



COMILLAS
UNIVERSIDAD PONTIFICIA

ICAI

ICADE

CIHS

Faculty of Human and Social Sciences

Bachelor's Degree in Global Communication

Final Degree Project

**Framing the Voice: A Discourse Analysis of the “Yes” and
“No” Campaigns in the 2023 Australian Referendum**

Student: Santiago Jiménez Sánchez

Director: Melanie Gut

Madrid, June 2026

I. Abstract

The 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum marked a historical moment in the nation's struggle to reconcile with its colonial past and to recognise the political and social involvement of its First Nations peoples. While it ultimately resulted in a "No" vote, the campaign reignited deep debates regarding identity, belonging and the place of Indigenous voices within the Australian constitutional framework. This dissertation seeks to explore how the "Yes" and "No" campaigns constructed opposed narratives around recognition, rights and national identity, and how these discourses reflect broader tensions in Australia's sociopolitical context.

The research employs a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to examine political speeches, media coverage and campaign materials between 2022 and 2023. The study investigates how language and oratory function as tools of both empowerment and exclusion in shaping public perception regarding Aboriginal rights. The focus will be placed on the discursive strategies that framed the Voice as either a necessary step towards justice, reparation and reconciliation ("Yes" position), or as a divisive, differentiating and dangerous constitutional reform ("No" position).

Through this approach, the dissertation aims to uncover how power relations and historical inequalities are reproduced or contested through language. The "Yes" discourse will be examined as rooted in moral legitimacy, inclusion and historical redress, invoking unity, fairness and recognition. In contrast, the "No" discourse will be analysed as appealing to civil equality, constitutional integrity and scepticism, drawing upon fears of division, irremediability and bureaucratic complexity. By comparing these two discursive constructions, the study seeks to highlight how "Australianness" and "Indigeneity" are rearticulated in this context of national decision-making.

The findings demonstrate that discursive framing not only influenced public opinion during the referendum campaign, but also revealed deeper societal attitudes towards reconciliation, belonging and multicultural coexistence in such a multiethnic nation. Ultimately, this project argues that the outcome of The Voice Referendum cannot be understood merely as a political outcome, but as a demonstration of the continuing contestation over representation and legitimacy in the Australian national context.

By bridging linguistic analysis with the political result, the dissertation aspires to provide a nuanced understanding of how discourse shapes and reflects the evolving landscape of Indigenous rights in contemporary Australia.

Index

1. Introduction.....	5
1.1. Purpose, Justification and Scope of the Research.....	5
1.2. Objectives and Research Questions	6
1.3. Methodology and Corpus Selection	7
2. State of the Art and Theoretical Framework	10
2.1. State of the Art: Legalism, Storytelling and the Analytical Gap.....	10
2.2. Theoretical Framework.....	11
3. Background: The Sociopolitical Context of Indigenous Australia	18
3.1. Colonisation, the Stolen Generations and Systemic Exclusion	18
3.2. The Road to Recognition: From the 1967 Referendum to the National Apology	19
3.3. The Uluru Statement from the Heart and The Voice to Parliament	21
4. Discourse Analysis I: The “Yes” Campaign	25
4.1. Narrative Frames.....	25
4.2. Discursive Strategies	28
4.3. Discursive Vulnerabilities.....	32
5. Discourse Analysis II: The “No” Campaign.....	35
5.1. Narrative Frames.....	35
5.2. Discursive Strategies	38
5.3. Discursive Efficacy: The Anatomy of a Successful Rejection	42
6. Discussion of Results	45
6.1. The Multicultural Paradox and the Egalitarian Ethos	45
6.2. Media Logic and the Erosion of Constitutional Nuance	45
7. Conclusions and Proposals.....	47
7.1. General Conclusions.....	47
7.2. Limitations and Future Lines of Research.....	48
8. Bibliography.....	50

Acronyms	Meaning
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AO	Officer of the Order of Australia
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
NIAA	National Indigenous Australian Agency
PDA	Political Discourse Analysis
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UTS	University of Technology Sydney

Figure 1: Polling Trajectory and Voting Intention for the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum 42

1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose, Justification and Scope of the Research

