

Part III

Contemporary Aboriginal Perspectives

Professor Larissa Behrendt

The campaign for the 1967 referendum highlighted the importance of ensuring equality for Aboriginal people. The posters showed a portrait of a black child and appealed to the electorate to give Aboriginal children the same opportunities that other Australian children enjoyed. In a country that has been reluctant to make changes to the Constitution, the 1967 referendum was an overwhelming success.

Forty years on, while much has improved, Aboriginal people still have poorer health, lower levels of education, higher unemployment and lower incomes than all other Australians. Clearly, the vision for a new era of opportunity and non-discrimination has not followed the constitutional change.

The referendum did two things: it allowed for Indigenous people to be included in the census and it altered the 'racism power' to allow federal parliament to make laws about Indigenous people. While at the time, this change was seen as an important tool in allowing the federal government to pass laws to assist Indigenous people, it has turned out that the power can also be used to repeal or limit the rights of Indigenous people as well. For example, native title can be legislated but also repealed; heritage protection legislation can be enacted but can also be repealed; the Racial Discrimination Act has been stopped from applying to some aspects of native title.

It is easy to see in hindsight that the changes were not as effective as it was hoped they would be but the referendum remains an important moment in Australian history. The real achievement was the way the referendum united people across the political spectrum. It showed the results of a successful, decade long 'hearts and minds' campaign and it became a high point in the relationship between Aboriginal people and all other Australians. While social justice for Aboriginal people did not follow, it was an important step in furthering the political agenda for a new generation of Aboriginal activists.

Kenny Laughton, author, Vietnam Veteran, former director of the Institute for Aboriginal Development

The 1967 Referendum in my opinion was significant for several reasons. Aboriginal people finally became 'visible' to mainstream white Australia; we were counted in the following census. We became political and the Referendum itself was significant because it was one of the very few in Australian history that were passed. A vote of 97% in favour would be unheard of nowadays. I suspect if the same question were asked today the figures would be different.

Yet despite Australia's overwhelming wealth, after more than ten years of the Coalition government being in power, Aboriginal people still languish at the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder in their own country. I'd like to see the day when the common people (both black and white) in this so called Commonwealth of Australia, actually get some of this wealth from the global economy that is supposedly making us all richer.

Dr Sue Gordon AM

We all know the purposes of the amendments in the *Constitution Alteration (Aboriginals) 1967* legislation. The Commonwealth's object was to co-operate with the States to ensure that together they acted in the best interests of the Aboriginal people of Australia. However, paternalism continued throughout Australia and I believe still exists in some parts of Australia today, with States and Territories still not acting in the best interests of the Aboriginal people. I believe the original intent has all but been forgotten.

Interestingly, my first job as a 16-year-old was with the old Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics in 1960 during a Census period and I had no idea that Aboriginal people, or Natives as we were called, were not included in the count. I was still a Ward of the State and subject to monitoring by the then Department of Native Welfare, having been forcibly removed from my mother in 1947.

So, where was I on 27 May 1967? I was employed at the Carnarvon Tracking Station as a teletype operator involved in Manned Space Flight Operations with the National Aeronautical and Space Administration (NASA). This job came about because of my Army training/service during 1960-64.

Bob Randall, traditional owner of Uluru, author, singer songwriter

When the campaign for the 1967 referendum was going on, it gave us all a hope that things could be better; both for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. We thought it meant sharing of stories and knowledge; a more equal and better distribution of Australia's wealth and resources.

But it hasn't happened, and that's particularly true in Central Australia. We're still so dependant upon the generosity of the Australian government; that is, at their mercy.

The referendum has achieved little: a promise never fulfilled, a hope never met, and a desire for improvement that has never reached.

Professor Mick Dodson

The 1967 referendum was a highly significant event in Australian constitutional history because it finally gave the Commonwealth power to make laws for Indigenous Australians. It also gave Indigenous people a great deal of hope that things would now improve and life would get better. I think the brave people who struggled to get the referendum through would be very disappointed that the changed constitution did not deliver as was expected by so many Australians. Too many national governments in the years since have repudiated the constitutional responsibility given them in 1967. We have made some little progress but sadly it has been piecemeal and appallingly slow. The saddest observation I think I can make is that I very much doubt whether such a referendum today would get the overwhelming support from the Australian people that it did in '67. I fear today it would not pass at all — that is the tragedy of 1967.