

Indigenous race shifting will rise following Indigenous voice to parliament referendum | The Australian

[Claire Lehmann](#) 12:00AM April 14, 2023

'Race shifting' casts long shadow over cultural identity



'It appears there is something deeper going on. Indigeneity, whether in Canada or Australia, while historically marginalised and stigmatised, now comes with unique cultural status.'

The 2021 census found the number of people identifying as Aboriginal in Australia had increased 25 per cent over a five-year period.

The huge uptick could not be explained by an Aboriginal baby boom, but the result of an increase in people claiming Aboriginal identity later in life, possibly after discovering a long-lost Aboriginal ancestor, or some other link to Indigenous heritage. According to the ABS, the uptick in Aboriginal-

identified population has not occurred in the Northern Territory, but in the big cities on the east coast.

The establishment of the [Indigenous voice to parliament](#) may drive these numbers higher again. While some have described the increase as a “wonderful thing”, others are not so sanguine. Some community leaders argue that funding opportunities and jobs go to those who falsely claim to be Aboriginal, as opposed to those who are authentically Indigenous.

Nathan Moran, chief executive of the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council, told 2GB last year: “We’ve now got a large proportion, if not a quarter of our population, (who) have chosen to self-identify rather than being born as Aboriginal to take up benefits of housing, scholarships, universities, employment opportunities and programs that are targeted for us to overcome our disadvantage.”



[Nathan Moran from the Metropolitan Aboriginal Land Council.](#) Picture: Sam Rutty

Victoria Grieve-Williams, an Aboriginal scholar and researcher into Indigenous identity fraud, describes such people as “race shifters”. They tend to be “well educated and articulate” and “oriented to getting awards, scholarships, benefits, and financial assistance”, she wrote in *The Australian* in 2021.

Since the 1980s, the commonwealth has applied a three-part test to determine Aboriginal identity whereby a person must be of Aboriginal descent, must identify as Aboriginal, and be accepted by an Aboriginal community. But the explosion of Aboriginal identity appears to sidestep this test, with those claiming the identity later in life relying on self-identification only.

While the three-part test is frequently dodged by individuals claiming Aboriginal identity, it is often ignored by organisations as well. Indigenous representation is highly sought after in business, academia and the public service, which leads companies and organisations to welcome "box-tickers" with open arms.

Pambalong woman Kumarah Kelly, CEO of Awabakal Local Aboriginal Corporation, told SBS Australia last year: "We're seeing people participating in cultural site surveys for the protection of artefacts and sacred sites. They're making \$1500 a day. Where did they get that cultural knowledge from?"

Dr Stephen Hagan, a Kullilli man from Queensland, also told SBS that those claiming fraudulent Aboriginal identity are protected. "They can sign a statutory declaration (to confirm they self-identify) and they're in. They can take on a \$200,000 job anywhere they want."



Laura Junka-Aikio
 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow, Tromsø University Museum, Arctic University of Norway
 Indigenous Research, Institutionalization and Neo-Politicization: Conjunctural analysis of Sámi Research in Finland



Daryl Leroux
 Dept of Social Justice & Community Studies, St Mary's University, Halifax
Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity, 2019



Suzanne Ingram
 Dept of Anthropology, University of Sydney
Nailing Wallpaper or Closing the Gap? An analysis of health communication for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

CASCA 2021 Roundtable W7: Race-shifting in Settler Nations



Facilitator
 Carolyn Smith-Morris
 SMU, Dallas



Circe Sturm
 Dept of Anthropology, University of Texas, Austin
Becoming Indian: The Struggle over Cherokee Identity in the Twenty-First Century, 2011



Victoria Grieve-Williams
 School of Media & Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne
Aboriginal Spirituality: Aboriginal Philosophy – and the Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal people, 2009