The Australian socio-political landscape presents a profound historical paradox: it is a young, modern nation-state built upon the ancestral lands of one of the oldest continuous living civilisations on the planet. Despite their enduring cultural heritage, Indigenous Australians have been historically and systematically marginalised from the institutional and national project. In an attempt to address this structural exclusion, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and the Labor government called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament referendum in October 2023. The proposal sought to constitutionally enshrine an independent advisory body for First Nations people. However, to be successful, the constitutional amendment required a "double majority": a national majority of voters and a majority in at least four of the six states. The initiative ultimately failed, suffering a resounding rejection with approximately 60% of the national vote opposing it, with the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) standing as the sole jurisdiction where the "Yes" campaign secured a majority (Evans & Grattan, 2024).

From a sociopolitical and communicative perspective, the failure of the 2023 Referendum constitutes a critical phenomenon worthy of academic investigation. The campaign rapidly evolved into a highly polarising national debate that transcended legal technicalities, transforming into a discursive battleground over human rights, historical grievance, and the very definition of Australian identity. This dissertation seeks to understand the mechanics of this defeat by examining the public discourses that capitalised on these societal fractures. The academic relevance of this research lies in its capacity to demonstrate how strategic political communication, rhetorical framing, and symbolic power can profoundly impact social cognition and, consequently, determine the outcome of a democratic vote.

The motivation for undertaking this specific research is deeply rooted in my personal and academic trajectory. During my time living in Australia for a year, specifically while completing an academic exchange at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), I had the opportunity to witness and experience this historic political process first-hand. I observed how the referendum kept a uniquely multicultural, yet politically unique, nation in a state of intense political suspense for months. The campaign dominated daily conversations, media coverage, and public spaces, awakening in me a keen interest in

understanding how the Indigenous population was simultaneously portrayed, represented, heard, or silenced through dominant political narratives.

The scope of this dissertation is specifically focused on the linguistic and rhetorical dimensions of the referendum campaign. Rather than evaluating the legal merits of the constitutional amendment, this study will critically analyse the political and media discourses deployed by the "Yes" and "No" campaigns. By establishing this specific scope, the research aims to unveil the underlying ideologies and communicative strategies that ultimately shaped the Australian electorate's decision.

1.2. Objectives and Research Questions

To structure the analysis, this research pursues a general objective from which four specific objectives are derived, guiding the development of the subsequent analytical chapters:

- **General Objective:** To analyse how the official "Yes" and "No" campaigns utilised political discourse, cognitive framing, and narrative strategies to mobilise the Australian electorate and shape public perception during the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum.
- **Specific Objectives**
 - To examine the specific linguistic and rhetorical structures employed by both campaigns to construct their respective narratives, defining the boundaries of national identity and civic equality.
 - To evaluate the impact of cognitive framing and political storytelling in simplifying a complex constitutional amendment, assessing how each side made specific moral values and historical narratives salient to the public.
 - To analyse the exercise of symbolic power within the campaigns, specifically assessing how the strategic selection of spokespersons and personal testimonies was used to establish institutional legitimacy and authority.
 - To assess how the political discourse surrounding the referendum navigated the tension between advocating for substantive structural reform and proposing a purely symbolic gesture of national reconciliation.

Linked to these objectives, this final degree dissertation seeks to answer the following research questions:

- Did the discursive strategies employed by the campaigns function primarily as pedagogical tools aimed at objectively explaining the legal and technical implications of the constitutional change, or did they operate fundamentally as instruments of emotional and ideological mobilisation?
- How did both sides of the referendum instrumentalise identical core concepts such as: "national unity", "fairness" and "equality", to legitimise entirely opposing political agendas?
- To what extent did the reliance on strategic storytelling and personal narratives shape the electorate's perception, overshadowing the technical and legal realities of the proposed constitutional amendment?
- How did the institutional campaigns navigate the discursive paradox of representing Indigenous voices, balancing the need for authentic self-determination with the requirements of a mass-market political campaign directed at a non-Indigenous majority?

