the nuanced and multi-faceted dimension of the struggle, saying:

First Peoples rights, including sovereignty – ‘freedom from external control’ – are not fixed in constitutional law. They must be fought for and defended, inside and outside the institutions of government, or the state.¹⁰⁴

The SEARCH statement in support of the Yes campaign, Organise Together for a Massive Yes Vote for a First Nations Voice to Parliament! stated the Voice was:

...constitutional reform that will help shift Australian society towards an anti-colonialist and antiracist politics and culture.¹⁰⁵

SEARCH members live in metropolitan inner-city and outer suburbs, as well as in regional, rural, and remote centres. Members shared insights and experiences, supported and encouraged each other across the different places and communities they live and work in.

SEARCH is proud that it produced the first Yes campaign badge made widely available in the national campaign, by Darwin-based artist and activist, Chips Mackinolty (right).

Other SEARCH actions included:

- Contributing funding towards a WA Yes campaign manager

- Organising several forums for members and supporters during the campaign with leading Uluru Statement from the Heart advocates including Thomas Mayo, Pat Anderson, and Dylan Lino.
- Uploading numerous documents and YouTube videos onto its website. (<https://www.search.org.au/>).



'A Voice? Yes' badge.

After the referendum result was known the SEARCH Committee issued a statement 'Don't take No for an answer', stating:

We reaffirm our active commitment to the vision of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and its call for Voice, Treaty and Truth. And we reaffirm our determination to support and act in solidarity with First Nations people as they take forward that vision and those goals.¹⁰⁶

The paragraphs below provide just one reflection on learnings from involvement in the referendum campaign and some challenges before us.

104 SEARCH Foundation (2023). Organise Together for a Massive 'Yes' Vote for a First Nations Voice to Parliament. https://www.search.org.au/vote_Yes

105 SEARCH Foundation. (2023)

106 SEARCH Foundation, (2023, October 21). *Don't take No for an answer: SEARCH Committee Statement*. https://www.search.org.au/don_t_take_no_for_an_answer



Artists who painted the Uluru canvas.

The SEARCH Foundation document '*Organise together!*' provided political clarity on why someone fighting for a socialist Australia would participate in the Voice Referendum campaign within the broader support for the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.

The failure of the Voice Referendum has changed the political landscape to such an extent that it now needs reworking, in collaboration with First Nations activists.

Issues requiring work include the meaning of self-determination for First Nations people. The *UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People* (endorsed by the Australian Government in 2009) described self-determination as the right for Indigenous people to "freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development".¹⁰⁷

More generally, we need to build local and national campaigns for decolonization, working with First Nations leaders for self-determination and understanding and redressing the continuing legacy of trauma and injustice arising from colonisation.

We need to continue to engage with the First Nations leadership that is redefining the tactics to achieve the strategy set out in the Statement from the Heart.

The diversity of First Nations views on the Voice, and on the way forward now, should be acknowledged. It is important to distinguish between different political lines, motivations, what they do or do not represent at the grass roots, and whether the strategies they advance are, in the view of allies, viable.

¹⁰⁷ Woodall, N and Ashton, K (2024, 8 September) "Indigenous leaders have long called self-determination the key to Closing the Gap — but what does it mean?" *ABC News* <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-09-08/victoria-self-determination-indigenous-treaty-yoorrook/103918900>

The presence of fundamentally compromised ‘comprador’ elements within the First Nations communities – recruited, trained and mentored by the Right – was starkly apparent in the referendum campaign. Such people are a tiny minority even among First Nations sceptics of the Voice, but they have media sway and some political traction.

There are other trends of relatively conservative First Nations thinkers who do not fall into that category, and whose views and arguments deserve respect, without necessarily agreement.

There is a broad spectrum of activists and leaders who remain united around the Uluru Statement as a core element of strategy. There is another overlapping spectrum of more radical advocates who identify primarily with the sovereignty tag and some of whom were Voice opponents – understanding where these activists are coming from, what their concerns are, and how their priorities and concerns relate to other aspects of the struggle, also requires reciprocal respect and dialogue.

