

Indigenous recognition: we have more diverse views than the official campaign



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For any proposal to be representative, Australians must engage with the full spectrum of Indigenous views on sovereignty – not just the government’s supporters and their critics



A young girl holds the Aboriginal flag on Sorry Day, 2003. Photograph: AAP

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The discussion on constitutional recognition for Indigenous Australians is [heating up](#). Tony Abbott has used the heightened platform on Indigenous issues provided by his visit to North East Arnhem Land to revisit his election [promise](#), and to state his wish to outline a timetable for a referendum.

While the vote on Indigenous constitutional recognition now appears to have been pushed back until 2017, my concern is that even with this extended time Indigenous voices for and against the proposal will be drowned out by official government rhetoric and non-Indigenous opposition.

As I have [previously mentioned](#), the Recognise campaign is a government-funded initiative promoting a view that has bipartisan political support. It cannot necessarily be described as representing the diverse views of Indigenous Australia.

It's well overdue that First Peoples' unique ties and history with these lands is recognised. I just don't agree that being written into the Australian constitution is the correct way to go about it. I'd prefer we looked at mutually-negotiated agreements, such as treaties, first.

Certainly, my views on constitutional recognition share no similarities with those who [argue](#) that it would be "racist" and would divide the country. I tend to find these views limited; they ignore the history of this country and through their misappropriation of the term racist actually obfuscate what are some real problems in Australia that need addressing.

But as these are unfortunately the oppositional views that thus far have dominated the debate, I find myself erroneously grouped in with them. That's because a significant number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who share similar views to mine are not being heard.

[National Unity Government](#), for example, has provided an information hub for views on sovereignty and treaty for a long time. So too has the [Treaty Republic](#), which partially sprung out of the Black GST movement made famous by [Camp Sovereignty](#), set up during the Melbourne Commonwealth games.

And actions that reinforce Indigenous sovereignty are on the increase. [Murrumu Walubara Yidindji](#), a former press gallery journalist, recently renounced Australia and reverted partially back to Yidindji law.

On 17 September, four young Indigenous activists re-entered this country [using Aboriginal passports](#) after embarking on a tour of Aboriginal communities in Canada. A group of First Nations women are also on a [Walk of Freedom](#) from Melbourne to Canberra, with the aim of meeting with politicians to outline Indigenous sovereign rights.

Certainly constitutional recognition doesn't mean much to people taking action to emancipate themselves from Australian laws. This should be acknowledged – but how widely are these dissenting views represented in public discourse?

Another proposal, for dedicated Indigenous Senate [seats](#), was [described](#) recently as a "distraction" by the chair of Tony Abbott's Indigenous Advisory Council, Warren Mundine. I'd argue many Indigenous people would be keen to discuss dedicated seats further, because they would have the potential to deliver practical political outcomes.

On the other hand, Noel Pearson and Greg Craven have circulated a “breakthrough” [proposal](#) to parliamentarians for constitutional recognition that includes the existence of an “advisory” Indigenous body. This body would scrutinise policy but would not hold veto power.

Again, some in the community would certainly have problems with the establishment of yet another Indigenous body that has no real political powers, even were it to be constitutional.

Australians have a responsibility to engage with Indigenous political debate on the topic of constitutional recognition. The primary consideration of Australians going to the polls should be whether they believe Indigenous people themselves wish to be written into the constitution.

Instead, the debate is between the government and its supporters, and non-Indigenous conservatives. The official Recognise campaign is consequently surging ahead, with little publicly-acknowledged Indigenous challenge. This must change if any proposal for the recognition of Indigenous Australia is to be representative of our views on it, let alone successful.