

Indigenous Yes campaigners fall silent as they grieve referendum result

[Lisa Visentin](#) 8.39pm

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Indigenous Australian campaigners for the [Voice to parliament](#) say they will fall silent for a week as they grieve the outcome of the referendum, and have called for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags to be lowered to half mast to reflect the loss they feel.

A statement by Indigenous Voice supporters, which the Yes23 campaign circulated on their behalf on Saturday night, labelled the referendum defeat a “bitter irony”. Indigenous Voice supporters said they would take a week of silence to “grieve this outcome and reflect on its meaning and significance”.



Yes23 campaign director Dean Parkin speaks at the Wests Ashfield Leagues Club in Sydney on Saturday night. *Dominic Lorrimer*

It was not immediately clear whether the statement represented all Indigenous campaigners who had backed the Voice. Yes23 and the Uluru Dialogue said they endorsed the statement, and it was shared on social media by the NSW Aboriginal Land Council and the Central Land Council.

"That people who have only been on this continent for 235 years would refuse to recognise those whose home this land has been for 60,000 and more years is beyond reason. It was never in the gift of these newcomers to refuse recognition to the true owners of Australia," the statement said.

"The referendum was a chance for newcomers to show a long-refused grace and gratitude and to acknowledge that the brutal dispossession of our people underwrote their every advantage in this country."

The statement said Indigenous Yes supporters would not comment during this mourning period and urged all Australians to reflect on "the role of racism and prejudice against Indigenous people in this result".

"To our people we say: do not shed tears. This rejection was never for others to issue. The truth is that rejection was always ours to determine. The truth is that we offered this recognition and it has been refused. We now know where we stand in this, our own country. Always was. Always will be."

The Indigenous Voice advocates said they would not rest long but would "pack up the Uluru Statement from the Heart. Fly our flags low. Talk not of recognition and reconciliation."

They would "re-gather our strength and resolve, and when we determine a new direction for justice and our rights, let us once again unite. Let us convene in due course to carefully consider our path forward."

Earlier on Saturday evening, Yes23 campaign director Dean Parkin delivered an emotional speech to a crowd of several hundred Yes volunteers at Wests Ashfield Leagues Club in Sydney's inner west. He addressed the Australians who "voted No with hardness in your hearts".



Emotional Yes supporters listen to Yes23 campaign leader Dean Parkin. *Wolter Peeters*

“Please understand that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have never wanted to take anything from you,” Parkin said. “All we have wanted was to join with you our Indigenous story, our Indigenous culture and not to take away or diminish what it is that you have, but to add to it, to strengthen it, to enrich it.”

“I would ask you in light of this result, if not tonight, if not in the next few days, but at some point, you find some peace in your own hearts towards us.”

Parkin also took aim at what he called “the single largest misinformation campaign that this country has ever seen” and MPs who joined the No camp and “waged a campaign, in my view very incorrectly and dishonestly, that this No vote would result in division in our country.

“It’s not enough to say that you were against division, you now have a solemn responsibility to back up those words in the next few days as we process this result, and in particular, when the parliament sits next week in Canberra, it is time to put the cudgels down,” Parkin said.

Before his speech, resignation filled the air as Voice supporters filed into the club's function room.

On muted TVs playing in the background, the ABC and Sky News beamed the early results they dreaded – [a thumping victory for the No campaign](#) – but few were watching, choosing instead to share a drink and swap stories from the hustings.

However, they rose to their feet in a standing ovation as prominent Yes campaigner [Thomas Mayo](#) took to the stage and declared the fight for better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would continue.

"This has been about justice. And it doesn't matter what happens tonight, if it is a No answer, then we're not lying down. We're not taking no for an answer, and we will continue," Mayo said. He praised the 70,000 volunteers who had mobilised for the Yes cause on voting day.



Prominent Yes campaigner Thomas Mayo addresses the crowd at the club. *Dominic Lorrimer*

"I really hope that everybody will keep walking with us. It's not just 70,000 people. What we'll see is millions of people saying Yes. And what we've

done is we brought Indigenous matters to the forefront of this country."

He may have been almost 1000 kilometres away in Brisbane, but Opposition Leader Peter Dutton was in the minds of those at the Yes23 event in Ashfield as they sheeted home blame to him and the Coalition before the result was announced.

"Peter Dutton has been dishonest to the Australian people. He has lied to the Australian people. The No campaign, their lies were exhausting themselves in the last few days," Mayo said.

"I really hope that when the analysis is done, win or lose, that that is exposed for all Australians to see. I hope there are repercussions ... That dishonesty should not be forgotten in our democracy by the Australian people."

Inner West Mayor Darcy Byrne, a long-time friend of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and former staffer in his electorate office, told the crowd that Dutton would be remembered as a wrecker of the referendum, giving an early taste of how the Labor faithful would seek to put their version of history.

"In the wake of his defeat at the Aston byelection, he decided to put his own political survival above the national interest. Division has been his goal and denigration his weapon of choice," Byrne said, as those gathered responded with chants of "shame".

"Peter Dutton walked out on the apology to the stolen generations. In 2023, he has sought to slam the door shut on the hopes of reconciliation."

There were no reflections on where the Yes campaign and government may have erred in their attempts to persuade voters of the merits of their cause. Instead, Byrne sought to place Albanese alongside the Labor giants who secured landmark progress on Indigenous rights.

"[Gough] Whitlam poured the sand into [Vincent] Lingiari's hands, [Bob] Hawke established ATSIC, [Paul] Keating spoke at Redfern and enacted

Mabo, [Kevin] Rudd apologised to the stolen generations.

“And now Anthony Albanese has had the personal and political courage to insist that after 235 years, after everything we’ve seen, that there must finally be a just and respectful settlement between the first inhabitants and our society as a whole,” he said.

Janet Rentz, a volunteer who letterboxed around Sydney’s inner west, said she had come to the event “to be with like-minded people and to grieve”. “I’m ashamed of my fellow Australians who have responded to vilification, misinformation and fear tactics,” she said.

Another volunteer, Anne Ryan, said the referendum result didn’t reflect her experience manning a booth in Sydney’s inner west earlier on Saturday, which had left her hopeful of a victory for the Yes vote.

“It’s upsetting, shocking. If anything, I thought we might have lost by a small amount,” Ryan said.

“It’s devastating to Indigenous people and for our nation.”

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