We have already identified the pernicious role, personal and political, played by reactionary institutions such as the IPA and CIS, and their international partners. A failure to declare these institutions has been one of the central failures of progressive forces over the last four decades.

We need to acknowledge that the Constitution is an inherently racist document, and no amendment will address that.

Regarding the broader political program, we are engaged in, when we talk about expansion of democracy – we need to be clearer on what we mean by democracy. For example, how do the various models for a national Voice which incorporate traditional elders’ authority and spokespersons in the Calma/Langton Report on the Indigenous Voice co-design process: final report to the Australian Government (the Calma/Langton report)¹⁰⁸ inform other models of local governance, self-determination and community empowerment, within and outside of First Nations contexts?

How do we develop new norms and forms of grassroots democratic institutionality?



Australian Unions: "It's time to listen. It's time for recognition. It's time to get better results. It's time to say Yes." ¹⁰⁹

108 Commonwealth of Australia. (2021, July). *Indigenous Voice Co-design Process Final Report to the Australian Government*. National Indigenous Australians Agency. <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-3024169672/view>

109 Australian Unions (2023,) It's time to listen by saying "Yes". <https://www.australianunions.org.au/2023/09/26/its-time-to-listen-by-saying-yes/>

Reflections

First Nations Yes campaigners' responses to the No result

At 12 months since the referendum, a clear differentiation has emerged between commentary made immediately after the vote and more recent "what next" commentary. First responses from individuals generally expressed anger and devastation. Mayo, interviewed on the night of the referendum stated:

[I am] devastated, ... it was a disgusting no campaign ... dishonest... I am not angry with the Australian people but Peter Dutton, Pauline Hanson and all those who lied to the Australian people. ... We are going to take stock, but we are never going to give up fighting for our rights and our rightful place in this country.¹¹⁰

Marcia Langton expressed anger and disgust at the Australian community of no campaigners and voters:

The referendum campaign has cemented racism into the body politic, and the 'baseless' rejection of 'Yes' will create a bleak future for Australia and those who stood with First Nations people.¹¹¹

And from Noongar woman Roxanne Moore, Executive Director, First Nations & Youth Action, The Foundation for Young Australians:

It felt gut-wrenching to have the racism of this nation confirmed ... in cold statistics: a truth we ... know and live every day... There's no hiding from it now.¹¹²

Vince Forrester, Luritja/Aranda man, speaking at the 50th anniversary of the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress the day after the referendum made a call to action:

They kicked us in the guts yesterday, now stand up ... boycott the 2032 Olympic Games in redneck Queensland ... They don't want us here.¹¹³

On the night of 14 October, the Uluru Dialogue issued a statement from Indigenous Australians who supported the Voice Referendum for a week of silence. They stated:

This is a bitter irony. That people who have only been on this continent for 235 years would refuse to recognise those whose home this land has been for 60,000 and more years is beyond reason. ... The truth is that we offered this recognition and it has been refused. We now know where we stand in this our own country. Always was. Always will be. ... Talk not of recognition and reconciliation. Only of justice and the rights of our people in our own country.¹¹⁴

After the week of silence, a further statement was issued by this group, an Open Letter to Australian politicians.¹¹⁵ First Nations Yes campaigners highlighted several insights in thinking about the future of equality and justice for Indigenous Australia:

110 Mayo. T. (2023, October 14). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3scbGDttFTo>

111 Langton, M. (14 October 2023). Whatever the outcome: Reconciliation is dead. The Saturday Paper. <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/indigenous-affairs/2023/10/14/marcia-langton-whatever-the-outcome-reconciliation-dead#hrd>

