

***At the Forks: Where Indigenous and Human Rights Intersect***

Volume 5

Journal site: <https://ojs.lib.umanitoba.ca/index.php/forks>



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## **Combatting Mis- and Dis-information: Lessons from the Australian Voice**

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In October 2023, voters in both Australia and Manitoba, Canada went to the polls after having witnessed and/or participated in political campaigns that demonstrated the power of misinformation and disinformation, the diminishing role of news media, and heightened anti-Indigenous racism.<sup>2</sup> Divided by 11 days and a gigantic ocean, the outcome of the provincial election in Manitoba could not have looked more different from results in the constitutional referendum that took place in Australia. But while the political purposes and outcomes were exceedingly different, at their core, these two polities shared a historical political moment, and demonstrated that they share much more than a colonial history. It is at this historical moment – or at these forks – in which anti-Indigenous racism, mis- and disinformation,<sup>3</sup> party politics, settler colonial statecraft, media, and Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to acknowledge the people who helped guide this project. Special thanks to Helen Fallding for advising us, and walking us through the fragmented media in Australia, to Samara Hand and Micah Robertson for assistance in editing, and Laura Majendaagoz for their work on the Twitter (X) Essay.

<sup>2</sup> Bartley Kives, “Weaponized by PCs, sidelined by NDP: Indigenous concerns largely absent from Manitoba election”, *CBC News*, October 2, 2023. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitoba-election-indigenous-issues-1.6983954>; Dominic O’Sullivan, “Racism and democracy: why claims of ‘division by race’ in the NZ election and Voice referendum need challenging”, *The Conversation* September 19, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/racism-and-democracy-why-claims-of-division-by-race-in-the-nz-election-and-voice-referendum-need-challenging-213651>

<sup>3</sup> Misinformation is false information not intended to cause harm, whereas disinformation is false information intended to manipulate, cause harm or guide people in a certain direction. See Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, 2024, “How to identify misinformation, disinformation and malinformation,” <https://www.cyber.gc.ca/sites/default/files/misinformation-mesinformation-itsap.00.300-en.pdf>

peoples intersect, these Anglo-settler societies converged, and perhaps diverged (if only momentarily), as the votes were counted.

Manitoba's provincial election was dominated by atypical "gutter politics."<sup>4</sup> The Conservative Party's anti-Indigenous campaign ads included billboards, social media, and multi-page newspaper ads, as well as a last-ditch ad (resulting in widespread backlash) that encouraged voters to stand strong, and to "vote like no one is watching."<sup>5</sup> Thankfully the world was watching when Wabanakwut Kinew became Canada's first First Nations provincial Premier and the first Indigenous premier in Manitoba since 1887.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Australians voted in a constitutional referendum on the First Nations Voice to Parliament which would have recognized Indigenous peoples in the constitution and provided for the creation of an Indigenous body which could provide advice to Parliament. The Voice campaign was similarly characterized by a form of gutter politics that was not confined to party elite or advertisement campaigns. The masses were urged to 'be proud' and to actively participate in the referendum campaign online, in person, and at the ballot box. As such, the public not only became consumers of an extremely divisive campaign, but many also actively engaged in 'participatory disinformation.'<sup>7</sup>

One need not study anti-Indigenous racism, anti-EDI, anti-immigration, anti-Black, anti-2SLGBTQIA+ discourses, nor engage in qualitative or quantitative analysis, to understand how effective such political discourses or campaigns are in changing public sentiment and ultimately influencing voter behavior. If we simply open our eyes, scroll social media, or listen to conversations on the street corner or in the local coffee shop, we see the impact around us. Examples like the Australian referendum readily demonstrate dominant trends converging with, and exacerbating, long-standing settler-colonial denial, socio-political divisions, the normalization of anti-Indigenous racism, and the information divide which creates

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<sup>4</sup> Marsha Lederman, "By playing gutter politics, the Manitoba PCs deserved to lose" *Globe and Mail*, October 5, 2023. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-by-playing-gutter-politics-the-manitoba-pcs-deserved-to-lose/>

<sup>5</sup> Grace Anne Paizen, "Manitoba should have no space for hate: Dog whistles in provincial election campaign symptom of larger issue," *The Manitoban*, September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://themanitoban.com/2023/09/manitoba-should-have-no-space-for-hate/45684/>; Ian Froese, "PC ad encouraging Manitobans to vote like 'no one is watching' pulled within hours," *CBC News*, October 1, 2023. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/pc-advertisement-backlash-election-1.6983946>.

<sup>6</sup> Adele Perry, "What Wab Kinew's win in Manitoba reveals about the province's political history," *The Conversation*, October 4, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/what-wab-kinews-win-in-manitoba-reveals-about-the-provinces-political-history-214994>.

<sup>7</sup> Participatory misinformation occurs when misinformation is created or spread by audiences.

increasing vulnerability among voter bases. As we look towards the future, we suggest that the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum is an opportunity to reflect on the unbridled powers of mis- and disinformation and the manner in which this growing divide is impacting our abilities to deliberate truth or engage in meaningful discussions of issues and the political process, broadly speaking.

Acknowledging that this highly fragmented media ecosystem and the proliferation of mis- and disinformation in publications across legacy and digital platforms is having greater impacts at the ballot box and in our daily lived realities than ever before, we offer this paper as an intervention. This paper introduces, responds to, and reflects upon an existing intervention — a series of Twitter (X) threads posted over the summer of 2023 as a collaborative student-led project with Dr. Kiera L. Ladner’s comparative constitutional law and Indigenous politics research project. While this paper was intended for a 2023 publication as a brief introduction to the threads, it seemed to have a life of its own and became an unwieldy collaborative mashup, as is often the case on team projects, and subsequently sat on Ladner’s desk in multiple iterations. Reworked in the spring of 2025, this paper is meant to offer a primarily Canadian audience – one dealing with the impact of mis- and disinformation at family dinners, in classrooms, and in boardrooms — a comparative vantage and analysis which situates misinformation within settler colonialism and demonstrates how the Australian constitutional referendum was implicated by mainstream media perpetuating harmful anti-Indigenous rhetoric. It serves as a reminder that Canadians can learn from our kin across the world that access to reliable, trustworthy information is more pressing than ever before.

## **Creating Understanding**

To truly understand Indigenous politics in Australia, one must understand the impact of national narratives, and how myths or stories once told by statesmen were woven into the fabric of the nation.<sup>8</sup> They played an essential role in framing how the vast majority of citizens have understood its past, present, and future.<sup>9</sup> Like Canada, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the United States, Australia is an Anglo settler state with a shared history as former British colonies. What is fascinating

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<sup>8</sup> Katjã Lafferty. “Story by story, Canada’s news media built Indigenous oppression. *The Tyee*, published June 21, 2021. <https://thetyee.ca/Analysis/2021/06/21/Story-By-Story-Canada-News-Media-Built-Indigenous-Oppression/>.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Pryor. *Constitutions: Writing Nations, Reading Difference* (Birkbeck Law Press 2007).

however, is that this shared history, and Australia's status as a colonized and colonizing nation, has been categorically denied by the state (politically and legally) through what is often described as a national amnesia defined and created through a mythologized exceptionalism.<sup>10</sup>

As was the case for Canada, the United States, and Aotearoa, sovereign Indigenous territories in Australia were claimed for the British Crown by explorers using instruments of international law (including the papal doctrines known as the Doctrine of Discovery). Despite international doctrine and the Crown instructing its authorities to pursue consent (treaty or a 'just war' were legally required for territorial acquisition and settlement in lands already occupied by 'natives' or those having already been discovered by a Christian/civilized nation/crown), British authorities did not proceed as such. Instead, British authorities claimed Australia as Terra Nullius (empty land or land belonging to no one) and established penal colonies for its undesirables. Over time a "retroactive" national narrative or origin story was created which situates Captain James Cook as having discovered an empty land and the arrival of the 'First Fleet' (of convicts) in 1788 as the founding of Australia as a "racially 'pure' nation"; albeit a 'white nation' manufactured and maintained through immigration policies developed even after the creation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 and the federation of six British colonies.<sup>11</sup>

That is to say, Australia is legally imagined as a white nation in an empty land. More importantly, this 'manufactured truth,' itself a form of misinformation, storied the nation — establishing the roots of the imagined nation.<sup>12</sup> As a 'constitutional narrative,' it is woven into the nation's law and politics, thereby enabling disinformation to perpetually define and confine the nation and its development (as it does to date).

