

# Recognition: Yes or No review – Bolt's barney with Burney an exercise in cheap spectacle

2 / 5 stars

The ABC's documentary on Indigenous recognition in the constitution resembles a quasi-intellectual bout of foosball



*Political odd couple: Andrew Bolt and Linda Burney in the ABC documentary Recognition: Yes or No. Photograph: Mark Rogers/ABC*

[Jack Latimore](#)

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It's difficult to recall a program as peculiar as Recognition: Yes or No?, which aired Tuesday evening on the ABC. Billed as a political documentary, the effort is more an exercise in cheap spectacle.

The premise: the elegantly mannered Indigenous politician Linda Burney is teamed up with the anxious class clown and conservative commentator [Andrew Bolt](#). Their mission: to spend four weeks talking to community leaders, lobbyists and lawmakers in Australia and New Zealand for a show that explores the intricate and nuanced issue of changing the commonwealth's founding document to recognise blackfellas – in one hour only.

Part Go Back to Where You Came From and part Two Men in a Tinnie, Burney and Bolt play an unlikely comic duo, discussing the pros and cons of significant reforms to the constitution. Unfortunately, the program doesn't quite work in the way the producers intended.

Now the shadow minister for human services, Burney – the first Koori woman to be elected to the federal House of Representatives – has long been an outspoken Aboriginal activist and advocate, and is literally a badge-wearing supporter of constitutional amendment. Bolt gets a

guernsey as her sidekick because he roundly rejects the nature of all the proposed reforms and, perhaps more precisely, was [found guilty](#) of breaching the Racial Discrimination Act in 2011.

We're introduced to each of them in terms of their cultural heritage. Burney is in Whitton, a quaint rural town on her traditional Wiradjuri country in a region more recently known as the Riverina. A visibly nervous Bolt, of Dutch descent, is driving north from Melbourne to meet her. Their partnership commences with Bolt interrogating Burney about why she identifies so strongly with her Aboriginal ancestry when she is also of Scottish heritage. For him, it seems, identity is not innate but a choice.

It's the first of numerous bewildering, frustrating moments for Bolt, as he struggles to comprehend Burney's complex response and why it is that he might be considered a racist: "There wouldn't be many Australians more against racism than me," he says to camera at one point.

For clarity, Burney takes him to Redfern, an inner-city suburb in Sydney. They meet the Indigenous political adviser Stan Grant, dressed too smartly to be working a double-end bag at Tony Mundine's famed boxing gym. Grant also attempts to explain to Bolt just how strongly Aboriginal people feel about identity and belonging to place – but to no avail.



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*Andrew Bolt and Linda Burney in Redfern. Photograph: Mark Rogers/ABC*

And so the tone is set for the show ahead: an alternating sequence of conversations intended to interrogate Burney and Bolt's respective positions on recognition, with Bolt's bearing becoming increasingly absurd by the minute.

Notable interviews include with the Indigenous conservative business consultant and constitutional recognition sceptic Wesley Aird. Bolt's support for Aird's economic rationalist views on Aboriginal affairs is [well-documented](#). Sitting in a high office tower overlooking the Brisbane river, Bolt invites him to confirm his assertion that "on the ground there isn't this passion for it [recognition], in the Aboriginal communities".

The irony persists with a visit to Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, where Yolgnu educators Yalmay Yunupingu and Witiyana Marika try to impress upon Bolt the value of bilingual education to achieve better cognitive development in Aboriginal children. Again, it's lost on Bolt: he may now be more appreciative of the faith that the Yolgnu place in their culture but he too quickly reverts back to a monoculturalist, assimilationist perspective, asking: "Can they speak English?"

Bolt's visit to the self-declared sovereign Yidindji Nation, to chat with the puckish former journalist Murrumu, goes pear-shaped. Bolt wants Burney to meet Murrumu, to smugly prove that constitutional recognition will lead to a treaty, which – he believes – will result in separatist, race-based Indigenous “states”, like Yidindji.

“This is the logical outcome,” he tells her. But Murrumu, who has renounced his Australian citizenship, informs him: “It’s not because we want to be separatist – far from it.”

After a hop across the ditch, the duo visit the former New Zealand National party prime minister Jim Bolger who, during his period of leadership in the 90s, oversaw the settlement of some longstanding disputes for breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi.

Bolt expected his rejectionist position to be welcomed by the conservative former PM – but Bolger's advocacy for Indigenous self-determination and meaningful reconciliation sits in stark contrast to Bolt's views.

“Why are you fearful of your history?” Bolger asks him directly. He challenges Bolt's fear of separatist states as an “exaggeration” and proposes that people of substantial influence have a responsibility to remove – not play into – the alarm of a sceptical public.



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*‘A quirky piece of theatre’: Andrew Bolt, Cory Bernardi and Linda Burney discuss recognition over a plate of cakes. Photograph: Mark Rogers/ABC*

A return to Bolt's home town of Adelaide to visit hard-right conservative Cory Bernardi is a quirky piece of theatre. Burney, Bernardi and Bolt sit around a plate of small cakes, a limp Australian flag framed prominently behind them.

Bernardi launches into a defence of the constitution, based on the logic that it has enabled the likes of Burney to obtain her seat in parliament. Burney deftly reminds him that her seat only came thanks to constitutional reform – the referendum of 1967, when Australians voted to count Indigenous people as part of the population. Bernardi and Bolt are left stammering.

The caper continues when he tells Shireen Morris, policy adviser for the Cape York Institute, that he is Indigenous. It's a rib-tickling routine from Bolt. Morris details the three-part legal definition for identifying as Indigenous to prove that he is incorrect. But identity politics are little more than a parlour game to Bolt: “I'm changing the definition,” he says, casually dismissing Morris' points of law.

It all culminates with Burney and Bolt visiting the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne, site of the commonwealth's exclusive first sitting of parliament in 1901. Seated in the gallery overlooking the main floor, Bolt explains “we must find a common, overarching identity or set of values ... There is no first Australians, and second Australians, and third or fourth, and

all that”. He passionately describes his bond with Australia “equal in depth of emotion”, he says, to any felt by Burney or other [Indigenous Australians](#).

“It’s not a competition,” Burney replies.

“Then drop the word ‘first’,” he says.

“I can’t drop the word ‘first’.”

“Then it’s a competition.”

The frustrating conversation is analogous to the program as a whole: light on genuine substance and fitful with gauche polemic, resembling something akin to a quasi-intellectual bout of foosball. It’s typical ABC fare: a beige primer of “he said, she said” that makes no firm ground in any direction. Brief contextual backgrounders use euphemisms including “settler” to avoid being contentious – while Burney strains to emphasise the importance of the actual truth in remedying the ills of more than 200 years of colonialism.