112 Moore, R. 2023, The Voice referendum: Blak sovereignty and justice after 'No', Archer, Oct 24, 2023, <https://archermagazine.com.au/2023/10/the-voice-referendum-blak-sovereignty-justice/> accessed 15 August 2024

113 Forrester, V., 2023 Address to CAAC 50th anniversary 15 October 2023, Ictvplay (58.50-1.08.43) Congress 50 years strong 1973 – 2023, <https://ictv.com.au/live-events/event/36>

114 The Uluru Dialogue. (2023, October 14). *A statement from Indigenous Australians who supported the Voice referendum*. <https://ulurustatement.org/a-statement-from-indigenous-australians-who-supported-the-voice-referendum/>

115 The Uluru Dialogue. (2023, October 24). *Open letter: A statement for our First Nations People and our Country*. <https://ulurustatement.org/statement-for-our-people-and-country/>

The Constitution still belongs to those who the founding fathers originally intended it for and remains unchanged in our exclusion. We were asked to be recognised over a decade ago; we sought to be included in a meaningful way and that has been rejected. In refusing our peoples' right to be heard on matters that affect us, Australia chose to make itself less liberal and less democratic.¹¹⁶

Most importantly it was made clear that:

Australia is our country. We accept that the majority of non-Indigenous voting Australians have rejected recognition in the Australian Constitution. We do not for one moment accept that this country is not ours. Always was. Always will be. It is the legitimacy of the non-Indigenous occupation in this country that requires recognition, not the other way around. Our sovereignty has never been ceded.¹¹⁷

Finally, the Uluru Dialogue Statement states:

Rejection of constitutional recognition will not deter us from speaking up to governments, parliaments and to the Australian people. We have an agenda for justice in pursuit of our First Nations rights that sorely need a Voice – we will continue to follow our law and our ways, as our Elders and Ancestors have done.¹¹⁸

The *Open Letter* so early in the post referendum period is a critical document. The statement makes clear that Australia's colonial legacy persists, and that First Nations people will continue to fight for justice:

While this moment will be etched into Australia's history forever, today we think of our children, and our children's children. Our work continues as it has always done. We will continue to fight to seek justice for our peoples.

We are three per cent of the population, and you are 97 per cent.¹¹⁹

Catherine Liddle, the chief executive of SNAICC, the national peak body for Indigenous children and families, emphasises that governments know very well about the genuine needs within First Nations communities, but they have not taken the necessary action:

We do need truth-telling. And I'd imagine every single Aboriginal person in this country will lean in and say if you want to make process you've got to have the truth-telling because we're not going to get to needs-based funding unless we're clear on why that's required.¹²⁰

More recently commentary at significant national and annual First Nations events such as Reconciliation Week late May 2024, NAIDOC Week July 2024, the Garma Festival early August and the first Allyship Summit on 8 August, have been the forum for more considered "what next" commentary.

An overview of First Nations Yes campaigners "what next" commentary comes together around interrelated critical themes. These are firstly, in response to the No vote:

- Anger, devastation, hope, and everything in-between!
- Establishing clarity about "what the No vote was a statement of 'no' to and 'not no' to".
- The on-going urgent need to address issues of self-determination, poverty, justice, land, housing, education, health and education.

116 The Uluru Dialogue. (2023, October 24).

117 The Uluru Dialogue. (2023, October 24).

118 The Uluru Dialogue. (2023, October 24).

119 The Uluru Dialogue. (2023, October 24).

120 Wellauer, K., Williams, C. & Brennan, B. (2023, October 16).

And secondly, looking forward:

- Staying true to the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.
- Building hope and ongoing campaigns.
- Building on the passion and solidarity of more than six million Yes voters.
- Building solidarity through shared purpose and allyship.
- Supporting the next generation of First Nations leaders.
- Truth-telling.
- Treaty/treaties.