From the outset, or the arrival of 'settlers' in 1788, the humanity of Indigenous peoples was denied. Viewed as subhumans, there was no need to negotiate treaties with Indigenous peoples nor recognize them as having any rights to property or their own humanity. When Australia was created from these former penal colonies in 1901, Australian leadership did not rid themselves of these shackles. Instead, section 127 of the Constitution explicitly excluded Indigenous peoples from being

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<sup>10</sup> Henry Reynolds. *Why Weren't We Told? A Personal Search for the Truth About Our History*, (Penguin Books Australia, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Pryor. *Constitutions*, p. 125-132.

<sup>12</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso Books, 1983).

counted as ‘people’ by the Commonwealth or any state, thereby denying them access to citizenship or government services.<sup>13</sup>

By the 1960s, the winds of time were having an impact on Australia. Against a backdrop of anti-Apartheid protests in Australia, the 1960s brought a growing public awareness of Indigenous inequality, the gradual dismantling of the white Australia policy (loosening immigration and extending basic civic rights to Indigenous peoples and non-Europeans), and a state of concern within political arenas that the treatment of Indigenous peoples might draw international attention and dampen Australia’s reputation.<sup>14</sup> Such societal shifts culminated in the nation-wide constitutional referendum on May 27, 1967 in which 90.77% of Australians voted in favour of amending Australia’s constitution (the highest approval rate to date) to remove the anti-Indigenous, ‘discriminatory’ provisions (section 127) and to extend the federal law-making authority in section 51 to include Indigenous peoples.

The 1967 referendum campaign’s political messaging of equality and assimilation certainly did not alter – nor did it challenge — the foundational national narrative of Australia. In fact, the referendum may have served to strengthen and reinforce the terra nullius mythology which remained largely unchallenged politically and legally, and untarnished within the hearts and minds of the nation until 1992, when Australia’s High Court was forced to confront – and in turn, forced the nation to confront – a *very* different narrative in the landmark Aboriginal title case of *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* 1992. In its judgement, the Court acknowledged pre-existing peoples’ law in their construction of Aboriginal Title and debunked Australia’s origin story, but it also “recognized the threat that this ‘new’ narrative might potentially have to the ‘old’ hegemonic narrative of Australian history ... [it did] not want to undermine current institutions.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, as is evident in the judgement and the reactions of politicians and academics at the time, Mabo represents ‘a foundational moment’ or a ‘new foundation’ from which to correct the past and build towards a different future, albeit one that would ‘not fragment the

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<sup>13</sup> Pryor. *Constitutions*, p. 131. One should also note that s. 51 explicitly denied the commonwealth government any ability to pass laws for Indigenous peoples whilst “states retained the ability to legislate for Aboriginals within their jurisdictions”.

<sup>14</sup> Brian Attwood, and Andrew Markus, “(The) 1967 (referendum) and all that: Narrative and myth, aborigines and Australia,” *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 29, no. 111, 1998, pp. 267–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10314619808596073>; Russell McGregor, *Indifferent Inclusion: Aboriginal People and the Australian Nation*. 1st ed. Canberra Act: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2012. Pg: 100-01. doi:10.3316/informit.9780855757793.

<sup>15</sup> Pryor. *Constitutions*, p. 152

body of the nation’ or ‘break its skeleton’ (such that it grounds Indigenous rights in the common law).

Looking back, however, it is clear to see that whilst many tried, no one was truly able to seize the moment to build upon this new foundation thereby giving meaning to Indigenous legal and political orders that were suppressed (yet within which vested any claims to Aboriginal title in common law) or to Indigenous rights claims more generally. Rather than ‘reimagining’ the settler-state, liberals advocated for “a ‘healed’ or ‘reconciled’ nation” whilst conservatives called for “the maintenance of ‘one nation’.”<sup>16</sup> More than thirty years after this case, not much has changed. The sanctimonious power of the old hegemonic narratives has been sustained, and settler state/status quo maintained. A modicum of change has occurred because of initiatives such as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the Bringing Them Home report, the *Native Title Act*, and the national Closing the Gap Agreement, and the meaning of reconciliation has shifted over time to include political matters like the relationship, treaty, and political participation. But the political divide has nonetheless remained constant when it comes to views on reconciliation, and unity opposed to division dominating political discourse.

Historical amnesia has remained common in politics, media, and among the ‘average Joe’, though the amnesia often takes different forms and can be analyzed using various lenses. For example, anti-Indigenous commentary such as, ‘they are going to steal my back yard’ became prevalent in social scenes, on community poster-boards and some news outlets post-Mabo as governments forged Native Title policies and attempted to shore up their legal orders and constitutional narratives in the courts and the legislatures. These messages are now viral with cross-platform posting and tagging across all forms of media and are increasingly studied as mis- and disinformation within a fragmented media ecosystem. As is abundantly clear when considering the dominant pre-Mabo narratives of Australia’s origin with tales of terra nullius and peaceful settlement, disinformation is nothing new. It is fundamentally tied to settler colonialism – past, present, and future.

## **The 2023 Referendum**

Without any constitutional recognition or footholds from which to ground their struggles, Indigenous activists like Eddie Mabo used whatever means possible and

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 156

every window of opportunity to create a different future. Alongside these other pursuits, Indigenous peoples have been calling for Constitutional recognition since William Cooper petitioned the British King in 1937. While most Prime Ministers since Malcom Fraser (1975-1983) have at least floated (if not studied and/or proposed) a makarrata/compact, treaty and constitutional amendment, it was Prime Minister Julia Gillard who finally took a giant step in 2010 and committed her government to pursuing a referendum and appointed the Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders to study the matter.<sup>17</sup>

As the Expert Panel's final report specifies, both their consultations and recommendations were confined and defined by four principles:

**contribute to a more unified and reconciled nation; be of benefit to and accord with the wishes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples; be capable of being supported by an overwhelming majority of Australians from across the political and social spectrums; and be technically and legally sound.**<sup>18</sup>

It is not surprising that from the outset, there was no room to fully address the competing constitutional narratives that Mabo enabled through an acknowledgement of Indigenous rights, let alone nationhood or a new relationship. But this was a near impossible task given the still prevailing views as to how those two opposing narratives should be addressed with liberals advocating for a “reconciled nation” and conservatives’ attempting to maintain the “one nation” through a slightly reimagined status quo.<sup>19</sup> Despite the efforts of the Expert Panel and at least three government sponsored reports and/or public engagements which followed, the task proved impossible. In 2017, the government’s Referendum Council took a completely different approach, and held a series of deep dialogues with Indigenous peoples across the country, culminating in a National Constitutional Convention at Uluru. From this convention came the Uluru Statement from the Heart – a simple, single-page invitation “to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.”<sup>20</sup> That invite begins from the vantage of the land and Indigenous sovereignty and a vision of a better future through “substantive constitutional change and structural reform” (specifically, a

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<sup>17</sup> Referendum Council, *Final Report of the Referendum Council* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2027), p. iii [https://ulurustatemdev.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Referendum\\_Council\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](https://ulurustatemdev.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Referendum_Council_Final_Report.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Referendum Council. *Final Report of the Referendum Council*, p. xi.

