

I can't call myself an Indigenous Australian and also say sovereignty never ceded

[Callum Clayton-Dixon](#)

Aboriginal sovereignty is not an abstract idea and can't be dismissed as such. @IndigenousX host Callum Clayton-Dixon explains the concept and why he thinks it's integral to the future of Indigenous people in Australia



‘Aboriginal sovereignty is *not* an abstract, absurd concept based in conspiracy theory and legal mumbo jumbo. And it shouldn't be dismissed as such.’ Photograph: Jade Slockee/Supplied

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What is Aboriginal sovereignty, and why are we still talking about it in 2015? To answer that question, we need to first define sovereignty in an Aboriginal context. Such a definition forms the basis of our philosophical approach to combating colonialism and reconstructing that which underpinned our society prior to colonisation.

Although there is no single definition *per se*, there are a number of core principles and elements commonly expressed by Aboriginal people articulating the meaning of sovereignty:

- Sovereignty is the foundation of all Aboriginal rights, and responsibilities;
- It's the inherent right we have to determine the future of our lands and lives;
- Aboriginal sovereignty finds its roots in our connection to kin and country, the ancient reciprocal relationship we have with our lands;
- It manifests in our song, dance and story, our language, ceremony and customary law;
- Aboriginal sovereignty is shared by the individual, the family, the clan, the tribe, and the nation;
- Our sovereignty has endured since the first sunrise; and
- It's the vision for Aboriginal people to take our place among the nations and peoples of the world, not beneath them.

Aboriginal sovereignty is *not* an abstract, absurd concept based in conspiracy theory and legal mumbo jumbo. And it shouldn't be dismissed as such.

So what threatens our sovereignty? Assimilation. Arising from the question of sovereignty, and assimilation, comes the question of how we identify. The task of Australian colonialism

is to convince us that our identity and national interest is within the confines of Australian colonialism.

The Australian government calls us “Indigenous Australians”, “Aboriginal Australians”, and “First Australians”. This fits nicely with their longtime goal of turning the Aborigine into the Australian.

Such terms keep us exactly where we are, holding onto a system that forces us to become something we’re not. They’re labelling us a category of Australian; we’re the adjective, they’re the noun. These terms are undeniably anti-Aboriginal sovereignty and assimilationist, validating the coloniser’s licence to dictate and define our entitlements. But that’s quite alright, as long as we’re content with crumbs from the coloniser’s table, whether it be a reconciliation action plan, a mention in Australia’s constitution, or a native title determination.



Illustration: Luke Peacock/Supplied

I cannot on one hand call myself an “Indigenous Australian” and then say “sovereignty never ceded” in the same breath. The two are incompatible. We will never hear Palestinian liberation fighters call themselves “Palestinian Israelis” or hear members of the West Papuan independence movement use the term “West Papuan Indonesians”.

Founding chairman of the [Aboriginal Provisional Government](#) Bob Weatherall once said:

Governments presume we are citizens of the Australian nation, and our rights are accordingly limited. But we have never been given the opportunity to say if we agree.

I identify as a member of the Anaywan tribe of the Aboriginal nation. But I do not identify as Australian. Hence why I use my Aboriginal passport, not an Australian passport, whenever possible. This is the same reason I refuse to vote in Australian elections. My customary obligation not to vote comes from my Anaywan Aboriginal nationality.

Others use other terms, like Indigenous and First Nations, and there’s nothing wrong with that. Rather than debating semantics among ourselves, let’s assume Aboriginal, Indigenous and First Nations are synonyms, and join together in our rejection of the colonial Australian identity that is being imposed on us.

One thing is clear – we need a united Aboriginal front, and we need to plan longterm. This is one thing the West Papuan independence movement has shown us very clearly. The United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) has brought together hundreds of tribes as one nation, with one flag, one body uniting the fight for independence.

At the 2015 Melanesian Spearhead Group summit, West Papua gained status under international law, on an international body, for the first time in over 50 years of Indonesian occupation. This would have been impossible if they'd split themselves into hundreds of separate "nations" asking for recognition of their separate sovereignty.

Sovereignty is not just an idea. It's an action.

Trade, ceremony and songlines have connected our tribes since time immemorial. From the frontier wars to the land rights movement, our fight against colonisation has only reinforced this bond. Let's focus on what connects us, our common ground and common cause. There is substance behind the saying "strength in unity".

Aboriginal sovereignty tells us to ask two questions. The first question: what must we do ourselves?

For me personally, this meant going back to my grandfather's country. It meant committing myself to the task of reviving our Anaywan language, and not being reliant on government or corporate funding in doing so. Language and cultural revival is a core component of Aboriginal nationalism, the revival and expression of our nationhood. It's about rekindling that which made our families, our clans, our tribes, our nation strong and proud. It serves as a means of us (re)creating a viable alternative to assimilation. Culture and connection gives us deeper drive and purpose.

Collectively, it means a concerted campaign and building a platform from which national Aboriginal political will can be demonstrated and enacted. Like the West Papuans, we also need to be lobbying the international community, bodies like the [Melanesian Spearhead Group](#), to support our calls for self-determination.

The second question: what do we want from the coloniser? We must be specific in our demands, going beyond the slogans "land rights" and "treaty now". We know we want the return of land and political empowerment. But what land do we want returned, and what rights do we want over that land? How are we to exercise political power and decision making about our future as a people? What model will deliver the most land and the most power in the most secure way possible? Is it a treaty? Dedicated Aboriginal seats in the parliament? National uniform land rights legislation?

Pakana lawyer Michael Mansell is now proposing an [Aboriginal state](#) within federation. Forget Northern Territory statehood. We could push for Aboriginal statehood; our own parliament, our own education and health system, our own constitution, our own laws protecting culture and customary law, a share of the GST, guaranteed Senate representation, and the most secure form of land rights possible.

An Aboriginal state would be far more secure than a treaty, as a treaty relies on legislation, and legislation can be revoked. Once the Aboriginal state is established, the commonwealth does not have the constitutional power to get rid of it. And a referendum wouldn't be required. This is definitely a model that deserves further debate and consideration.

The struggle for Aboriginal sovereignty is ultimately what stands in the way of assimilation, the destruction of our people and our lands. But sovereignty is not just an idea. It's an action. Without action, principled and purposeful action, that idea remains just an idea.

Veteran Pakana activist Jimmy Everett once said, “I think that our sovereignty and nationalism will probably be back on the agenda very firmly with new generations. Our younger generations are not going to let that sort of thing die.”

That is our task, our responsibility. Only we can forge a proper place for ourselves and future generations.

- *“Our stories, our way” – each week, a new guest hosts the [@IndigenousX Twitter account](#) to discuss topics of interest to them as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. Produced with assistance of Guardian Australia staff.*