Megan Davis, in her 2024 NAIDOC address spoke about the 6.2 million Australians who voted Yes and the importance of keeping the Uluru Statement from the Heart alive:

They didn't Vote No to Truth-Telling. They didn't Vote No to Agreement Making. The No doesn't mean a legislative Voice is off the table. And the No was not a No to constitutional recognition.

Our research this year shows even No voters saying that the loss in the referendum does not extend to all things in Indigenous Affairs.... We're continuing to keep the *Uluru Statement from The Heart* alive and on the agenda. Its legitimacy stands.¹²¹

Celeste Liddle wrote in Crikey (12 September 2024):

With the referendum, what was up for grabs at the ballot box was a "Voice" for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be inserted in the constitution. The proposed "Voice" had no legislative powers, no power of vetoes,

no guaranteed representative structure and selection process — none. All of that was to be decided by the "parliament of the day". The Voice could have been a robust, democratically-elected committee, or it could have been some future prime minister's 'Blak mate'.

She goes on to say:

In a round-about way, what I am saying is this: the very foundation of the Parliament, and these major parties, is racism. Neither major party is looking to change things beyond a surface level. It suits them to maintain these measures, because it gives them a reassurance that every three years, they will have a viable shot at power at the ballot box, as the mainly apathetic public flips a coin.

Thomas Mayo looks back and forward in his book, *Always Was, Always Will Be*, to produce a treatise on hope: in young people, in the Australian people generally, and in the future - as underpinning the way forward.

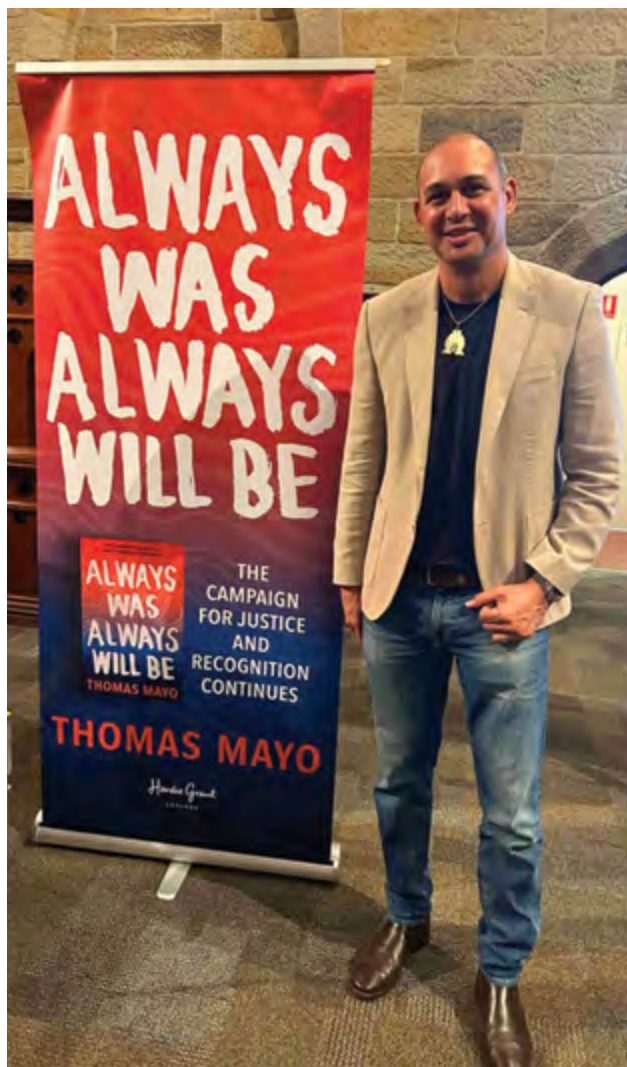
I say we should use hope and resilience to build a fire in our bellies. Whatever the Bad Actors throw at us, let it burn to give us energy. I ask that non-Indigenous people try to understand our anger when we protest. For my fellow Indigenous people, we should use our anger to be heard. But we should temper our anger – hone the edge of our rage into a key that will open hearts and minds, rather than a blade that will sever our support. ... We experienced a loss at the referendum, but we gained resilience, and I refuse to give up my hope – a new generation of Indigenous leaders are ready.¹²²