1.3. Methodology and Corpus Selection

To achieve the proposed objectives and address the research questions, this dissertation employs a qualitative methodological approach rooted in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Moving beyond mere descriptive linguistics, CDA provides the necessary analytical framework to deconstruct how power, ideology, and identity are enacted and contested through language. The empirical analysis in the subsequent chapters will systematically operationalise the theoretical constructs established in Chapter 2 by triangulating three complementary analytical dimensions.

First, to understand macro-level polarisation, the study utilises Teun van Dijk's Ideological Square as an analytical matrix. This allows for the identification of macro-strategies of positive self-representation and negative other-representation, evaluating how political elites constructed strict "in-groups" and "out-groups." However, macro-strategies alone are insufficient to capture the emotional and psychological nuances of the debate. Therefore, the cognitive theories of Entman and Lakoff are integrated to map the micro-level discourse, specifically examining how lexical choices, metaphors, and narrative omissions were strategically selected to increase the salience of particular moral values. Finally, to contextualise these linguistic mechanisms within broader power dynamics, the analysis incorporates Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital alongside Hall and Tuhiwai Smith's postcolonial perspectives. This synthesis enables a critical

evaluation of how campaigns deployed specific spokespersons not merely as messengers, but as "structuring structures" designed to establish legitimacy. It provides the lens necessary to question whether the representation of Indigenous identities functioned as a push for genuine decolonisation or merely as a symbolic political gesture.

To ensure a rigorous and highly focused application of this methodological framework, the corpus was compiled using a purposive sampling strategy. It is strictly delimited to high-impact public addresses and media interventions from key leaders and activists. Static institutional documents have been deliberately excluded in favour of active political discourse, as the latter more accurately encapsulates the core ideological battles of the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum. The selected texts are strategically drawn from the two primary opposing camps to provide a comprehensive comparative analysis.

Within the "Yes" campaign, the corpus captures both institutional authority and intellectual advocacy. It contrasts the official discourse of administrative necessity and empathetic urgency framed by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Minister Linda Burney with the philosophical, legal, and postcolonial arguments articulated by key Indigenous figures and architects of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, such as Noel Pearson, Professor Megan Davis, and Pat Anderson AO. This selection is crucial for analysing how the campaign simultaneously attempted to project transversal unity, moral obligation, and an uncompromising demand for substantive structural reform.

Conversely, the analysis of the "No" campaign discourse examines a fractured opposition, encompassing both institutional conservative resistance and radical progressive dissent. On the conservative front, the corpus scrutinises how institutional figures like Opposition Leader Peter Dutton framed the constitutional amendment as an unprecedented institutional threat, while concurrently deploying conservative Indigenous voices, most notably Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, to ground the rejection in material reality and anti-elitism. The inclusion of these figures is critical for understanding how the conservative campaign successfully deployed risk-aversion rhetoric and contested the "Yes" side's monopoly on Indigenous empathy. Furthermore, to capture the full complexity of the opposition, the corpus integrates the "Progressive No" discourse spearheaded by Senator Lidia Thorpe. Her inclusion facilitates a critical assessment of the Blak Sovereign Movement's arguments, examining how anti-colonial rhetoric was mobilised to reject the Voice not as an elite overreach, but as an insufficient institutional concession that risked compromising genuine Indigenous sovereignty.

In the preparation of this Bachelor's Thesis, limited use has been made of Artificial Intelligence tools, exclusively as support for instrumental tasks (e.g., copyediting, organisation of ideas, or generation of preliminary proposals). Under no circumstances have these tools replaced the personal research, writing, and analysis that constitute the foundation of this work.

In accordance with University policy, it is expressly declared that:

- Artificial Intelligence has not been used for the complete drafting or the preparation of substantial parts of this work.
- Any intervention by AI tools has been critically and autonomously reviewed, reworked, and adapted by the author.
- The final responsibility for the content, analysis, and conclusions rests entirely with the author.

Consequently, this Bachelor's Thesis complies with the provisions of the University's General Regulations, which consider the use of AI to create complete works or relevant parts without proper citation, authorisation, or acknowledgment to be plagiarism.

2. State of the Art and Theoretical Framework

To conduct a rigorous evaluation of the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice to Parliament Referendum, it is imperative to establish a comprehensive theoretical framework situated at the intersection of political communication, the sociology of language, and postcolonial studies. Political discourse is fundamentally defined as the text and talk of professional politicians or political institutions, such as presidents, party leaders, and members of parliament (Van Dijk, 1993). Historically, language has not operated as a mere passive reflection of reality, but as an active instrument that constructs and shapes it (Fairclough, 1992).