<sup>19</sup> Pryor. *Constitutions*, p. 156

<sup>20</sup> Uluru Statement from the Heart. 26 May 2017, <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/view-the-statement/>.

constitutionally entrenched Indigenous Voice, a Makarrata or treaty, and a Makarrata Commission for Truth Telling) through which “this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia’s nationhood.”<sup>21</sup>

But the government of the day refused the invite issued at Uluru and did so unequivocally when Prime Minister Scott Morrison rejected the Uluru Statement from the Heart upon its release in 2018. But the invitation issued at Uluru was not withdrawn. Instead, it was accepted by Anthony Albanese in May 2022 during the federal election campaign when he promised a referendum on the First Nations Voice to Parliament if he became Prime Minister. With an approval rating of 65%, a successful referendum looked promising. That was, until it was plagued by ‘gutter politics’, misinformation and an announcement that the opposition leader, Peter Dutton would stand in opposition. The situation only got worse. By the time the votes were being counted, 60.06 % opposed the Voice.<sup>22</sup>

Shifting approval ratings and a wide range of political perspectives, discourses, and debates are normal in the game of politics. This is particularly true in settler nations like Australia where popular understandings of colonialism and the nation itself are contested and expressed through radically non-ideological, incommensurable positionalities. National and constitutional narratives matter. This is especially true in situations where the validity of the national narrative and thus, the legitimacy of institutions are contested. This political divide can be expected given the persistence of Australia’s founding narrative within law and politics. But these are not ‘normal times.’ As Graham explains,

**While several factors explain the rapid shift of support over such a short period of time – lack of bipartisan support, entrenched social and economic inequality, and enduring racism in Australian society – perhaps the most defining characteristic of the referendum was the volume of misinformation and conspiracy theories circulating during its lead-up.<sup>23</sup>**

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> ABC News. Map of Voice referendum results by electorate. 2023.  
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/elections/referendum/2023/results/map>.

<sup>23</sup> Timothy Graham. “Exploring a post-truth referendum: Australia’s Voice to Parliament and the management of attention on social media.” *Media International Australia*, online first (2024).  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X241267756>





A poster of the Yes campaign. Image credit: Dr. Kiera Ladner

In short, the fragmented, “high-choice digital hybrid landscape of 2023”<sup>24</sup> allowed racism to become normalized<sup>25</sup> and disinformation to explode to the extent that *The Guardian* proclaimed it “disinformation” and compared it to “Steve Bannon’s strategy of flooding the zone.”<sup>26</sup> As the *Guardian* journalist, Van Badham, goes on to explain, in the lead-up to the vote, disinformation took over the Internet and the public discourse. The far-right created “alternative information ecologies” where multiple narratives, no matter the degree of truth, were claimed by Australians across the country, from dentists and musicians, to white supremacists and anti-vaxxers, mobilizing confusion and disinformation using a shared set of talking points circulated within certain online communities, which fused community members’ paranoias with the “no” cause.<sup>27</sup> As a result, Australia was simply flooded with disinformation spreading Mabo-era fears like “[Indigenous peoples] are going to steal your

backyard,”<sup>28</sup> and conspiracy theories like “the United Nations (UN) would take over Australia if the Yes campaign was successful ... [allowing it to] steal land and restrict individual rights.”<sup>29</sup>

But unlike the flooding of Australia with disinformation which occurred following the Mabo decision of 1992, the highly fragmented information ecosystem of 2023 enabled messages of fear, hate, division, and democratic destabilization to be

<sup>24</sup> Andrea Carson et al. “Voiceless: a multi-level analysis of the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum outcome and its implications: an introduction.” *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 59, no.3. (2024): 308-313 p.4.

<sup>25</sup> Ian Anderson et al. “Racism and the 2023 Australian constitutional referendum.” *The Lancet* 402, no. 10411 (2023): 1400-1403.

<sup>26</sup> Van Badham, “‘Disinformania’ has taken over the internet - can ‘no’ voice opportunists maintain control of an unleashed far right flank?” *The Guardian*, September 27, 2023.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/sep/27/voice-to-parliament-referendum-disinformania-no-campaign-australia-far-right>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Graham. “Exploring a post-truth referendum.”

disseminated across platforms through headlines, full-page ads, tweets, posts, and 24-hour television channels dedicated to the Voice. This flooding of mis- and disinformation across platforms was also aided by the re-activation of covid-freedom or anti-vax networks, social media algorithms, shifting public opinion on the trustworthiness of legacy media and government, and multiple instances of foreign interference. ABC News was able to demonstrate widespread Chinese interference in September 2023, while two US Christian conservative firms (with Australian divisions) partnered with the Advance Australia on its ‘No’ campaign, which created multiple sites – including one presenting itself as an independent news source – targeted towards different audiences, aiming to spread misinformation across social and legacy media platforms, and across demographics using targeted messaging.<sup>30</sup>

As a research team working on an ongoing research project on comparative Indigenous constitutional politics, we watched this play out from the vantage of the Canadian province of Manitoba with students tracking the referendum through content, framing, and reactions across multiple platforms in the “high-choice digital hybrid landscape.” Consistent with the growing literature on social media’s impact on political campaigns, our research showed that the highly fragmented ecosystem contributed to the increasingly polarized public, which in turn influenced the way the referendum was experienced by people, particularly Indigenous peoples. While we were watching this happen, others were living this experience. Thus, when appeals were made on social media to enlist others to provide fact checking and to tackle disinformation campaigns, three of the undergraduate students on the research team posted a thread on X as a Mamawipawin team project.<sup>31</sup>

## **Our Response: Engaging Misinformation and Disinformation**

It should be noted that though there were multiple perspectives (and levels of understanding), we did not see the Voice as inherently divisive, but instead viewed media fragmentation, misinformation, and disinformation as perpetuating anti-Indigenous rhetoric, and contributing to the political polarization of the Australian

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<sup>30</sup> Josh Butler, “Indigenous voice: no campaign’s deep links to conservative Christian politics revealed,” July 12, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/jul/13/indigenous-voice-no-campaigns-deep-links-to-conservative-christian-politics>; Shireen Morris and Sarah Sorial, “‘Abject failure’: why Australia’s scheme to curb foreign influence doesn’t work and can’t be fixed,” April 29, 2024, <https://theconversation.com/abject-failure-why-australias-scheme-to-curb-foreign-influence-doesnt-work-and-cant-be-fixed-228292>

<sup>31</sup> This project was developed in July 2023 and led by Undergraduate Research Award Recipients Catherine St. John and Gillian Brown, in collaboration with Laura Majendaagoz with considerable support and assistance from Kiera L. Ladner, Hope Ace, and Helen Falding, with comments and support from Micah Robertson and Samara Hand.

public. This is the position from which three students — Gillian Brown, Catherine St. John, and Laura Majendaagoz— envisioned an X thread as a response. Whilst the three are now in graduate programs, at the time of writing they were all senior undergraduates who were new to the Mamawipawin team. As the project evolved, it became a multi-thread twitter essay consisting of more than 100 tweets and 8 threads which challenged eight major myths and misconceptions from a comparative vantage. As the project grew, its authors shifted with Brown and St. John drafted most of the threads, and Ladner and Ace acted as mentors, fact-checkers, editors, and even co-authors.

On October 14, 2023, the Voice constitutional referendum was declared failed within minutes. Indigenous leadership called for a week of silence recognizing the enormous impact that the campaign and the rejection had on Australia’s Indigenous community. A year later, a post on the Australian Human Right’s Commission website by Katie Kiss, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commission, stated:

**After more than 200 years of colonisation, many First Nations Australians feel more disillusioned than ever and rejected in their own lands. The impact of this rejection has been absolutely extreme on our people: our hearts, our minds and our souls.**

**The Voice ... was marked by misinformation, disinformation and racism. It weaved division and disunity into an already fragile social fabric.**

**At its worst, the referendum campaign involved personal attacks and perpetuated racial stereotypes. Many of us experienced attacks from extremists who were emboldened to bring their ugly and unacceptable behaviour into the public domain.**

**... Ironically, despite the referendum’s failure, an ANU study conducted soon after found that 87 per cent of voters said it is important for First Nations Peoples to have a say in matters that affect them.<sup>32</sup>**

Despite the Australian National University study, if the referendum were to happen today, we fear that the situation would only be worse given that disinformation has continued to escalate and exacerbate disunity, racism, transphobia, and sexism, as

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<sup>32</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, “The year our Voice broke: the fallout from the failed referendum,” October 14, 2024. <https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/opinions/year-our-voice-broke-fallout-failed-referendum-0>

is evident in the near-daily examples of cross-platform flooding of information. It is also evident in the multiple elections that Elon Musk has tried to influence since his takeover of X by promoting misinformation, censoring criticism, and revoking protections previously put in place against disinformation and propaganda.<sup>33</sup> The reality is such that the digital ecosystem has been greatly impacted by the 2024 U.S. election and Trump's second presidential term, allowing for further manipulation and erosion of truth. Beginning with X and spreading to Meta and beyond, machine-based and professional fact checking (and labelling of false information) on social media has largely been removed and replaced by voluntary fact-checkers and community-generated notes which are shared based upon an algorithm which filters the audience to whom such messages are shared.<sup>34</sup> As if the continued presence of mis- and disinformation and the absence of labels were not enough of an issue, actual coverage of news by journalists on social media has not been available in Canada since 2023.