In *Always Was, Always Will Be*, Mayo not only speaks to hope, but also strategises a way forward. In "What's next?" Mayo addresses the question of what we can

121 Davis, M. (2024, July 19). 2024 UQ NAIDOC Keynote Lecture. The ulurustatement.org <https://ulurustatement.org/prof-megan-davis-delivers-2024-uq-naidoc-keynote-lecture/>

122 Mayo, T. (2024)

“start to do today ... to continue the campaign for justice and recognition for our people”.¹²³ In the final section of this paper we explore the way forward in more depth.



Thomas Mayo, Uniting Church Paddington NSW, September 2024

Speaking publicly for the first time since the No vote, Pat Anderson called out the PM on his seeming backdown on Makarrata:

Our people are hurting from the silence, and there needs to be leadership. ... Nothing has changed since October 14 ...Change is urgent. ...The referendum outcome should not be used as a barrier to the nation progressing on unfinished business [of truth-telling].¹²⁴

She went on to say:

I worry that we will see the Makarrata baby thrown out with the referendum bathwater. I hope I'm wrong. But we have seen that politicians can be fair weather friends. And when I see that, it makes me all the more grateful for our steadfast allies.¹²⁵

Other speakers at the Allyship Summit: Anaiwan man Blake Cansdale, National Director ANTAR, Bronwyn Fredericks, Thomas Mayo, Wiradjuri man Geoff Scott, all echoed the imperative to “stay true to the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*” and the urgent need for truth-telling.¹²⁶

In a report on research in 2023 on truth-telling after the No vote, Heidi Norman (of the Gomeroi peoples of northwestern NSW) expounded a pathway for truth-telling without the Voice:

[T]he current focus on truth-telling will once again draw our attention to dealing with difficult history. This time, different questions need to be asked. Not *why didn't I know?* But *how can I find out?*¹²⁷

¹²³ Mayo, T. (2024)

¹²⁴ Lowrey, T. (2024, June 30). Indigenous Voice architects back Greens push for federal truth and justice commission. *ABC News*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-06-30/voice-truth-and-justice-commission-proposal-makarrata/104040218>

¹²⁵ Cross, J. (2024, August 9). ‘Deja vu’: Aunty Pat Anderson shares concern for future of Makarrata at Uluru Statement ally summit. *National Indigenous Times*. <https://nit.com.au/09-08-2024/12991/deja-vu-aunty-pat-anderson-shares-concern-for-future-of-makarrata-at-uluru-statement-ally-summit> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4si6f4ntdA>

¹²⁶ Jane Durie *Personal Communication*, 2024, August 8

¹²⁷ Payne, A.M. & Norman, H. (2024). Coming to terms with the past? Identifying barriers and enablers to truth-telling and strategies to promote historical acceptance. UNSW? *Reconciliation Australia*. <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Barriers-and-enablers-to-truth-telling-report.pdf>

Norman and her co-author Anne Maree Payne set out four pillars for truth-telling:

1. To achieve justice for First Nations people.
2. To promote reconciliation and healing.
3. To challenge and change historical understanding.
4. The practice of truth-telling – led by First Nations people, engage First Nations perspectives, be ongoing.¹²⁸

In similar vein, Aboriginal Elder Tom Calma, giving the Lowitja O'Donoghue Oration in May 2024, reiterated the commitment of Lowitja O'Donoghue, Yankunytjatjara woman, founding chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, and founding chair of the now Lowitja Institute, to the advancement of young people as leaders; and the critical importance of truth-telling as a response to the No vote. In his speech he drew attention to truth-telling already taking place and Reconciliation Australia's four pillars of practice:

- First Nations Community led, responsive to the needs and aspirations of First Nations people.
- Place-based Truth-telling, building local relationships and change.
- Strengths-focused Truth-telling to generate respect and understanding of First Nations cultures and knowledge.
- Action-oriented Truth-telling to ensure injustices cannot continue or be repeated.¹²⁹

A recent article by Marcia Langton draws attention to the federal government's new focus for Indigenous policy, announced at Garma, "pivoting away from the rights-based self-determination approach of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* to a First Nations Economic Partnership with the Coalition of Peaks".¹³⁰

This is not the same pathway as truth-telling, but as Langton points out, it is not in conflict with the desire to see Indigenous disadvantage addressed. As she wrote:

The significance of this approach is enormous. ... The First Nations Economic Partnership has the potential to accelerate the pace of change in overcoming entrenched Indigenous disadvantages.¹³¹

What does the Yes campaign outcome tell us?

The failure of the referendum campaign for a constitutionally-enshrined First Nations Voice to parliament was a tragedy for First Nations people and for Australia, as a nation.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is emotionally shattered, angry, and deeply distressed by the rejection of the Voice. Its rejection by a strong majority of Australians, confirmed what many had already feared: the right-wing thrives on attacking the marginal and unfairly maligned in our nation. Ignorance, entrenched racism, and a lack of generosity towards disadvantaged people, are powerful political features of contemporary Australian society.

The majority of the 97% of Australians from non-Indigenous backgrounds demonstrated a profound lack of understanding of the 250-year history of this country since British invasion and settlement. They are ignorant of the traumatic impacts on First Nations people.

128 Payne, A.M. & Norman, H. (2024)

129 Calma, T. (2024, May 29). *Lowitja O'Donoghue Oration 2024 Professor Tom Calma AO*. <https://www.dunstan.org.au/events/lodo24/#:~:text=The%20Don%20Dunstan%20Foundation%20was,influence%20actions%20of%20the%20future%E2%80%99>

130 Langton Aug 2024

131 Langton (2024)

They are ignorant of the basic human rights principle of self-determination for Indigenous people, and the evidence that self-determination and community-control of services delivers better outcomes for affected communities.

The Australian nation lost an opportunity to make a modest step towards recognition, reconciliation and justice for First Nations people.

The campaign exposed the power and threat of conservative political forces who mobilised to oppose and defeat the call for the Voice from its inception, through an effective media campaign backed by a disturbing local and international network of right-wing funders and strategists.

Networks of billionaire activists and right-wing organisations are extremely well-resourced and operate locally, nationally and globally. Following their “success” in the referendum these groups are now emboldened to publicly campaign against progressive social change beyond the Voice and against progressive political forces such as the Greens.¹³²

The campaign had some positive outcomes which need to be promoted. Over 20,000 activists have been mobilised in struggle across the country and more than six million people supported First Nations people’s fight for justice.

Voice campaigners established many new collaborations of committed activists across the country, including local community networks bringing together First Nations activists and non-Indigenous allies often for the first time. These networks provide opportunities for future collaborations, and advocacy for new forms of economic justice, meaningful democracy and reconciliation from the grassroots.

We are faced with the challenge and have the opportunity to develop and promote new and innovative ways to organise, build solidarity and win struggles for new forms of anti-colonialist resistance and First Nations self-determination, and economic and social justice at local, regional, national and global levels.