As Paul Chilton (2004) argues, language operates as the fundamental medium through which political phenomena are constructed, given that the core concepts of politics (power, influence, and authority) refer fundamentally to linguistic modes of interaction designed to achieve strategic goals. Consequently, political speakers systematically imbue their utterances with evidence, authority, and truth-claims to construct legitimacy within political contexts (Chilton, 2004). This chapter reviews the existing literature surrounding the referendum and establishes the theoretical framework used to decode these linguistic strategies.

2.1. State of the Art: Legalism, Storytelling and the Analytical Gap

Given the recency of the 2023 referendum, academic literature analysing its specific discursive mechanics is still nascent but can be broadly categorised into two dominant lines of inquiry: the legal-constitutional perspective and the descriptive communication approach.

The first scholarly current focuses on the legal validity, technical safety, and pedagogical dissemination of the constitutional amendment. Appleby et al. (2023) rigorously evaluate the factual accuracy of the arguments deployed in the official pamphlets distributed by the Australian Electoral Commission. Their analysis examines the "Official Yes and No Cases" to provide citizens with verified, fact-checked legal information, evaluating the empirical soundness of the claims made by both campaigns. Similarly, Komesaroff et al. (2023) assemble a comprehensive compendium of academic excerpts, historical facts, cultural implications, practical matters, legal concerns, and public statements to guide voters navigating complex constitutional technicalities.

While these studies are indispensable for understanding the substantive reality of the referendum, their scope remains strictly pedagogical and legalistic. In essence, they operate as civic guides for voters rather than critical deconstructions of political messaging. While Appleby et al. (2023) determine whether an argument was factually true, they do not examine how it was framed to exercise symbolic power. Consequently, their work leaves a significant analytical gap regarding the persuasive, emotional, and ideological strategies used by political representatives. They do not account for how rhetorical exaggerations or emotionally resonant claims, regardless of their strict factual accuracy, successfully mobilised the electorate through cognitive framing.

The second, more recent current redirects the analytical focus towards communication tactics, specifically examining the role of political storytelling. Vromen et al. (2025) analyse the narrative strategies of the campaign, attributing the victory of the "No" camp to its highly effective use of storytelling and contextualised, personal narratives. This strategy relied on inductive reasoning, moving from highly specific personal testimonies to global conclusions, grounded in a conservative framework of civic equality and national unity. This technique was powerfully humanised by prominent Indigenous figures, such as Country Liberal Party Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, who successfully humanised abstract constitutional concepts, thereby facilitating ordinary public engagement (Vromen et al., 2025).

However, while Vromen et al. (2025) provide crucial insights into storytelling patterns, their analysis remains largely descriptive of narrative forms. A profound epistemological gap persists in current academic literature regarding the underlying asymmetric power structures and systemic ideologies that shaped these stories. This dissertation departs from existing literature by moving beyond the description of what was said or whether it was legally true. By implementing a CDA framework, this study investigates how language, metaphors, and oratory functioned as instruments of symbolic power and ideological control to redefine the boundaries of national identity.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

2.2.1. Symbolic Power and the Political Market

To understand why political agents compete so fiercely over language, this study adopts Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) sociology of language. Unifying structuralist theories with the sociological insights of Durkheim and Marx, Bourdieu posits that linguistic exchanges

are never neutral; they are inherently expressions of symbolic power, exercised not through physical coercion but through a covert, tacitly recognised form of domination known as symbolic violence. This mechanism allows dominant elites to maintain hierarchical control over time without their authority being explicitly perceived as oppressive, but rather as legitimate. In this framework, communication is not a mere exchange of information, but a power relationship dependent on the authority or prestige of the speaker, which Bourdieu terms "symbolic capital".

