

# The 'no' campaign against Indigenous recognition isn't Cory Bernardi's to run

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Indigenous opposition to constitutional recognition continues to be drowned out by the voices of white conservatives



'Some Indigenous people do indeed support constitutional recognition. But a proportion of the community are opposed, and even more remain undecided.' Cory Bernardi speaks at the National Press Club. Photograph: AAP

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Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the constitution is currently being framed as a white versus black issue, where black people wish to be recognised and white people need convincing. The truth is more complex.

Some Indigenous people do indeed support constitutional recognition. But a proportion of the community are opposed, and even more remain undecided.

Yet our own oppositional voices are ignored, while the views of privileged white men are promoted by the media. Privileged white men who have never experienced racism in their lives, who will be barely affected by changes to the constitution, and who still hold power regardless of the outcome of any referendum. This is not the way it should be.

How do Australians hope to make an informed decision on the best outcome for Indigenous people, and the country as a whole, when they are barely exposed to appropriate information from the very people whose lives recognition would affect most?

When I heard that Cory Bernardi, the ultra-conservative Liberal senator from South Australia, was willing to [spearhead a “No” campaign](#) for the referendum on constitutional recognition, I was amused. Bernardi is a polarising figure who the left would have a field day taking apart.

His views are similar to those of other conservatives, like [Andrew Bolt](#): that constitutional recognition would itself be racially divisive. That’s laughable; right now, the real racial divides in this country are actively being highlighted by protesters taking to the streets to oppose forced closures of Aboriginal communities only to be labelled “[selfish rabble](#)”.

In addition, former ALP minister Gary Johns’s “Recognise What?” campaign has [grabbed headlines](#). While Indigenous viewpoints are represented on Johns’s page, these views are more in agreement with his conservative stance rather than encompassing of the diversity of Indigenous oppositional views. For his part, Johns wrote [recently](#) that the whole issue has become a “national embarrassment”.

Views like these get airtime at the expense of dissenting positions from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and everyone else as well.

There are, for example, a number of Indigenous-run groups like [Vote No to Constitutional change](#), the [Aboriginal Provisional Government](#) and the [National Unity Government](#). How much does the public hear from them? And we are currently seeing more sovereignty-reinforcing protest actions; activists have taken steps to renounce Australian citizenship and have attempted to clear customs using [Aboriginal passports](#), as well as the removed themselves from all systems of [non-Indigenous governance](#).

Indigenous people have also made dissenting submissions at the public hearings held by the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition, such as [this](#) from the University of Queensland’s Gordon Chalmers. The body of work from Indigenous people on this topic continues to grow, yet public awareness is low.

[Recognise](#) has, on the other hand, received substantial government funding to run a public campaign educating people on the “yes” view for constitutional recognition – a funding commitment Indigenous groups opposed to the changes are yet to receive. Corporate entities such as the [AFL](#) and [Qantas](#) have used the Recognise symbol in their branding. Recognise calls itself a “grassroots campaign” – yet the real grassroots campaign is the debate now being held amongst the community.

Of course everyone has the right to have a view on the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Yet considering who it is that this country is looking to recognise, it should be the First Peoples of this country who are front and centre, including in any “no” case. For how can we even think of recognising Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander people in the Australian constitution when we cannot even recognise their diverse views?