Celeste Liddle, an Arrernte union organiser, social commentator, freelance writer and activist living in Naarm (Melbourne), reminded us before the vote that First Nations people will still have to fight continuously to be heard and to have their views respected, along with ongoing struggles for land, and language rights are helpful:

If I had any advice for the Australian public at large right now, it would be to stop, sit back, and engage in some deep listening when it comes to the conversations happening in Indigenous communities.... You owe it to yourselves, to our communities and to future generations to be as informed on this decision as you possibly can be. Block out the lies, the half-truths and the misinformation and instead think about what kind of country this is, and what kind of country you would like it to become. Perhaps then, you will gain a better perspective with regards to how we can all, constructively, move forward.¹³³

132 Morton, R. (2024, May 25). How right-wing lobbyists are expanding their reach, *The Saturday Paper*. <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/politics/2024/05/25/how-right-wing-lobbyists-are-expanding-their-reach>

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133 Liddle, C. (2023, September). A Yes vote won’t change whose constitution it is, a no vote won’t take the struggle back decades....*Arena*. <https://arena.org.au/notes-%20of-an-arrernte-undecided/>

The emerging landscape: The struggle continues!

The Voice referendum in Australia happened at an historical moment of intensive challenges between progressive and reactionary political forces on several fronts:

- Global campaigns to redress the unjust power relationships and traumatic legacies of colonisation (especially European colonisation) on people and environments - and to engage in truth-telling, reparations, and programs to achieve social and economic justice.
- Right-wing populist rallying of citizens around reversed notions of victimhood, for example, the Incel perspective that men rather than women are the real victims of gender-based oppression. This combines easily with a divisive, zero-sum game' view of politics and society - if they win, we lose. The emerging dominance of these viewpoints in many societies around the globe is critically dangerous for First Nations peoples, those on the frontline of climate change, women, LGBTIQ+ people, refugees, an increasingly casualised workforce, and other groups who are presented as 'stealing' the rights of others.
- Right wing narratives of past greatness that ignore the realities of slavery and colonial exploitation - Trump's 'Make America Great Again', the Brexit fallacy of a Great Britain standing on its own – speak to a yearning to

return to some pure past that never existed, a yearning for time of unacknowledged entrenched structural privileges of the very few over the many

- A pushback against treaty rights and self-determination of Indigenous peoples, exemplified by campaigns by the conservative National/NZ First/Act party coalition in Aotearoa (New Zealand) to remove Māori community-controlled health, education and language programs, and wind back Māori rights enshrined in the Treaty of Waitangi, in what Māori leaders define as a 'dangerous' and 'retrograde' systematic legislative attack.¹³⁴

Immediately after the failure of the referendum, First Nations supporters of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* and their allies have continued campaigning for state and federal governments to act on truth-telling, treaty-making and self-determination processes¹³⁵.

First Nations communities continue to push for government commitments to self-determination, achievable outside of a constitutionally-enshrined Voice, including a November 2023 report from the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs recommending 'development of a National Action Plan, in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, that outlines the approach to implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Australia.'¹³⁶

Under the banner of allyship, tens of thousands of activists and many of the six million Yes voters are sustaining and building solidarity networks across the

134 Corbett, E. & Tahana, J. (2024, July 29). 'Dangerous' and 'retrograde': Māori leaders sound alarm over policy shifts in New Zealand. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/29/maori-leaders-new-zealand-coalition-government-policy-changes>

135 Linder, D. & Hobbs, H. (2023, October 25). After the Voice referendum: how far along are First Nations treaty negotiations across the country? *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/after-the-voice-referendum-how-far-along-are-first-nations-treaty-negotiations-across-the-country-215159>

136 Parliament of Australia, Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. (2023, November). *Report of Inquiry into the application of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Australia*. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Aboriginal_and_Torres_Strait_Islander_Affairs/UNDRIP/Report/List_of_recommendations

country, especially at the local level, to tackle social and economic inequality and disadvantage, to improve education, housing, health and justice outcomes, and for climate justice and for safe and healthy environments.

First Nations people and allies need to protect, develop, and strengthen treaty processes that conservative parties, emboldened by the referendum outcome, are now walking away from even though they had previously committed to them (for example in in Queensland).

