

# Indigenous campaign builds against constitutional recognition

[774 ABC Melbourne](#)

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**Photo:** [Arrernte woman and NTEU National Indigenous Organiser Celeste Liddle is not a supporter of the campaign to recognise Aboriginal people in the Australian Constitution. \(774 ABC Melbourne: Simon Leo Brown \)](#)

[Map: Melbourne 3000](#)

The Indigenous community is split over a campaign to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Constitution.

The Recognise campaign calls for a referendum and for all Australians to back constitutional change. It's backed by the Federal Government, Opposition and the Greens, as well the AFL and Cricket Australia.

However, there are members of the Indigenous community who argue that campaign doesn't represent their views.

Arrernte woman and Indigenous Organiser for the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) Celeste Liddle said Recognise is federally funded and is dominating the debate.

"There is a huge movement against it as well... and it's barely been heard," she said.

## Treaty vs constitutional change

Ms Liddle said Australia is not ready to vote in a referendum without a formal discussion that involves all sides of the debate.

"In my ideal world most Australians would be exposed to a wide panel of views on this."

Ms Liddle is concerned that proceeding with a referendum to recognise Aboriginal people in the constitution will set back the campaign for a treaty with Indigenous Australia.

The Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples reported to the Federal Government in January 2012.

Ms Liddle said the panel reported that the Australian public would vote against any proposal using the words "sovereignty" or "treaty".

"Does that negate our ability to go and negotiate a treaty and be recognised as sovereign peoples of the country?" she asked.

She said Indigenous activists had been campaigning for a treaty for decades.

One of the things we've fought really hard for is the right to have a say on the affairs that govern our people.

Celeste Liddle, Arrernte woman and NTEU Indigenous Officer

In 1988 then Prime Minister Bob Hawke, while visiting a Northern Territory Aboriginal community, promised Australia would enter into a treaty with Indigenous Australians by 1990.

The treaty never eventuated.

In 1992 the High Court recognised Native Title in their landmark Mabo decision.

"At that point, that's when we should have been talking about treaty," said Ms Liddle.

"It's kind of like the position has been scaled back."

Ms Liddle said other countries have made treaties with their indigenous peoples and believes the current national debate needs to be about a treaty rather than constitutional recognition.

She is also concerned about moves to refer to Indigenous Australians in the constitution as the 'original occupiers' rather than the 'original peoples',

"Original peoples... denotes a long connection to land and a belonging to land."

She said the term 'occupiers' is too passive.

"It perpetuates some really bizarre ideas about what Indigenous people did before everyone else rocked up."

The Federal Government has said that the draft wording of the referendum proposal will be finalised by the end of 2014.

## High profile support for Recognise

Recognise, which is a part of Reconciliation Australia, says that recognising Indigenous Australians in the Constitution is an essential next step in reconciling Australia's past.

It also supports removing Section 25 of the Constitution, which allows the States to ban people from voting based on race.

The campaign has the support of high profile Indigenous Australians including AFL footballer Adam Goodes and singer songwriter Archie Roach.

"I fully support Goodes and Archie Roach and a whole heap of the people who support the yes campaign," said Ms Liddle.

"One of the things we've fought really hard for is the right to have a say on the affairs that govern our people."

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However, she said Australians deserve to hear opposing views from the Indigenous community before the decision is made to proceed with a referendum.

"I worry that they're not getting the full spectrum of information," she said.

Ms Liddle said the 1967 referendum decision was the result of years of campaigning.

The referendum proposed to remove sections of the constitution prohibiting the Commonwealth from making laws for Aboriginal people or counting them in the Census.

It had the highest "yes" vote ever recorded at an Australian referendum.

"That was '67 and it's now 47 years on," said Ms Liddle.

She is concerned that if a referendum on constitutional recognition resulted in a no vote it would set back attempts to recognise Aboriginal sovereignty.

"Would we be waiting another 47 odd years?"

**Topics:** [indigenous-policy](#), [indigenous-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander](#), [melbourne-3000](#)

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