

Indigenous Voice

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Business titans get behind an Indigenous Voice to parliament

The bid to change Australia's constitution to recognise Indigenous Australians has united powerful allies across the political spectrum.

By Anne Hyland

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Indigenous filmmaker Rachel Perkins believes the “deep social conscience” of Australians will lead them to vote in favour of recognising First Nations people in the constitution.

Rachel Perkins, the celebrated Indigenous film director, shares a common fight with some unlikely allies. Among them are some of the nation's most conservative and influential business people and political powerbrokers. Their fight – one that began almost a century ago with the efforts of many predecessors – is to deliver a message across the country that the Constitution must be changed to recognise Indigenous Australians as the First Peoples of the nation.

In the next six months, before a referendum is held on this issue, there will be many conversations at barbecues, dinner parties, on sporting fields, at churches and in workplaces about changing the Constitution.

The challenge for those on both sides of the debate – as there are Yes and No campaigns – will be to cut through the noise to reach the millions of Australians who are indifferent or confused about why recognising Indigenous Australians in the Constitution matters.

And those conversations have already begun inside some of the country's biggest employers.

Earlier this year, Thomas Mayo, an Indigenous advocate and maritime union representative, who is also on the board of Australians for Indigenous Constitutional Recognition (AIRC) with Perkins, gave [a briefing to National Australia Bank employees](#) about his involvement in the Yes campaign.

He explained what is being asked and what it will mean for Indigenous people and Australia if the referendum is successful or if it fails. About one-fifth of NAB's 28,700 Australian staff attended or watched the briefing.

NAB, alongside large corporations such as the Commonwealth Bank, ANZ, BHP, Rio Tinto, Wesfarmers, Woolworths and Coles, are supporting the Yes campaign. The federal Liberal party, typically considered the party of big business, and [its leader Peter Dutton](#) remains divided on constitutional recognition for Indigenous Australians. Federal Labor supports it.

However, Perkins and the high-powered group she's working with on the AIRC want to avoid the debate becoming mired in party allegiances. "It's not affiliated with one party or another," says Perkins. "It will only happen if the Australian people say it should."

The make-up of the AIRC board reflects that desire for constitutional recognition not to become a left or right issue.

Perkins is co-chair with Danny Gilbert, a director of the Business Council of Australia and managing partner of law firm Gilbert + Tobin. Other directors are Wesfarmers chair Michael Chaney (whose father and uncle were Liberal federal ministers), BHP director Catherine Tanna, Indigenous advocate Noel Pearson, former Liberal Party adviser and powerbroker Mark Textor and Tony Nutt, Griffith University chancellor and former Queensland Labor treasurer Andrew Fraser, former Rudd government adviser Lachlan Harris, Reconciliation Australia chief executive Karen Mundine, Tanya Hosch, the AFL's general manager of

inclusion and social policy, and Mayo.

In the referendum, which is expected to be held sometime between October and December, Australians may be asked a question as simple as: “Do you want to recognise Indigenous people in the Constitution?”



Wesfarmers chair Michael Chaney became a director of Australians for Indigenous Constitutional Recognition because he believes more needs to happen to close the gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians. TREVOR COLLENS

If Australians vote yes, then an advisory body of Indigenous Australians, known as a Voice to parliament, would be established, providing advice to the federal government and parliament on policies and decisions affecting First Nations people. The advisory group would not have the power to veto legislation.

“For Indigenous people to be brought into that very important document [the Constitution], in not only a symbolic way but in a very practical way, gives great recognition to the deep history of the nation,” says Perkins, the daughter of civil rights activist Charlie Perkins.

The AIRC was established in 2019 to co-ordinate the Yes campaign and to act as a fundraising and governance body for the multiple groups advocating for a Yes vote. There are also groups behind a No campaign, with the most prominent being [Advance](#).

Some advocates of the Yes and No campaigns want greater detail around how the Voice

advisory body would work and have suggested it should only advise Parliament, not executive government (cabinet and the public service).

“There’s been a lot of distracting noise over the last few months, about things like ‘show us the detail’ and so on,” says Michael Chaney. “It’s going to become clear to people at large that the detail is a question for parliament, as always under the Constitution, parliament is the organisation that makes the laws and the rules, and that the question [that is] going to be asked in the referendum is a very straightforward one about whether there should be a Voice.”