Having defeated the Voice, conservative activists and their organisations, including Advance which is credited with much of the success of the No campaign, are also pushing back on other hard-won recognition and rights of First Nations people in Australia, including recognition of prior ownership and the trauma of invasion through attacking the practice of Acknowledgement of Country, and 'saving' Australia Day.¹³⁷

There is an urgent need for cross-sectoral coalitions of First Nations and allies to defeat the well-bankrolled right-wing lobby groups, such as Advance, which are expanding their reach and organising to defeat other policies that benefit the whole community, including the transition to renewable energy, labour rights, environmental protections, youth justice, and other human rights.¹³⁸

The referendum outcome tells us that progressive and socialist activists and organisations must develop powerful alliances that organise beyond the inner-metro strongholds, that we must engage cynical and alienated citizens around a compelling narrative about justice, solidarity and hope, and support grassroots actions for an inclusive, compassionate, and just society in which all people can thrive in a healthy environment.

As Megan Davis highlighted shortly after the referendum:

We six million are bonded together now. There is power in our voices. Collectively, we the people believe in recognition and rights. Those Australians who accepted the offer of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, and listened to the dialogues, now make up an Australian chorus, six million voices in unison, who march on in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.¹³⁹



Voice Treaty Truth at Brisbane rally.

137 Advance (2024). *Campaigns*. <https://www.advanceaustralia.org.au/campaigns>

138 Morton, R. (2024, May 25). How right-wing lobbyists are expanding their reach. *The Saturday Paper*. <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/politics/2024/05/25/how-right-wing-lobbyists-are-expanding-their-reach>

139 Davis, M. (2023, December) Truth after the Voice, *The Monthly*. <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2023/december/megan-davis/truth-after-voice#mtr>

A final word ...

This document was finalised before the one-year anniversary of the Referendum defeat. We note with alarm hostile actions of newly elected conservative governments in NT and Queensland towards First Nations people, within days of being elected. Our forthcoming summary document includes an analysis of the arguments and important information from key figures and commentators that emerged in late October 2024 which, along with this analysis, will help us in determining the way forward.

Acknowledgements

The SEARCH Voice Treaty Truth Working Group (VTTWG) acknowledges the steadfast courage and tenacity of Australia's First Nations people in their 250 years of resistance and struggle against the Australian colonial settler state.

Sovereignty has never been ceded.

We also acknowledge the leadership and generosity First Nations leaders have provided in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, and the referendum campaign. We are proud to be among the thousands of Australians who campaigned alongside as allies.

The VTTWG acknowledges the work of the SEARCH Foundation in providing a 'home' for democratic ecological socialists to work together on our shared vision, and the support, advice and encouragement our collective efforts provide to each other, and our allies.

This analysis and our reflections are an outcome of years of campaigning for the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* and other First Nations justice campaigns across the continent. Our analysis is a collective effort. We thank all who have contributed insights, SEARCH members and allies.

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We recognise that this only one perspective, there is more to be learnt and shared, and the work to develop stronger winning campaigns still lies before us. The struggle continues!



Always Was, Always Will Be. Bus shelter Stanwell Park, NSW.



Central Australian community members show their support for the Yes vote.

The SEARCH Foundation

For a Democratic, Ecologically Sustainable & Socialist Australia

The SEARCH Foundation is located on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. We acknowledge their elders, both past and present, and recognise that this land was never ceded, was taken without compensation, without consent and without Treaty. We are committed to the Uluru Statement from the Heart process and Voice - Treaty - Truth, to begin to redress this injustice.

An extensive **Annotated Bibliography** accompanying this document is available on request from the SEARCH Foundation.



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The campaign

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- *Woolgoolga & Surrounds for Yes group beach walk in support of the Yes vote*. Source: Woolgoolga & Surrounds for Yes group (2023).
- *'A Voice? Yes' badge*. Source: Chips Mackinolty (2022).
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The emerging landscape: The struggle continues!

- *Voice Treaty Truth at Brisbane Rally*, Source: Nina Lansbury

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- *Always was, always will be. Bus shelter, Stanwell Park, NSW*. Source: Chris Elenor (August 2024)
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