

# 'Have the courage to stand up': Voice split gets personal as Albanese rebukes Leeser

[Paul Sakka](#) March 27, 2023 — 7.25pm

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has demanded the opposition's Indigenous Affairs spokesman show the moral courage to back his long-held support for a Voice to parliament.

The prime minister, who has staked his political authority on the contentious referendum's success, underscored the growing partisan gulf over the reconciliation push when he pointed at Coalition frontbencher Julian Leeser during question time and urged him to support the proposed Indigenous advisory body, as Leeser advised on the design of the Voice as a lawyer before entering parliament.

"He should have the courage to stand up for the principled positions that he has historically taken on this issue and support Yes when it is put to the Australian people this year," Albanese said in parliament, adding that Indigenous leader Noel Pearson "nailed" Leeser in an opinion article this month.

"[He] has actually been involved in a deeper way in this process for longer than I have been. That is why he knows full well, he knows full well that some of the campaign that has attempted to draw questions where they simply are not there ... are disingenuous."

Responding to the personal critique, Leeser said he had always supported the Voice but was concerned about Albanese's handling of the referendum, which the Coalition believes has been secretive and hostile to input beyond a core group of Indigenous leaders, risking a devastating failure for national reconciliation efforts.

"The prime minister should not interpret questions about the Voice as

attacking the Voice. In this referendum, the prime minister should be building bridges not throwing stones," Leeser said in a written statement.



Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has demanded the opposition's Indigenous Affairs spokesman Julian Leeser (left) show the moral courage to back his long-held support for the Voice. *Alex Ellinghausen*

Albanese, who adopted a notably aggressive stance in the debate over the Voice on Monday, mocked Opposition Leader Peter Dutton for the low profile he has maintained since last Thursday, when he doubled down on criticisms of the Voice in response to the government's release of referendum wording, saying last Thursday that none of his questions had been answered.

"The leader of the opposition has broken his vow of silence today," Albanese said as Dutton yelled "answer the question", following Leeser's query about the Voice's ability to consult the Reserve Bank on interest rates.

The opposition has not yet declared its formal position on the Voice but has spent months asking questions about its operation, inviting accusations that it is deliberately talking down the Voice to harm Albanese.

The Liberals are unlikely to reach a formal position on the Voice at their party room meeting on Tuesday, raising the possibility they may not declare their stance until after the budget in May.

As Albanese emphasised to his caucus last week, the constitution has never been changed in a referendum without bipartisan support, highlighting the importance of the party's referendum battle lines being drawn before the vote, likely to be held in October.

The proposed design of the Voice, expected to be tabled in parliament this Thursday, would allow the body to give independent advice to the parliament and the government, and make proactive representations as well as respond to requests for advice.

Conservative critics are particularly alarmed that the body would be able to consult directly with executive government, which refers to ministers and the public service, as well as making representations to parliament.

Albanese also fired back at questions from journalists about whether the Voice would, in theory, advise a non-government party such as the Greens on a policy such as the safeguard mechanism, which the [Greens announced it would support](#) after a months-long negotiation with the government on climate mitigation.

"Of all the very strange questions I have been asked about the Voice, that's up there. You know, the Voice is about matters that directly affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. That's what it's about. And people shouldn't look for, on the Voice, distractions," Albanese said in a press conference.

Eminent constitutional lawyer Anne Twomey said the scope of the Voice was broader than Albanese had implied. The constitutional amendment revealed by Albanese last week limited the Voice to advising on matters "relating" to Indigenous Australians, which is slightly more expansive than the definition cited by Albanese.

However, Twomey said the notion that the Voice would have a say in

decisions with no particular relevance to Indigenous Australians was a "fantasy".

She said the Voice would have no legitimacy to advise on policies or decisions that have no specific relevance to Indigenous Australians, such as the RBA's interest rates decisions or the AUKUS deal. What would fall within the Voice's remit, she said, was a situation in which an AUKUS naval base was proposed near an Indigenous town.

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