Language endows the speaker with authority and secures the confidence of the listener by conferring social competence through the strategic use of specific rhetoric, syntax, and specialised vocabulary. In this light, symbolic instruments do not merely describe the world but operate as "structuring structures" that actively construct social order based on cultural biases. Following the neo-Kantian tradition, Bourdieu (1991) argues that our perspective is a historical construct, and mental structures of judgement are social in origin. Thus, an individual's classification of any political fact is inherently arbitrary and deeply rooted in their specific social group.

In the political sphere, agents utilise slogans, programs, and principles of division to impose a particular vision of the world while creating a social order that legitimises their strategic interests. Political discourse combats the isolation of individuals by giving an institutional voice to private grievances, transforming personal unease into a collective political cause (Bourdieu, 1991).

However, Bourdieu (1991) warns of an inevitable dispossession of the population's autonomous voice due to the professionalisation of politics. In modern representative systems, the direct capacity for expression is transferred to professional spokespersons. This delegation of voice poses a distinct sociopolitical risk, particularly for progressive and left-wing parties; as political elites become increasingly professionalised, they risk profound disconnection from the working-class demographics facing the greatest economic hardships that they ostensibly represent. This dynamic forces the political field to operate under a market logic of supply and demand:

“The political field is the site in which, through the competition between the agents involved in it, political products, issues, programmes, analyses, commentaries, concepts and events are created products between which ordinary

citizens, reduced to the status of consumers, have to choose” (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 171-172).

This dynamic is underpinned by the unequal distribution of the instruments required for the production of political discourse. Generating autonomous political thought requires extensive education, time, mastery of technical jargon, and media access; resources that the majority of the population does not possess. Consequently, ordinary citizens are reduced to consumers of pre-fabricated political messaging, forced to choose between positions, speeches, and concepts manufactured in a sphere far removed from their everyday reality: the political arena. In this sense, the greater the distance between the "producer" and the "consumer", due to disparities in cultural capital, the greater the risk of misunderstanding the product offered.

In the context of the Voice Referendum, Bourdieu's (1991) framework allows an examination of how campaigns acted as producers in a competitive market, strategically deploying specific spokespersons to accrue symbolic capital and project a manufactured authenticity. The prominence of conservative Indigenous voices in the "No" campaign serves as a prime example of utilising symbolic attributes to obtain legitimacy when addressing the non-Indigenous population.

2.2.2. Critical Discourse Analysis and the Ideological Square

While Bourdieu establishes the structural nature of symbolic power, CDA provides the precise methodological tools to dismantle how this power is linguistically enacted. To unpack these power dynamics, this dissertation employs CDA to examine how language maintains or challenges systemic inequalities. According to Norman Fairclough (1992), discourse must be conceptualised not merely as a reflection of reality but as a form of social practice. Fairclough argues for a dialectical relationship between language and society: discourse connects the micro-level of the text with the macro-level of social structures. It is shaped by pre-existing institutional frameworks, yet it simultaneously holds the generative power to shape, reproduce, or actively challenge those structures.

Furthermore, Fairclough (1992) states that this discipline should extend beyond formal political institutions into the domain of the "lifeworld". He understands the political sphere as encompassing not only stable institutionalised practices, but also "unstable, fluctuating, and emergent" grassroots social movements, as well as mediatised politics. Thus, the "Yes" and "No" campaigns did not operate in an ideological vacuum but sought

to actively remodel the sociopolitical landscape of Australia regarding racial reconciliation.

Complementing this macro-sociological view, Teun van Dijk (1993, 2008) anchors Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) in the cognitive and institutional access of elites. Van Dijk indicates that discourse analysis examines the text and talk of politicians to understand the nature and function of political discourse. PDA is fundamentally concerned with critiquing the role discourse plays in producing, maintaining, abusing, and resisting power in contemporary society. He insists that such analysis should address issues of power, domination, inequality, and resistance, exploring how strategies of text and talk are conditioned by, and in turn help condition, cultural processes.

In *Discourse and Power*, Van Dijk (2008) asserts that political and media elites maintain "preferential access" to the public sphere, granting them a near-monopoly over the manufacturing of public consent. To analyse highly polarised debates, Van Dijk introduces the concept of the "Ideological Square", a socio-cognitive strategy consisting of four structural discursive moves:

1. Emphasise "Our" good properties.
2. Emphasise "Their" bad properties.
3. Mitigate "Our" bad properties.
4. Mitigate "Their" good properties.