As the use of social media and news media continues to polarize the public, there is a need for robust fact-checking and improved media literacy to counteract the divisive effects of misinformation and disinformation and ensure that our democratic processes are informed by accurate and respectful dialogue. The remainder of this paper turns now to engage with three intersecting points of analysis that defined this project for Brown and St. John: the importance of news media and of understanding the highly fragmented news media ecosystem; building awareness and understanding the rise of misinformation; and understanding how each of these is shaped by — and remains active in maintaining and reshaping — the settler colonial context.

When it comes to polarization, the Voice to Parliament referendum campaign is not an outlier in Australian politics. Australian politics is extremely polarized. This is due in part to the country's news media. Roughly 52 to 59 per cent of the country's news media is owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp Australia; making the owner of the United States' Fox News the most powerful news organization in the country.<sup>35</sup> Like its American counterpart, Murdoch media outlets outwardly proclaim they provide a conservative position. These political leanings become more

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<sup>33</sup> Miah Hammond-Errey. "Elon Musk's Twitter is Becoming a Sewer of Disinformation." *Foreign Policy*, July 15, 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/15/elon-musk-twitter-blue-checks-verification-disinformation-propaganda-russia-china-trust-safety/>.

<sup>34</sup> Chris Vallance. "Meta is ditching fact checkers for X-style community notes. Will they work?" BBC News, January 25, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4g93nvrzd7o>.

<sup>35</sup> Senate of Australia, Environment and Communications References Committee, *Media Diversity in Australia* (Canberra, AUS: Environment and Communications References Committee, 2021), p. 16.

pronounced during election times or in the anticipation of major government decisions.<sup>36</sup> This was readily evident in Sky News' coverage of the Voice referendum such that it consistently portrayed the Voice to Parliament as racist toward white Australians, divisive, and ineffective.

David McKnight argues in his article "Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation: A Media Institution with a Mission" that Murdoch newspapers use their influence to advance specific long-term right-wing ideological beliefs.<sup>37</sup> News Corp positions other non-Murdoch news sites as biased, leaning towards the left. The *Australian*, one News Corp outlet and the country's largest national newspaper, frequently alleges that the publicly funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has a liberal bias to give its own content more credibility.<sup>38</sup> Murdoch-owned outlets perpetuate the idea that consumers should be skeptical of a "liberal elite" that owns and influences the non-right-wing media. News Corp positions itself as the voice of the "working class," and consistently encourages right-wing populist sentiment.<sup>39</sup> Combined with increasing rates of media illiteracy, the conditions necessary for Murdoch's media to thrive have been met. The coverage of the Voice referendum in Australia was no exception. The News Corp Australian-owned Sky News, the *Australian* and the *Courier Mail* consistently portrayed the Voice to Parliament as divisive, ineffective and racist toward white Australians.

News outlets play a vital role in the functioning of a healthy democracy. Good journalism informs the public, giving citizens information that they might not otherwise be aware of so that they can make informed decisions and hold institutions to account. Beyond News Corp's biases, another issue is the sheer scale and spread of Murdoch media outlets. The monopoly it holds over the market means that even the influence of its outlets' is oversized given that stories are automatically amplified by other outlets. While this might seem like a small issue, it enables News Corp publications to readily share and to amplify misinformation across a network and across platforms.

While News Corp's monopoly and amplification abilities define Australia's news media ecosystem, it is important to understand that this operates within, is defined by, and helps to maintain settler colonialism. Settler colonial nation states such as

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<sup>36</sup> Senate of Australia, "Media Diversity in Australia," p. 90-3.

<sup>37</sup> David McKnight, "Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation: A Media Institution with a Mission," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 30, no. 3 (2010): 304.

<sup>38</sup> David McKnight, *Murdoch's Politics: How One Man's Thirst for Wealth and Power Shape Our World* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), p. 32.

<sup>39</sup> McKnight, "Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation," p. 311.

Canada, the United States, and Australia, continue to see the impact that conservative media ownership has on social issues such as Indigenous rights and sovereignty. As conservative media perpetuates the post-Mabo, post-white Australia, mythologized identity of one nation or one Australia, they do so in a manner that presents settler myths and the national narrative as exceedingly neutral and as having no ties to misinformation, past, present or future. We need only to mention ‘Springfield’ to truly understand just how it is that right-wing media tried to transform myth into fact, or to render the myth neutral, remaking it as truth through the heavy rollout of disinformation. This is to suggest truth can be created, and facts are neutral and trustworthy. These narratives are then continuously framed and perpetuated in mainstream newspapers, which historically has reflected the social order of white male elites.<sup>40</sup> Conservative talking points are consistently platformed in many newspapers, not just News Corp-owned ones, while attempting to seem unbiased, crafting a narrative that platforms “both sides.”<sup>41</sup> However, on several issues, including Indigenous rights, framing arguments as if both sides have equally strong arguments is disingenuous at best. In Canada, while the news media are not concentrated in the hands of one corporation to the same degree, there are still issues with media bias when it comes to ownership; especially when concerning conservative-leaning media company Postmedia Network Inc. which owns a large percentage of newspapers in the country.<sup>42</sup>

The coverage of the Voice to Parliament was no different than Australian Murdoch outlets’ coverage of climate change in the lead-up to the referendum, particularly on Sky News Australia, which was found by the Australian Centre of Independent Journalism to be focused on debate rather than scientific and public consensus,<sup>43</sup> publishing “both sides,” including climate change skepticism, which effectively misrepresented facts and public understanding of climate change. Similarly to News Corp’s coverage of climate change, its coverage of the Voice validated what many white people wanted to hear, reinforcing colonial misinformation centred around Indigenous communities. Misinformation and disinformation were found to

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<sup>40</sup> Cristina Azocar, *News Media and the Indigenous Fight for Federal Recognition* (New York: Lexington Books, 2022), p. 38.

<sup>41</sup> Theodore L. Glasser. “Newsworthy accusations and the privilege of neutral reporting.” *Communication Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1980).

<sup>42</sup> See Marc Edge. *The Postmedia Effect: How Vulture Capitalism is Wrecking Our News* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2023).

<sup>43</sup> Wendy Bacon, “Sceptical Climate Part 2: Climate Science in Australian Newspapers” (Australia: The Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, 2013), p. 19, <https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/Sceptical-Climate-Part-2-Climate-Science-in-Australian-Newspapers.pdf>

have influenced the result of the Voice referendum in large part.<sup>44</sup> In the lead-up to the Voice referendum, every day, multiple times a day, the network released video clips on its website that featured hosts talking about the Voice negatively, often with inflammatory headlines that, sometimes, did not clearly distinguish the opinions of its hosts or guests from its coverage marked as news.<sup>45</sup> News Corp outlets platformed enough mis- and disinformation about the Voice, its advocates, and its competitors that it likely contributed to shifting the nation's undecided voters towards the political right.