Perkins says the recent alcohol-related violence in Alice Springs, and the poor decision-making by governments at the territory and federal level, is just one example where she believes a Voice to parliament could have helped deliver a different outcome.



Millionaire Marcus Blackmore says no one has convinced him yet to vote for a change to the constitution to recognise First Nations people. LOUISE KENNERLEY

Millionaire Marcus Blackmore, the founder of the vitamins company, who no longer holds any role with it, has been a vocal opponent of the Voice: “Neither the Prime Minister nor anybody else has convinced me at this stage to vote Yes.”

He supports the views of Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, a conservative senator for the Northern Territory, who is against the Voice and has argued it adds another layer of bureaucracy.

The AIRC, which has tax-deductible status, is understood to have raised “tens of millions” for its Yes campaign, including receiving donations from NAB and the Paul Ramsay Foundation.

Danny Gilbert has called on Australia’s biggest companies, which employ hundreds of thousands of Australians, to get behind the campaign. “This is a nation-building moment. Corporates are corporate citizens, and they are part of the social, economic and political infrastructure of this country. They employ a lot of people and have an interest in building a strong, healthy, inclusive democracy. It’s not in their interest to have a group of people relegated to poverty and disadvantage.”

Mike Henry, chief executive of BHP, which has 2437 Indigenous employees out of its 49,420 employees in Australia, says the miner is supporting constitutional recognition. “BHP is a long-standing supporter of the establishment of an Indigenous Voice to parliament in Australia, aligned with our support for broader efforts towards reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.”

Fellow miner Rio Tinto, which employs almost 1600 Indigenous staff, and saw its relations with First Nations stakeholders and the Australian public plunge after the [destruction of Juukan Gorge](#), is also supporting the Voice.



Rio Tinto chief executive, Australia, Kellie Parker says the miner supports a Voice to parliament, while acknowledging the company has failed First Nations people in the past. DAN PELED

“Rio Tinto has long supported constitutional recognition for Indigenous Australians, having

backed the ‘Recognise’ campaign in 2015, through to the Uluru Statement from the Heart in 2019, to where we stand today, with the call for an Indigenous Voice to parliament,” says Kellie Parker, Rio Tinto’s Australia chief executive. “As a company, there have been times throughout our history where we have failed Indigenous Australians, and defining moments that have compelled us to evolve our approach.”

Wesfarmers, which owns a wide range of companies from Bunnings, Priceline, Kmart to Target, has over 100,000 staff, of which 4000 are Indigenous. Wesfarmers chair Michael Chaney became involved with the AIRC because he believes more needs to happen to close the gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians, with the latter having poorer health, education and employment outcomes.

“What is being done currently is not working, and inserting that provision in the Constitution, provides a very important recognition, which is firstly symbolic, but more than symbolic, it provides a voice, which makes a lot of sense, where Indigenous people can have a voice in matters concerning them.”

Matt Comyn, Commonwealth Bank’s chief executive, says the bank will be engaging its employees on the referendum and its own commitment to reconciliation. “We support an Indigenous Voice to parliament that is enshrined in the Constitution.”

Ross McEwan, NAB’s chief executive, has already taken steps to brief its employees on the forthcoming referendum with meetings such as that held with Thomas Mayo. “NAB has a key role to play in ensuring our Indigenous colleagues, customers and community succeed.”

Brad Banducci, Woolworths chief executive, says it’s engaging with its 185,000 employees, of which 4500 are Indigenous. “Having established our own Indigenous Voice via our First Nations Advisory Board, we have first-hand experience of the positive impact First Nations’ voice and advice can have on our own decision-making.”

In 2021, Woolworths abandoned plans to [open a Dan Murphy’s megastore](#) close to liquor-free Indigenous communities in Darwin, after a backlash from Aboriginal and health groups.

The [countries major sporting codes](#), the AFL, NRL, Rugby Australia, Netball Australia, Football Australia, Cricket Australia and Tennis Australia are also working on a co-ordinated campaign to support the Voice.

While such support and surveys conducted by Resolve and Newspoll indicate that Australians will vote in favour of changing the Constitution there remains a risk. “I try not to contemplate that very often,” says Perkins. “But I think that we will win because Australians have a really deep social conscience.”

This article was updated to reflect that Thomas Mayor has changed his family name back to its original spelling of Mayo.

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