

A STATEMENT FROM OUR HEARTS: A RESPONSE FROM INDIGENOUS STUDIES

Dear colleagues and students of the Department of Indigenous Studies,

We issue this statement in response to the devastating national rejection of the proposal to amend the Constitution through an Indigenous Advisory Board and enshrine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'Voice to Parliament'.

While we predicted the result would not likely be Yes, we were understandably shocked and shattered to see the predominance of 'No' to this recognition of change. What we are witnessing, is expressed in the work of [Patrick Wolfe](#) and [Lorenzo Veracini](#). It is the continuation of the violence of settler colonialism and the ongoing practice of the 'logic of elimination', in this case through the settler colonial imaginary of the democratic process of recognition.

[Prime Minister Albanese](#) stated in his defeat speech that he absolutely respects the decision of the Australian people and the democratic process that has delivered it. As if completely out of touch with the damage this referendum has caused, he went on to say that 'we can all give thanks that here in Australia, we make the big decisions peacefully and as equals with one vote, one value'. Having recognised our inequality, he now reverts to the mantra of equality. And we are left wondering about the so-called equality that lets 97 per cent of the population hold all the decision making for 3 per cent of the people. While this 'No' position has been framed as one that will not stop reconciliation, or the Closing of the Gap targets, these two separate initiatives have never been achieved in all the decades they have existed. It takes *will* for change.

Australia, a settler colonial nation state, is built on white supremacy and racism, and this was reflected in the process where violence was permitted by our highest office. We can learn a lot from scholars such as the late [Charles Mills](#) and the more recent work of our colleague [Debbie Bargallie](#) as we think more deeply about what a democracy entails. As Mills argues, alongside the social contract which is embedded in the Constitution and that is a framework for liberal democracy is the 'racial contract'. This overtly excludes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and relegates us to a position defined by violence, exploitation, poverty, and denial of our full humanity. As [Marica Langton](#) has stated, 'the referendum campaign has cemented racism into the body politic, and the 'baseless' rejection of 'Yes' will create a bleak future for Australia and those who stood with First Nations people'.

Mills writes, 'There is obviously all the difference in the world between saying the system is basically sound despite some unfortunate racist deviations, and saying that the polity is racially structured, the state white supremacist, and races themselves significant existents that an adequate political ontology needs to accommodate' (1997, pp. 123-24)

Put simply, the 'racial contract' is a set of meta-agreements between settlers to categorise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as inferior relative to themselves. This continues to ensure settlers retain their position of superiority and privilege. As Bargallie notes, in so called Australia, 'the racial contract began with invasion and colonisation; indeed, it may be thought of as a racial-colonial contact' (2020, p. 92).

We are unable to fully articulate our rage at yet another assault. To add insult to our injury, we are now asked to console those who consider themselves allies, to assuage their 'grief', explain to them the racism of the polity that is beyond their comprehension. We are asked to respond to media and provide analysis of what went wrong.

We are now also faced with the proposition of working alongside people who may be themselves No voters. The referendum has emboldened racists, and they are roaming free both online and offline targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Our political leaders and media argue about whether Australia is racist as white supremacists cosplay being Nazis and publicly enact the Sieg Heil salute on our streets. Yet still we are assured that we are one and all equal. Indigenous peoples live racism and violence daily. Our children are killed on streets and in prisons, our families incarcerated, many living in poverty under the ever-watchful eye of the settler colonial powers who can remove our children at will. We experience racism and violence online and offline. And still we are assured that we are “all equal” from both sides of the political spectrum. We are repeatedly told that this is not a racist country.

Some of us mob have called for [a week of silence](#) to recover. Others are calling to speak up and enact our sovereignty and continue the fight against settler colonialism. Many are practicing the act of refusal recognising that the proposition of “recognition” by settler colonial governments is nothing more than an act of ‘legal tricks’ as Audra Simpson would argue (2017, p. 20). We are tired but we are not defeated. We have seen this day over and over again in the 235 years our lands have been occupied by the Crown. We know all the tricks.

The Department of Indigenous Studies will continue to do anti-colonial work. We will provide the education sorely needed. But we will do this work to benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples first and foremost. We will focus on self-determination and will no longer participate in providing the energy, the labour and the time for reconciliation, equity, and diversity. We will not compromise our efforts towards Indigenous resurgence and our commitment to self-determining futures. We will always uphold our right to live in a world where we are thriving.

[Sana Nakata](#) has captured the sentiment when she states, ‘We asked for change. We asked to be heard. We asked the Australian people to walk with us. And so now we are where we have always been, left to build our better futures on our own’.

[Reconciliation is dead.](#)