During the lead-up to the Voice to Parliament referendum, Sky News's coverage of the Voice and of Indigenous issues also led to distrust in fact-checkers and in other information sources like the ABC, which allowed for the continued



A territorial acknowledgement poster from the City of Sydney. Image credit: Dr. Kiera Ladner

<sup>44</sup> Andrea Carson, Rebecca Strating, and Simon Jackman. "Why did the Voice referendum fail? We crunched the data and found six reasons," *The Conversation*, May 1, 2024, <https://theconversation.com/why-did-the-voice-referendum-fail-we-crunched-the-data-and-found-6-reasons-228383333>

<sup>45</sup> For more research on this topic see, for example: Andrew Clennell, "Liberal MPs 'believe' Peter Dutton should've given them a free vote on the Voice," posted May 16, 2023, Sky News, 1:12, <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/voice-to-parliament/liberal-mps-believe-peter-dutton-shouldve-given-them-a-free-vote-on-the-voice/video/ac5ba207bae97e096417f699f85c9052>; Patrick Hannaford, "'Madness': Sky News host Amanda Stoker accuses Rio Tinto of 'hypocrisy' after 'virtue signalling' on Indigenous Voice to Parliament," posted May 10, 2023 Sky News (Australia), <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/voice-to-parliament/madness-sky-news-host-amanda-stoker-accuses-rio-tinto-of-hypocrisy-after-virtue-signalling-on-indigenous-voice-to-parliament/news-story/7cbe17a417c42a5fa4db99aacdc289ee>; Sky News, "Most Australians are too worried about paying bills to care for the Voice," posted May 31, 2023, Sky News, 5:23, <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/politics/most-australians-are-too-worried-about-paying-bills-to-care-for-the-voice/video/37617835c456960f2140b5ff200bc45a>

Here, the news article is a Sky News Host's opinion: <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/voice-to-parliament/madness-sky-news-host-amanda-stoker-accuses-rio-tinto-of-hypocrisy-after-virtue-signalling-on-indigenous-voice-to-parliament/news-story/7cbe17a417c42a5fa4db99aacdc289ee>

In this one, the headline is clearly editorializing by saying they're exceeding their power:

<https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/voice-to-parliament/victorian-barrister-reveals-culture-of-fear-preventing-lawyers-opposing-voice-to-parliament-says-bar-council-exceeding-its-power/news-story/2841589085b6bbb094e1acf34f589fe5>

Note the description in this article: <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/voice-to-parliament/liberal-mps-believe-peter-dutton-shouldve-given-them-a-free-vote-on-the-voice/video/ac5ba207bae97e096417f699f85c9052>

Just for context, this video, which is marked as opinion, has similar wording in it with the above description, <https://www.skynews.com.au/opinion/rita-panahi/nsw-coalition-mps-to-have-freedom-to-campaign-yes-or-no-to-voice/video/485bb498718003d4a10fe285f491a07b>

perpetuation of mis- and disinformation.<sup>46</sup> One study of public opinion following the referendum found that respondents that identified as right-wing on the political spectrum were more likely to view fact-checkers as untrustworthy.<sup>47</sup> It is necessary to note, however, that the majority of dialogue in the media concerning the referendum dealt with fact. The misinformation was largely perpetuated on X, Reddit, and broadcasters such as Sky News.<sup>48</sup>

Disinformation, particularly negative agendas set by political elites, is attractive to the public.<sup>49</sup> A major issue that perpetuates this is an outdated media strategy that tries to balance simplistic ideas of objectivity and impartiality in a political environment where one side makes baseless claims without being held to account,<sup>50</sup> such as the case of the Voice to Parliament, and claims by politicians that the voting process is rigged, or that colonialism had positive effects on Indigenous Peoples.<sup>51</sup> Often, the perpetuation of misinformation can be observed both in Australia and in the United States through a phenomenon that Andrea Carson et al. refers to as “participatory disinformation.”<sup>52</sup> The disinformation cycle begins with capitalist elites, and audiences respond by creating false or misleading stories that reinforce the narrative set by that politician, who, in turn, reinforces it themselves. There becomes a spiral of disinformation, which, while small, has the opportunity to grow out of proportion, in large part due to news sources like the Murdoch-owned media. Both in Australia and the U.S., Sky News’s accusations of bias against third party fact-checkers reached an audience of 3.75 million people on YouTube,<sup>53</sup> while at the same time perpetuating false claims about the length and contents of the Uluru Statement.<sup>54</sup> These reinforcements contribute to the fostering of a right-wing echo chamber, one that expands into the larger population as a result of social media.

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<sup>46</sup> Andrea Carson et al., *Influencers and Messages: Analysing the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum Campaign*, (Melbourne: La Trobe University, 2024), p. 31.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Denis Muller, “How did the media perform on the Voice referendum? Let’s talk about truth-telling and impartiality,” *Conversation*, Oct. 15, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/how-did-the-media-perform-on-the-voice-referendum-lets-talk-about-truth-telling-and-impartiality-214961>.

<sup>51</sup> see Sarah Basford Cales, “AEC hits back after Peter Dutton suggests voice referendum rules are ‘rigged’,” *Guardian*, August 25, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/aug/25/indigenous-voice-to-parliament-referendum-aec-poll-unfairness-claims-rejected>; Paul Sakkal, “Price says colonialism has been good for Indigenous Australians,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney, Australia), September 14, 2023, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/price-says-colonialism-has-been-good-for-indigenous-australians-20230914-p5e4lz.html>

<sup>52</sup> Carson et al., *Influencers and Messages*, p. 29.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid p. 31.

<sup>54</sup> Denis Muller, “How did the media perform on the Voice referendum?”



In a media landscape like Australia's, it is difficult to rely on mainstream news outlets as a source of information when it comes to social and political issues. Our research team's social media scans found that X was overrun by posts by Sky News sharing its videos and links. Despite a wide range of posts by the "Yes" group and its supporters, Sky News and posts by other Murdoch outlets, along with public supporters and representatives of the "No" camp, garnered more engagement. In addition, a study published just before the referendum examined platforms' processes for vetting paid political ads and checking them for misinformation. They found that while Facebook and TikTok had some limited protections in place for combatting misinformation, and did reject some ads depending on certain factors, X did not require self-identification for political ads, and the platform approved fifteen ads that contained misinformation.<sup>55</sup> This is a clear indication that the fact-checking capacities of social media sites can contribute to a significant weakening of the nation's electoral protections and integrity.

The problem, however, goes far beyond fact checking and vetting political ads given the prevalence of foreign interference in the Voice campaign. In 2025, there is an increasing awareness of Musk's propensity to interfere in political campaigns using his financial resources, ability to modify his platform, and manipulate algorithms to amplify certain voices over others, or misinformation and/or disinformation campaigns, along with his propensity to use his own account to influence voters. In the case of the Voice to Parliament campaign in 2023, a former X employee who had been responsible for monitoring misinformation warned that "Musk's takeover has made the social media platform increasingly vulnerable to foreign governments and extremists trying to influence the Voice to Parliament referendum. ... [As X] was doing almost nothing under Mr. Musk's ownership to stop lies spreading among its users."<sup>56</sup>

## Reflections

We developed this project in 2023 around the Voice referendum in Australia because we saw a need to fight against the widely circulating myths and

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<sup>55</sup> Rhys Farthing, Alice Dawkins, and Taylor Gese. "How do platforms handle electoral misinformation in paid-for advertising?" *Analysis & Policy Observatory*, September 24, 2023. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2023-09/apo-nid324443.pdf> page 2

<sup>56</sup> Pat McGrath, Kevin Nguyen and Michael Workman. "Voice to Parliament referendum 'prime target' for foreign interference on Elon Musk's X, former executive warns." *ABC News*, September 19, 2023. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-30/voice-to-parliament-misinformation-elon-musk-x/102912548>

misinformation, perpetuated on behalf of politicians, lobby groups, and the Australian public on the very platforms that amplified the myths in the first place. We continued because the situation that gave us concern during the Voice remains, meaning that we continue to see a need to foster understanding of the highly fragmented news media ecosystem, to build awareness of the rise and prevalence of mis- and disinformation and to understand how both continue to be shaped by and to reproduce settler colonialism.

