

# The ABC doesn't need Andrew Bolt to debate Indigenous recognition



[Paul Daley](#)

There are plenty of Indigenous people who could argue the case against a new constitutional settlement instead of a white, rightwing columnist



The ABC's decision to involve Andrew Bolt in a program about Indigenous recognition is a puerile grab for publicity. Photograph: Julian Smith/AAP

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So, the ABC is turning the complex, divisive issue of constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians into [a reality TV show featuring Andrew Bolt](#).

The 55-minute show has been commissioned by the ABC and funded by Screen Australia. The national broadcaster apparently believes pitting Bolt (anti) against Linda Burney, Labor's deputy leader in the New South Wales parliament, a proponent of constitutional recognition (whatever that may be) in a "provocative one-off documentary", is an incisive way into the complexities of the "Recognise" debate.

It will be interesting to see (hello Senate estimates) precisely whose imprimatur at Screen Australia and the ABC ultimately deemed it a good idea to make this show, given [Bolt's provocative assertion that "I am an Indigenous Australian"](#) and his long-held animosity towards the broadcaster.

Recognition does not, at present, seem likely to address questions that burn at the heart of Australian nationhood

Where to begin?

The program is about to enter production and Screen Australia says it "follows two fierce individuals who travel the nation with opposing views about the referendum on Indigenous recognition".

That's a big problem for starters. Not least because at the moment there is neither a referendum nor a clear proposal about how the constitution might be amended to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

While former prime minister Tony Abbott pinned his spurious claim to being a PM for Indigenous affairs largely on [a vow to "sweat blood" for a recognition referendum](#) in 2017, he wouldn't commit to a firm timetable or propose what firm shape any proposal might or should take.

His successor Malcolm Turnbull, has, while an Abbott government minister, given motherhood support to the well-funded Recognise movement (there is no such taxpayer support for the very significant proportion of [Indigenous Australians](#) who currently oppose recognition). But he has done nothing substantive as prime minister to indicate that Indigenous issues are a priority.

Always one to push inflammatory rhetoric to the edge (click, click), Bolt has previously warned that the (unformulated, unannounced) nebulous proposal for recognition would "put Australia on the path to Apartheid", and "divide Australians between the 'first' and the rest – on the basis of the 'race'."

Ironically, it would seem that that is precisely what the program in which Bolt has agreed to participate might well do, by presenting the ongoing, emotionally charged debate about recognition as a simplistic "for" or "against", black/white, proposition.

Beyond Indigenous people in some way associated with the [Recognise](#) organisation, I have met very few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in the cities or the bush, who support Recognise. They do speak of treaties and sovereignty, however.

They, like the rest of Australians, have little idea what recognition means because the (mostly white) politicians haven't dared go beyond the broadest motherhood statements to explain what it might, could or should ideally be. But there are, of course, big added complexities for black Australians – who've faced continued violence, oppression, racial and social discrimination since 1788. Not least of which is the value of any merely gestural, symbolic words that do not contribute to improving Indigenous lives or won't commit firmly to treaties with First Nations people and serious negotiations about sovereignty.

[Interviewed by Michael Brissenden on the ABC's AM program this week](#), Megan Davis, a member of the advisory council that will consult Indigenous communities on possible recognition, said the first consultative question "is do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people want to continue with the process, and what might that look like. Because ... there is somewhat of an ambivalence towards this process in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community".

Asked what contributed to the ambivalence, she said: "Well, it depends on what we're embracing ... we're only talking about a concept at this point, which is recognition. That's not very clear what that means. If recognition is something akin to symbolism or minimalism, then that's unlikely to get the support of the Aboriginal community, and that is because the Aboriginal community is very universal on this point: if the reforms aren't going to make a significant difference to their lives, if it's not going to advance the legal status or position that

they have currently, then it's a huge amount of political capital and money to expend on something that's not going to take us forward.”

Asked if constitutional recognition was enough for Indigenous Australians, she said: “What does constitutional recognition mean? Recognition, in terms of legal and political reform, actually sits on a spectrum ... the weakest form of recognition is something akin to just a few lines of acknowledgment. And then at the other end of the spectrum there's more substantive reform, the kind that you see in Canada, the US, New Zealand. Now part of the role of these conventions [forthcoming in Indigenous communities] is to work out where recognition lies on that spectrum, and I think one of the problems ... is the ambiguity over the term ‘recognition’.”

Supporting some broad notion of ill-formulated, symbolic “recognition” might well assuage middle-class white guilt regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

But the ABC/Screen Australia decision to insert the “Indigenous” Bolt as a credible opponent of recognition is similarly simplistic – not to mention a puerile grab for “all publicity is good” sensationalism. Where is he on the spectrum? Is he saying “no” because recognition does not, at present, seem likely to address the questions of sovereignty and treaties, that burn, unanswered, at the heart of Australian nationhood?

I doubt it.

If the ABC/Screen Australia had wanted a reasoned, articulate, explanation of the “no” case as it stands – rather than just a right, white, reactionary one – it had countless thousands of Indigenous opponents from which to choose.

That might've made for an informative, worthwhile program.