

# Hunter Indigenous leader: 'This is a social justice issue'

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"This is a social justice issue. This is not political. This has been made political by a few politicians. They're being divisive. It is not the broader community that is being divisive," Ms Dever said.

"I think if people locally were actually talking to local people about what they thought, to Wonnarua elders living in Maitland and Cessnock, those elders would tell you they're supportive of the Voice.

"That's what you would hear from us here.

"But instead people are going, 'Here's this one senator from the Territory and we will listen to her,' or 'Here's one person who wants to be a senator, and we'll listen to him.

"I think people are grabbing on to things they want to grab on to to make them feel like they're supported in their decision."

University of Newcastle academic Amy Maguire, an associate professor in international law and human rights, said a no vote would be "corrosive of trust" between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

"It will reinforce a lack of trust which is already there," Dr Maguire said.



Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council chief executive Tara Dever says a no vote will set back efforts to improve Indigenous living standards. File picture

"For First Nations peoples, at least some of them will fairly interpret a no outcome as reflective of racism.

"One of the reasons for that is the proposition being so low in ambition.

"All that's being requested is a better form of advisory body and one that is secured against abolition at the whim of a change of government."

Ms Dever said First Na-

tions people in the Hunter were "all targeted" during the referendum debate.

"We keep coming back with love," she said.

"Many of the people who are supporting the yes vote are dealing with that with love.

"There's definitely an underbelly of people that are not happy.

"They're breaking signs and spray-painting things

and doing awful things, to their neighbours, really.

"I have very little time for that racist no. There are two nos.

"There's a no of sovereignty and there's the no of racism, and the racist no is unfortunately fuelled by politicians."

Mindaribba recently lost \$40,000 in federal funding for its Aboriginal pre-school.

Ms Dever said the Voice

to Parliament would help Indigenous groups be heard.

"We're the largest Aboriginal organisation in the area that we represent, and we unfortunately fight every day to secure things that other groups secure very easily, particularly missionary groups," she said.

"I'm not trying to be negative to those people ... but they have a lot more cultural capital when they

come to this space and financial capital."

She said a failed referendum would damage efforts to improve living standards for Aborigines all over Australia, including in areas such as education and neonatal health.

"People talk about closing the gap, and people think we're talking about a gap only in certain parts of Australia," she said.

"We're actually not.

"These things are happening right here in the Hunter Valley.

"Will it be detrimental?

"Yes, it could be 30 years or 50 years before this comes around again. That's the sad part."

Asked if she expected a strong yes vote in the Hunter, Ms Dever said: "I hope so. I truly hope so. That's my hope. I have to be positive.

"We have good people. We have intelligent people.

"The Hunter Valley is an amazing place.

"I think at the end of the day we'll get a good outcome because people care about each other.

"The catchcry for Australia is we're the land of the fair go. Well, this is about having a fair go.

"This is about providing a fair go for everyone."

## THE VOICE Political hijacking of debate overwhelms best intentions

# No result would send wrong message

Michael Parris

UNIVERSITY of Newcastle political scientist Jim Jose says Australians will wake up with a "hangover" on Sunday when they realise they have rejected constitutional recognition of Indigenous people.

Opinion polls suggest the referendum, which asks voters whether they support constitutional recognition for First Nations people by establishing an Indigenous Voice to Parliament, is headed for a clear defeat.

"I think a lot of people are going to have that morning-after feeling of, 'This is not what I wanted' or 'This is not how I want to feel,'" Professor Jose said.

"I like to believe that voters get it right in the main, but this is one occasion, if the No vote is successful, and it looks like it is, that we will have made a mistake, and I'm not sure how we're going to be able to correct it in the short to medium term."

The referendum question arises from the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart, in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes called for a voice enshrined in the constitution and asserted an Indigenous sovereignty, or ancestral tie with the land, "which co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown". Professor Jose predicts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will regard a No vote as a rejection of their invitation to "walk with us" towards a better future.

"It will be interpreted by First Nations

people as 'We don't count', that the Australian voter has turned around and told us that we are not part of this country, we do not belong," he said.

"The impact on First Nations people who think about this and every day experience the micro-aggressions that come with racial issues, many of them will simply abandon faith in the political system to deliver anything for them.

"The Uluru Statement from the Heart was a statement in good faith about how we might do this differently, and basically the Australian people, in voting no, the message their sending, intentionally or otherwise, is rejecting the Uluru Statement from the Heart."

More than 2 million people have already voted and almost 2 million others have requested postal votes. Recent polls show support for the Yes campaign languishing at between 37 and 47 per cent.

Professor Jose said the international community would interpret Australia's rejection of constitutional recognition as a return to the White Australia policy of racial discrimination.

"This is the message that will go out to the rest of the world, that we do not want to recognise the First Nations people as having prior occupancy. Granted there are many in the No camp who want that recognition, but they've convinced themselves that making this a constitutional enshrining of the Voice



Professor Jim Jose says political attempts to prevent constitutional recognition of First Nations people are "morally bankrupt". Picture supplied

is a step too far.

"For many Indigenous people, this will be a reassertion of the White Australia policy internally, and that's really unfortunate, because a lot of people, including First Nations people, have worked very hard to push past that history so that we can begin to come to terms with it without getting involved in

rancorous and useless go-nowhere discussions."

The 1967 referendum on Aborigines being counted in the population and allowing the federal government to make "special laws" for Aborigines won bipartisan political support and 90.77 per cent of the vote.

Professor Jose said Australian politics had "gone backwards" since then, despite "many, many Australians wanting to do something positive" to improve outcomes for Indigenous people.

"The sort of politics which has played out over the past two decades has been one in which political figures have been quite content to denigrate those who might be different from us ... and the racial hostility that is generated has become worse over the past two decades."

He blamed senior Liberal and National party figures for "deliberately hijacking" the referendum into a debate about Anthony Albanese's leadership. He said their attempts to stop constitutional recognition of First Nations people were "morally bankrupt".

"It's largely aimed at bringing down Anthony Albanese as the leader," he said.

"Senior people in the Liberal and National party are deliberately misleading the public to maximise their political advantage. It's now getting that Trump-ish element to it where they can say black is white, up is down, without fear they're going to be held to account."