With the public mobilizing and perpetuating participatory disinformation, driven by prominent politicians and elites, we aimed to combat and counter the eight most prominent and damaging myths. Our goal was to break through the echo chamber of participatory disinformation that circulated and reinforced harmful ideas about the Voice and about Indigenous Peoples. Our counter-initiative garnered minimal engagement in comparison with prominent posts in both camps, but nearly all comments on the project were on behalf of those critical of the Voice.

Whilst we were unable to break through the echo chamber of participatory disinformation, this also means that we did not serve as a significant source of amplification or participatory disinformation. But in saying that, we point to a growing literature on countering the spread of misinformation on social media, particularly that which seek to develop AI and/or group-oriented strategies which account for participatory disinformation.<sup>57</sup> Further, whilst our initiative was unable to influence the results of the referendum on its own, we also recognize that the odds of the referendum were stacked given the enormity of the challenge posed by over 200 years of a national narrative that denies Indigenous peoples' humanity, history, language, collective rights, legal order, and agency or its contemporary manifestation in the competing visions or discourses of reconciliation and one nation. To combat this, we must understand Australia's national narrative and with it, the interrelationship between settler colonialism and misinformation in this context. We must realize that the misinformation present in the "no" campaign also would have been appealing to white Australians who do not wish to confront the realities of colonialism and the impact that structural and personal racism has on the lives of Indigenous peoples in Australians. Viewed in this light, the "participatory disinformation" framework can be applied to ways in which settler colonialism tries to maintain the ignorance of the general populace, whilst

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<sup>57</sup> Canada Foundation for Innovation. "Taking aim at online hate and fake news." January 12, 2024. <https://www.innovation.ca/projects-results/research-stories/new-ai-countermeasures-misinformation>. See also for example Marie McAuliffe. "How AI can help combat mis- and disinformation about migration," *World Economic Forum*, December 18, 2024. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/12/how-ai-can-help-combat-mis-and-disinformation-about-migration/>

encouraging the erroneous belief that inequality is simply a matter of “personal choice” and not colonialism. Or the belief that inequality would have truly resulted from the establishment of an Indigenous Voice to Parliament as a non-binding body whose advice could be sought by Parliament.

It is evident disinformation within the media is not an isolated issue. Whilst it has not been discussed in any detail, our intent was to demonstrate that a relationship exists – and has always existed – between national or constitutional narratives and mis- and disinformation. Mis- and disinformation cannot be understood outside of this settler colonial context so long as settler colonialism (and thus its national narratives) continues to structure the nation and its truths. Further, through our analysis, we have demonstrated the ramifications of disinformation on democratic elections in the US, Canada, and Australia. As our team has outlined above, we must embrace truth telling processes and commit to educating ourselves and others to recognize and address the role of disinformation – both past and present – especially insofar as disinformation is used to reify national narratives of settler colonialism. Perhaps an advisory body is needed to provide oversight on how media disseminate information or to regulate fact checking. To do so effectively, that advisory body needs to be aware of the misinformation that is already so deeply engrained in the settler-state and its citizens. When we can see through the myths of the nation-state and disinformation spread through the media, we can begin to envision a truly transformative reconciliation with inclusive, interdependent sovereign futures. There is a better world coming, and we can make it together.

This analysis may provide tools to poke holes in the veils of disinformation and with that, to disrupt the layers of disinformation in the ever-present narratives of settler states (past, present and future) which structure and continuously reify settler colonialism in law and politics. In early 2025, Manitoba’s Premier, Wab Kinew, announced that his government is working towards introducing a new bill to fight against organizations and individuals who distribute both false information and reckless disinformation.<sup>58</sup> Governments must introduce legislation to press the fragmented media system to ensure our elections are free of mis- and disinformation. As we look ahead to future elections and referendums, we have a responsibility to remember to fact check, think about its relationship to settler-colonialism and inquire about where our information is coming from, and the agendas it supports.

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<sup>58</sup> Steve Lambert, “Work underway on new bill to fight election interference: Manitoba premier,” *CBC News*, January 2, 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/election-interference-legislation-1.7421935>.

# The Twitter Essay

## Introduction

1. As #VoiceToParliament nears, voters are facing mis/disinformation from social media, news, campaigners and politicians. This false information manipulates opinions and ultimately could change the #Referendum2023 results #auspol 1/3
2. Over the next week, Mamawipawin twitter will use research and experience from around the globe to clear up seven misconceptions about #VoiceToParliament for those thinking they might #VoteNo 2/3
3. We will debunk 6 myths about the Voice: that the Voice has a veto, there is a lack of detail, it's racist, it gives special rights, it changes the concept of sovereignty and creates division among Indigenous Peoples 3/3

## Myth #1: Veto

1. One of the most common myths about #VoiceToParliament that could affect voters is that proposed constitutional amendment will give Indigenous Peoples #Veto over parliament 1/
2. The Voice will act as an advisory body. It won't have the power to stop parliament from passing laws. It would only advise on matters concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, not parking tickets, and not future referendums 2/
3. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (#UNDRIP) includes free, prior and informed consent (FPIC). Article 19 of UNDRIP says that states must consult with Indigenous Peoples before putting measures in place that may affect them, and must have FPIC 3/
4. Australia has formally endorsed UNDRIP. It did so in 2009 4/
5. This myth also exists in Canada. Canada endorsed #UNDRIP in 2010 and incorporated it into legislation in 2021. Some still argue FPIC is a veto, but it isn't. Canada defines it as requiring 'meaningful participation in decision making in decision that affect them' #cdnpoli 5/
6. In 1982, section 35 was added to Canada's constitution. It recognizes Aboriginal and treaty rights including the duty to consult. This means

- governments must consult with Indigenous Peoples on issues that may impact them. It is NOT a #VETO. Veto is a right to reject a decision 6/
7. Rather than a veto, the #VoiceToParliament, duty to consult and FPIC are ways to ensure that governments consult with Indigenous Peoples. They can create ways for Indigenous Peoples and governments to collaborate on and discuss issues that impact them 7/
  8. The #VoiceToParliament in Australia would simply be an advisory body. Much like the duty to consult and FPIC, it would facilitate participation in decision-making processes 8/
  9. Today we debunked the myth that the #VoiceToParliament gives Indigenous Peoples a veto over parliament. Advice is not a veto. Tomorrow, we'll address the myth that the Voice proposal lacks detail! 9/
  10. We hope that thoughts from Canada can help bring clarity and informed decisions this upcoming #Voice2023 #referendum! #auspol 10/

## **Myth #2: Lack of detail**

1. Yesterday, Mamawipawin discussed the myth that the #VoiceToParliament would have a #Veto over Parliament. Today, we're giving you some details on the Voice 1/
2. A common claim about the #VoiceToParliament is that the government hasn't provided enough information about how the Voice will function. The #VoteNoAustralia info pamphlet ends with the words "if you don't know, vote no" 2/
3. While the #VoteNo rhyme is catchy, it is transparently a scare tactic. While the exact details of #VoiceToParliament will be worked out by parliament after the #Referendum2023, information about how the Voice will operate exists, and we've compiled some of it below! 3/
4. The government and Indigenous leadership have been working on the #VoiceToParliament for years, and several major reports exist. The government of Australia has released hundreds of pages on what the Voice will look like and how it will function 4/
5. The #VoiceToParliament will have gender parity, representation for each state, its representatives will be chosen by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and it will give independent advice to parliament, as outlined here:  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20230628080102/https://voice.gov.au/about-voice/voice-principles> 5/

