

# Ditch plebiscite or hate will spread to Indigenous referendum, Malcolm Turnbull warned



[Michael Gordon](#)

Aboriginal leaders are urging Malcolm Turnbull to abandon the promised plebiscite on same-sex marriage, convinced an ugly campaign by those advocating a "no" vote will hurt the prospects for Indigenous constitutional recognition.

Indigenous academic Marcia Langton has warned that a vitriolic campaign against marriage equality would "unleash the dogs" on Aboriginal Australia in a referendum campaign that would require a majority in a majority of states to pass.

"I don't think it's good for anybody to have two votes that incite some people in the community to spew hate - and that's certainly what is going to happen if the government pursues both," Professor Langton told Fairfax Media.

"There's enough concern, even in conservative ranks, about the harm that the marriage equality plebiscite will do to decent men and women who don't deserve to be the targets of stupid, homophobic hate campaigns.



*Marcia Langton warns that the same-sex marriage plebiscite will 'unleash the dogs' on Aborigines in a referendum campaign. Photo: Peter Eve*

"And, if that happens, that will unleash the dogs on Aboriginal people even more so if the referendum of constitutional recognition goes ahead."

Professor Langton was a member of the expert panel on constitutional recognition that reported in January 2012. Her concerns are shared by a cross-section of Indigenous leaders, academics and advocates contacted by Fairfax Media.

The push from Aboriginal Australia against the marriage equality plebiscite has been led by Black Rainbow, an advocacy group founded by Kimberly-based Dameyon Bonson. It coincides with a poll suggesting a decision to drop the plebiscite would increase Malcolm Turnbull's popularity.

The Galaxy poll found 46 per cent of voters were more likely to support Mr Turnbull if he returned the issue to Parliament, rather than proceeded with the plebiscite. One in five voters said they would be less likely to support him if the plebiscite was dropped.

Indigenous leaders fear a divisive campaign ahead of the planned February 11 plebiscite would spill over into the consultations on Indigenous recognition in the constitution. No dates have yet been set for the nationwide consultations.

"What I can see brewing in the recognition discussion is the same sort of divisive, ugly fear-mongering that we are going to see in the marriage equality plebiscite. It's exactly the same people," said Labor MP Linda Burney, the first Indigenous woman to be elected to the House of Representatives.

Mr Bonson said gay Aboriginal people were subject to racism and homophobia and faced "copping it from both ends" if the plebiscite preceded the recognition referendum. "We've got two of Australia's minority groups that are going to be under attack during this process," he said.

He said concerns expressed by Australia's most prominent mental health advocate, Patrick McGorry, and the nation's peak mental health group about the harm a plebiscite would do to gay and lesbian Australians were especially relevant to the under-resourced LGBTI Indigenous community.

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While recognition had to involve a referendum, marriage equality could be achieved simply by a vote of Parliament, which was Mr Turnbull's original preference, Mr Bonson said.

"Parliament should enact marriage equality and not have a plebiscite that runs the risk of causing harm to the LGBTI community," said Professor Langton. "I think that's the majority view in the LGBTI community anyway."

Professor Langton said "organised racists" in Australia had picked up a few tips from the ultra-right in America "and they're organising themselves into groups on Facebook and other social media, inciting violence in small rural communities".

Another Indigenous MP, Labor senator Malarndirri McCarthy, conducted a round table of the gay and lesbian community in Alice Springs this week and says the emphatic message was rejection of the marriage equality plebiscite and an impassioned plea for politicians to make the decision.

The Galaxy poll, commissioned by a group called Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, found 44 per cent of voters opposed the plebiscite and 38 per cent supported it.

When told that the result was not binding on MPs who would have to change the Marriage Act and would cost more than \$170 million, opposition to the plebiscite increased to 55 per cent and support dropped to 20 per cent.