

PM's offensive vanity project a bad 'vibe' for nation's future

It is neither hard-hearted nor racist to say no to the biggest change to our Constitution



PETER DUTTON

Australians are being asked to change the Constitution in the most significant way since it was created at the time of Federation. However, unlike any time in our

history, the Prime Minister of the day is asking people to vote for the voice on the vibe.

There has been no constitutional convention – as has occurred in the past – to thrash out the proposal. In fact, the Prime Minister quite proudly says he is not providing the detail Australians are reasonably asking for. And his approach is dividing the nation.

For all our gripes, we have one of the most stable democracies in the world. We have survived world

wars, changes of government, economic and natural disaster shocks and, most recently, a pandemic.

And it's not by chance. Indeed, our foundational document, the Constitution, was deliberately constructed. It sets out the rules of our nation and has been the underpinning of the stability, and indeed, the maturing, growth, development and incredible success of the best country in the world. Every commonwealth law has been passed by the parliament in accordance with the relevant provision in the Constitution. Where there is ambiguity, it is resolved by amendment to the legislation or interpreted and resolved by the High Court.

So, when a prime minister proposes to change that document, it needs to be for good reason. The pros and cons should be laid out in a transparent way, the model understood, and people properly informed so they can cast their "yes" or "no" vote. In many ways, you could argue the vote to change the Constitution is weightier than the decision we make every three years in a general election.

The words proposed matter because, once in the Constitution, it can only be changed by another constitutional change. The parliament cannot "out-legislate" the Constitution.

This is what makes the vibe approach so offensive. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is proposing a broad range of words – so broad the Solicitor-General and the Attorney-General advised against them. The Prime Minister insisted on them anyway.

To compound legitimate concern about the process, the Prime Minister is proposing six months

of consultation after the vote to work out the design. It is without precedent, the risks significant and it would undoubtedly result in a significant change to our system of government and democracy. And not for the better.

The concept of giving Indigenous people a greater say in policy – to try to increase life expectancy and reduce domestic violence – is admirable and desired by all Australians.

What is even more offensive is the Prime Minister and his other ministers saying that Australians who don't instinctively sign up to the Canberra voice model are hard-hearted or racist. It is as offensive as it is absurd.

The Liberal Party has proposed an approach that unites the nation. We support constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians. It is the right thing to do. But we oppose the voice being enshrined in the Constitution. We support the concept of allowing a greater say by Indigenous leaders

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in the policies affecting them. Under our model, Alice Springs elders, not academics or elites from capital cities, would be the ones to properly consult and help improve the lives of their people.

We are in a different cultural era than when previous questions have been considered by the Australian people. I have heard solicitors of significant legal standing say they have deep reservations about years of resulting litigation in the High Court. They say the wording is dangerous and deeply flawed. And, when further pressed,

they can't explain the basic concept of how the model would work practically (and how would they, because it is being built mid-air). Nonetheless, they say they are voting yes. Simply on the vibe. Some say their children demand it of them. Some are worried about being cancelled from social groups or ostracised in their workplace.

It is a dangerous place to be. I have spent months speaking with people, mostly Indigenous, all over the country about how the Prime Minister's voice could work. I have asked reasonable questions and have had an open mind, particularly if it was the answer to reversing Indigenous disadvantage.

But having looked under the bonnet, this is not a car worth buying. The Prime Minister might be seeking his moment in history, but that shouldn't be at the expense of our country's future.

The voice will have the power to involve itself in every element of government decision-making. Defence decisions, foreign affairs,

RBA deliberations on interest rates, budget priorities and more besides. It will need to be consulted and the comments included in every cabinet decision. This is by deliberate design, as noted by the Referendum Working Group's Megan Davis and her colleague, Gabrielle Appleby, in these pages last weekend.

This Easter and right up until the day of the vote, I hope parents and grandparents can have a family discussion about the gravity of changing the Constitution. Yes, we all want to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians, but the consequences of unsettling a stable system of government that can't be easily undone should weigh on people's minds. Let's support practical assistance to improve the lives of Indigenous peoples, not create another layer of bureaucracy and permanently disrupt our system of government.

Peter Dutton is the federal Liberal leader.