6. You can find more information on the design process here:  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20230629171426/https://voice.gov.au/resources/indigenous-voice-co-design-process-final-report> 6/
7. This is the final report of the Joint Select committee in 2018, which has another list of recommendations  
[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Joint/Former\\_Committees/Constitutional\\_Recognition\\_2018/ConstRecognition/Final\\_Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Former_Committees/Constitutional_Recognition_2018/ConstRecognition/Final_Report) 7/
8. There is also the final report of the 2017 Referendum Council: [LINK] While none of this is final, and parliament will draft new legislation after the referendum, the #VoteNo campaign will have you believe there is no plan. That is untrue 8/
9. The Guardian has fact-checked the whole #VoteNoAustralia pamphlet, revealing misinformation throughout:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2023/jul/20/the-vote-no-pamphlet-referendum-voice-to-parliament-voting-essay-aec-published-read-in-full-annotated-fact-checked> 9/
10. Beyond governmental sources, there are books on the subject, including *The Voice to Parliament Handbook* by Thomas Mayo and Kerry O'Brien. Megan Davis wrote a recent book, *Voice of Reason: On Recognition and Renewal*, which offers more detail and debunks misinformation 10/
11. Australia is not the first country to create an institution like #VoiceToParliament in its constitution. In the 1990s, South Africa transformed its constitution after #Apartheid and created its National House of Traditional Leaders 11/
12. Plenty of countries have advisory bodies for Indigenous Peoples and 'traditional' governments. Botswana, Namibia and Ghana all have advisory bodies. The Nordic Countries have had Sami Parliaments since the '90s, which oversee matters related to the Sami 12/
13. Closer to Australia, many pacific countries are attempting to reckon with their colonial past and create better futures. Vanuatu has a second house for Indigenous leaders, as does Fiji and the Marshall Islands. Australia has plenty of examples to help craft the Voice! 13/
14. Today focused on providing some background and information on the #VoiceToParliament, and you can come back tomorrow for the myth that the Voice is racist 14/
15. We hope that thoughts from Canada can help bring clarity and informed decisions this upcoming #Voice2023 #referendum! #auspol

## **Myth #3: Racist/apartheid**

1. Yesterday, we debunked the myth that the #VoiceToParliament lacks detail. Another common myth about the Voice is that it is racist and is dividing the nation like #Apartheid would 1/
2. Racism is inherently based on power. When considering racism against Indigenous Peoples in particular, it is important to acknowledge that it is linked to colonialism, and thus, the theft of land and genocide 2/
3. Because white people have not historically faced systemic disadvantage or been denied their governing systems because of their race, it is impossible for them to experience racism 3/
4. Giving Indigenous Peoples a voice in policies and programs that affect them doesn't constitute racism. 3% of Australia's population is Indigenous. That means that 97% have had control over issues that affect Indigenous Peoples. The #VoiceToParliament will begin to remedy that 4/
5. Many believe that enshrining something that has to do with race in the constitution would be racist. However, race is already included in the constitution in Sections 25 and 51! 5/
6. Section 25 of the constitution currently allows people of different races to be disqualified from voting, and section 52 grants the federal parliament the permission to make "special laws" for people of any race when "seemed necessary" 6/
7. Comparisons with apartheid are unfounded. Apartheid is a system of segregation based on race. While apartheid removes the opportunity of democratic participation on the basis of race, the #VoiceToParliament is a path towards it 7/
8. The #VoiceToParliament would act as an advisory body, giving political representation to Indigenous Peoples, following international human rights law 8/
9. Constitutional change isn't bad! The end of apartheid in South Africa transformed the country's constitution to embody and facilitate reconciliation through democracy, include traditional leaders in government and end discrimination 9/
10. Ultimately, the #VoiceToParliament will unite Australia, not divide it. A successful #Referendum2023 will tell Indigenous communities that the Australian people want parliament to listen to Indigenous voices. A #VoteNo is a vote against that 10/

11. Enshrining a #VoiceToParliament in the constitution is a way to move past the pervasive anti-Indigenous racism that currently persists, and to confront the racism in government and policy today 11/
12. As the #VoiceToParliament gains traction in mainstream news coverage, reported racism against Indigenous Peoples has increased. Bringing on this coverage has placed even more of a target on Indigenous Peoples' backs, and it will likely continue over the next 6 weeks 12/
13. It is up to the rest of Australia to determine how the next 6 weeks will go and whether or not the country challenges the racism that persists in Australian society 13/
14. Today we debunked the myth that the Voice is racist and will divide the nation like apartheid. Tomorrow we'll be back to debunk the myth that the Voice will grant Indigenous communities special rights 14/
15. We hope that thoughts from Canada can help bring clarity and informed decisions this upcoming #Voice2023 #referendum! #auspol 15/

## **Myth #4: Special rights**

1. The #VoteNo2023 campaign says that the #VoiceToParliament will upset the fair go and legal equality that is supposedly the norm in Australia and grant Indigenous Peoples "special rights" over other Australians 1/
2. This is a racist lie. The entire Australian legal and political system is based on Terra Nullius, the concept that Australia was "empty" and that Indigenous nations had no sovereignty over Australia 2/
3. Because of Terra Nullius, white immigrants and their descendants who arrived after 1788 to Australia have enjoyed special rights over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including the rights to land that is not their own 3/
4. British and Australian governments ignored Indigenous governing systems. Moreover, the colonial government denied Indigenous Peoples a #Voice in the institutions that the British created. This established a government that is built on the denial of Indigenous sovereignty 4/
5. Terra Nullius was declared a legal fiction by the Australian High Court in *Mabo v. Queensland*. *Mabo* acknowledged Indigenous title based on the recognition of Indigenous political orders. However, the Australian government continues to ignore Indigenous sovereignty 5/



6. The #VoiceToParliament is not creating new rights, but rather acknowledging existing ones. In countries where Indigenous self-determination is enshrined in the constitution, there are often better outcomes for the entire country 6/
7. In Brazil, Indigenous Territories in the Amazon are responsible for the forest's preservation. The same is true for other Latin American countries, where Indigenous Territories are responsible for the protection of many endangered ecosystems: <https://news.mongabay.com/2022/11/indigenous-lands-hold-the-worlds-healthiest-forests-but-only-when-their-rights-are-protected/> 7/
8. Australia is reluctant to take even small steps toward creating a less colonial government. Reconciliation cannot be pursued through the courts alone. Political reconciliation must also be sought 8/
9. #VoiceToParliament, #Treaty and #Truth are not about giving special rights to Indigenous Peoples, but instead are necessary for challenging the racist lies that Australia was built upon. Australia must #VoteYes23 and recognize an Indigenous Voice 9/
10. The path towards a more mature country may not be easy but it is necessary for this young country to move beyond its racist past, and to embrace the #UluruStatement #HistoryIsCalling #auspol 10/
11. The process of reconciliation must include and create Indigenous institutions, or the same structures will continue to harm Indigenous Peoples. The #VoiceToParliament is an opportunity to create one of these institutions and begin the process of governing together 11/
12. We hope that thoughts from Canada can help bring clarity and informed decisions this upcoming #Voice2023 #referendum! #auspol We'll be back again tomorrow for a discussion about sovereignty! 12/

## **Myth #5: Sovereignty**

1. Another common myth about the #VoiceToParliament is that it would affect Australian #sovereignty, and that an Indigenous advisory in turn will change how Australians can govern 1/
2. The thing is, nothing in the proposed #VoiceToParliament alters the fact that Indigenous Peoples never ceded their sovereignty in the first place! The Voice emerged from Indigenous Peoples asserting their pre-existing sovereignty in the #UluruStatement 2/

3. This myth comes from a common misunderstanding of what #sovereignty means. Settler-colonial understandings of sovereignty are limited to a singular power having control and ownership over lands, resources and its citizens with no interference 3/
4. In Australia, sovereignty comes from the power of the Crown. Sovereignty was proclaimed by the Crown through delegates who claimed the land despite it being someone else's homeland with its own government and law. Sovereignty was claimed over an already existing nation 4/
5. When we expand our understanding of #sovereignty, we can see multiple sovereigns co-exist and work together sometimes, but then return back to separate nations. There is never a transfer of power, both nations already have their own! 5/
6. Everyone wants what's best for their nations, and Indigenous Peoples haven't had the chance to advocate and represent their nations. There have been attempts at representation, but it's time for a real, effective, permanent change, and #VoiceToParliament will accomplish that 6/
7. One major aspect of the #VoiceToParliament that people seem to forget is that it wouldn't have a say over every issue that parliament deals with. It will only look at issues that concern Indigenous Peoples 7/
8. Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty will not take away from the sovereignty of the Australian government. But #VoiceToParliament, #Treaty and #Truth will create a new understanding of mutual co-existence #HistoryIsCalling 8/
9. Australia is not alone on this journey. The Canadian constitution and #UNDRIP are great examples that confirm that sovereigns can co-exist on shared lands, while recognizing and respecting the sovereignty of the other at the same time 9/
10. Indigenous Peoples will not use #VoiceToParliament to erase Australian sovereignty and governing powers. Rather, it provides an opportunity to build a mature country—one not built on the denial of Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous rights 10/
11. The Supreme Court of Canada provides a reminder: "we are all here to stay." The same holds true in Australia. Indigenous Peoples have never ceded sovereignty. The Crown proclaimed sovereignty, and now, Australians need to work it out. #VoiceToParliament offers an opportunity 11/
12. Today we debunked the myth that the #VoiceToParliament will affect Australia's #sovereignty. We'll be back again for a discussion on division! 12/
13. We hope that thoughts from Canada can help bring clarity and informed decisions this upcoming #Voice2023 #referendum! #auspol 13/