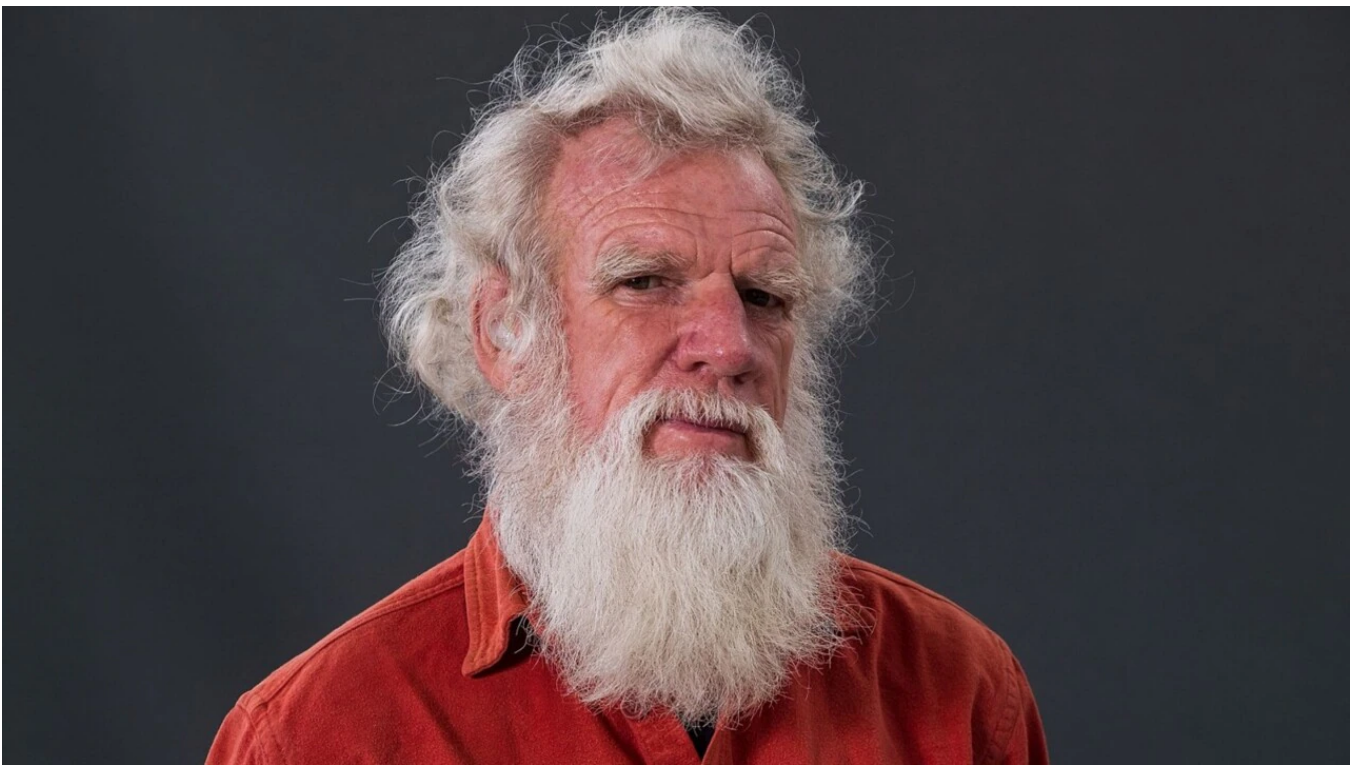
Gaynor Macdonald
 Dept of Anthropology, University of Sydney
Wiradjuri Experiences of Australian Colonialism and Citizenship, forthcoming

[Academics who participated in a roundtable to discuss the issue of 'race-shifting' and its impact on Indigenous people.](#)

The phenomenon is not unique to Australia. Last year Canada's CBC aired a documentary titled "The Pretendians", which follows a First Nations Canadian author as she explores the trend of white people claiming indigenous status. "Is it all about money and jobs, or is there something deeper going on?" she asks the audience.

It appears there is something deeper going on. Indigeneity, whether in Canada or Australia, while historically marginalised and stigmatised, now comes with unique cultural status. While "whiteness" is often negatively associated with the evils of colonialism and racism, indigeneity is positively associated with the qualities of spiritualism, ancestral lands and cultural wisdom.

It's easy to dismiss those opportunistically claiming Aboriginal status for material gain as cynical race hustlers. But for those who genuinely feel affinity with Aboriginal culture the issue is not so clear cut. Should a desire to identify with a culture be immediately invalidated because a person has light skin or is from an urban background? The ethics are complex.



In 2017, a philosopher named Rebecca Tuvel attracted worldwide attention when she published a paper arguing that if society accepts transgenderism then, on the same basis of reasoning, it ought to accept transracialism as well. The paper was inspired by a real case: Rachel Dolezal, an instructor in Africana studies at Eastern Washington University, and who identified as mixed-race, was publicly shamed when her white parents accused her of pretending to be black. Dolezal later admitted to being “white and born to white parents” but argued that her self-identification as a black woman was real, and that her transracial status ought to be respected.

In her paper, Tuvel grapples with the arguments against transracialism, and argues that each of these arguments (that it is offensive, it is an example of privilege, and it is not biologically possible to change one’s race) could also be used against transgenderism if extended to their logical conclusion.



And in the context of gender, self-identification is now widely accepted. In Victoria, for example, an individual born biologically male with XY chromosomes can change their recorded sex to female on the basis of self-ID only. No surgery or psychiatric diagnosis is required.

These philosophical issues may seem arcane and abstract, and only worthy of debate in academic journals. But when claims to power are involved, the stakes become much higher. The reality is that if the voice succeeds, it is likely the number of Australians identifying as Aboriginal will increase further. It is also likely the issue of self-ID will become increasingly divisive.

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