## Myth #6: Divided

1. The #VoteNo23 campaign will have you believe that to #VoteYes is to ignore Indigenous voices. Many say that Indigenous Peoples are divided on the #VoiceToParliament 1/
2. Like every other group of people, Indigenous Peoples do not all have the same opinions, and individuals are allowed to have their own thoughts. Just because Indigenous people have different opinions on #TheVoice does not mean Australians shouldn't support it 2/
3. However, Indigenous people aren't really that divided on the issue. A recent poll shows that 81% of Indigenous people in Australia do support the #VoiceToParliament 3/
4. The #VoiceToParliament, in one form or another, has been discussed for years in many different forms. Like any new institution, people have different ideas 4/
5. The #Voice proposal isn't perfect, and there are valid reasons to oppose it, but there are also invalid reasons. Some claim that the Voice is racist, or that the proposal lacks detail, but this isn't the case. You can check out our posts from the last few days for more myths! 5/
6. One reason why some Indigenous people may #VoteNo is because they ask, "how can a colonial institution fix a problem made by colonialism?" Lidia Thorpe has raised this, calling the #VoiceToParliament "a powerless advisory body" that won't be able to make change 6/
7. However, as it stands, Indigenous MPs and senators sit in that same colonial institution and are elected to serve all voters. #VoiceToParliament will exist to represent Indigenous Peoples and to advise parliament on Indigenous issues 7/
8. #VoiceToParliament will provide Indigenous Peoples with a powerful voice for change as it advises parliament and creates a national space to yarn/discuss and envision a future as Indigenous Peoples 8/
9. On October 14, make an informed decision on #VoiceToParliament. Look beyond clickbait headlines, fact-check and keep reading. Tomorrow we'll be discussing the myth that there's a better way to "close the gap" 9/
10. We hope that thoughts from Canada can help bring clarity and informed decisions this upcoming #Voice2023 #referendum! #auspol 10/

## Myth #7: Closing the Gap

1. Another myth is that the #VoiceToParliament will be ineffective at #ClosingTheGap 1/
2. In other words, #VoteNO would like you to believe that the Voice will be powerless, and thus, unable to make practical change to address real issues – including the existing inequalities in health outcomes and incarceration rates 2/
3. The issue with this myth is twofold. First, it suggests that creating meaningful change can be done without acknowledging the history of colonialism and its lasting legacies. That belief is a fantasy 3/
4. The Australian government will not be able to legislate its way out of colonialism and the legacies of persistent inequalities within Australia without Indigenous institutions like the #VoiceToParliament 4/
5. After generations of denial, Australia must accept that Indigenous Peoples #AlwaysWereAlwaysWill be sovereign. International law recognizes Indigenous Peoples’ right to self-determination and to exercise it through participation in both their own and state institutions 5/
6. The #VoiceToParliament achieves this. It provides for a forward-looking politics which acknowledges that ‘we are all here to stay’ while embracing the idea of building a mature nation and a better future for all 6/
7. Secondly, the myth misrepresents the function of the #VoiceToParliament. As an advisory body, it isn’t the mechanism through which all inequalities will be solved. It is a permanent institution which cannot be appointed or terminated at the whim of the PM 7/
8. #VoiceToParliament represents a first step towards creating Indigenous policy together with Indigenous Peoples or #NothingAboutUsWithoutUs 8/
9. The inequality in Australia is undeniable, and policy must be made to address this. Achieving meaningful change requires making policy choices WITH Indigenous Peoples. To do otherwise allows the Australian government to continue to cause harm 9/
10. The political project of decolonization will not be achieved through one referendum. However, change is needed, both inside and outside the Australian government to move towards creating a more matured Australian nation. It will not be easy, but it is necessary 10/
11. The Voice should be thought of as the beginning, rather than the end, of advancing the nation and what it means to be Australian rather than simply

‘closing the gap’ or trying to create a ‘fair go’ that hasn’t been fair for a long, long times, if it ever was at all 11/

## **Conclusion, Myth #8**

1. On July 26, former Australia PM John Howard said British colonization was the “luckiest thing” to happen to Australia. The comment was made regarding the Voice referendum and it perpetuates a dangerous myth 1/
2. Howard claimed that the luck came from the fact that Britain was “infinitely more successful and beneficent” than other colonizing countries. This begs the question, is there such a thing as a “good colonizer”? 2/
3. During Howard’s time in office, his government suspended Australia’s racial discrimination act, weakened Indigenous land rights and refused to apologize to the Stolen Generations 3/
4. In 2007, Howard also implemented the “intervention,” which saw drastic military intervention into Indigenous communities in the north 4/
5. According to a BBC article, Howard claimed that if the Voice succeeds, it could stop the government from intervening in Indigenous affairs “when deemed necessary.” The question is: who is it necessary for? Corporate interests? <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-66309637> 5/
6. Remember, the results of the “intervention” have been almost entirely negative, and the actions the Howard government took were not based on evidence: <https://theconversation.com/ten-years-on-its-time-we-learned-the-lessons-from-the-failed-northern-territory-intervention-79198> 6/
7. Governments across Australia are permitting (and even encouraging) mining on sacred sites, and Indigenous peoples are unable to have any sort of say. This needs to change!  
<https://www.reuters.com/graphics/AUSTRALIA-MINING/INDIGENOUS/oakpearaepr/> 7/
8. Howard’s claims are a clear justification for colonialism. His statement is based in white supremacy, and remains rooted in the doctrine of discovery, which, we remind you, has been revoked by the church 8/
9. Howard’s comments prove that he does not believe in the existence of 60,000 years of knowledge, governance, and law grounded in country. He dismisses the possibility of a better future built on mutual co-existence, where Indigenous voices are no longer silenced 9/

10. Right-wing news media like Sky News has had Howard on to speak about the #Voice, and itself has inflamed racism in Australia. It has a vested interest in portraying colonization as an inevitable fact of history, rather than an outcome of greed and white supremacy 10/
11. Colonialism didn't end once British control ceased. It remains the structure of the state and society. For Indigenous Peoples, despite what Price would have you believe, it continues to impact every aspect of life 11/
12. Canada and Australia share similar histories of British colonization. Lucky is not the word used here. Canada recognizes that colonialism is an attempted genocide 12/
13. Indigenous Peoples were forced from their lands, and children were forcibly removed from their families to be put into schools where violence, abuse and neglect dominated. This structure of colonialism continues within our child welfare system, as it does in Australia 13/
14. There is no such thing as a "good colonizer." Canada and Australia removed Indigenous Peoples to take up their lands and resources. The ideals of "protection" and "civilization" may be appealing, but they can easily be replaced by the words genocide and destruction 14/
15. Colonial policies and attitudes meant that Indigenous Peoples were cut off from their own ways of governance, life and identity. It also meant that Indigenous peoples were excluded from the governance, life and identity of the nations that were created on their lands 15/
16. As Patrick Dodson reminds us, the #Referendum "gives us some insight into the meaning of the concept of a fair go ... It will be a test that we are an enlightened, modern democracy." The #VoteYes is a vote to move forwards 16/

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