Regarding the 2023 Referendum, this framework is essential for deconstructing how both campaigns manufactured binary opposition. In applying the Ideological Square, political actors utilised positive self-representation contrasted with negative "other-presentation" to consolidate a dominant "ingroup" against an untrustworthy "outgroup". Ultimately, these theories provide the necessary analytical lens to examine how the "Yes" and "No" campaigns did not merely debate a policy, but competed discursively to define the legitimacy of Indigenous presence within the Australian Constitution.

2.2.3. Cognitive Framing and Strategic Storytelling

To understand how ideological structures successfully colonise public common sense, this framework incorporates the cognitive theory of Framing. As George Lakoff (2004) posits, cognitive frames are unconscious mental structures that shape how individuals perceive and understand the world. Because they reside in the cognitive unconscious,

frames are not observed directly but are known through their consequences and the language that activates them; in addition, they define goals, plans, actions, and what society ultimately accepts as "common sense". In the political arena, Lakoff argues that language and metaphors constitute the central battlefield, because language transmits and evokes primary ideas. Every word spoken activates a specific conceptual frame in the brain's neural circuitry. For instance, the strategic use of a metaphor pre-defines roles; employing specific terminology allows a political party to impose its worldview, as thinking differently requires speaking differently (Lakoff, 2004).

A critical element of Lakoff's theory is the principle of vocabulary control: never use the opponent's language. Grounded in cognitive linguistics, Lakoff (2004) demonstrates that negating a frame inherently evokes and activates it. Consequently, arguing against an adversary using their own terminology inadvertently reinforces their worldview in the minds of the audience. Therefore, to win a debate, actors must structure their arguments using a vocabulary that reflects their own values.

Robert Entman (1993) provides the structural mechanics of this process, formally defining framing through two interconnected actions: selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text. Entman (1993) defines salience as the act of making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences, thereby elevating the probability that receivers will process and store that meaning.

According to Entman (1993), frames typically perform four primary functions, often simultaneously. First, they define problems by determining what a causal agent is doing and evaluating costs and benefits through the filter of common cultural values. Second, they diagnose causes by identifying the specific forces creating the problem. Third, they make moral judgments by evaluating these causal agents and their effects. Finally, they suggest remedies by offering and justifying solutions while predicting their likely outcomes.

Texts increase the salience of specific information through strategic mechanisms such as placement, repetition, and symbolic association with culturally familiar concepts. Crucially, Entman (1993) highlights the role of pre-existing mental "schemata": if a message aligns with the audience's pre-existing beliefs or stereotypes, even a brief

mention becomes highly salient. Conversely, information that clashes with these schemata is easily ignored. Furthermore, framing is defined as much by omission as by inclusion, and excluding certain interpretations, explanations, or facts diverts the audience's attention, inherently guiding their response (Entman, 1993).

By applying these theories to the 2023 Voice Referendum, this dissertation can analyse how political campaigns engaged in strategic storytelling. Campaigns do not merely present raw facts; they organise events into narrative arcs that assign moral responsibility. By selecting specific words, making certain historical aspects salient, and strategically omitting others, the campaigns sought to define what the core "problem" of the referendum was, automatically dictating the logical "solution" for the voters.

2.2.4. Postcolonialism and the Politics of Representation

Finally, because this discourse directly impacts the original inhabitants of a nation historically shaped by colonial settlement, the framework must be anchored in postcolonial representation theory. Stuart Hall (1997) defines representation as the production of meaning through language, functioning as the vital link between mental concepts and systems of signs. Fundamentally, Hall argues that meaning is never fixed or inherent in the material world; rather, it is socially constructed through shared cultural codes and representational practices. Because texts inherently possess multiple potential meanings, political and media institutions constantly intervene to encode a "preferred meaning" and limit ambiguity. As Hall posits, the attempt to fix meaning is precisely why power intervenes in discourse.

This intervention frequently operates through stereotyping, which reduces marginalised groups to simple, essentialised characteristics. Hall demonstrates that this representational practice creates a rigid symbolic boundary between the "normal" (Us) and the "pathological" (the "Other"). This operates as a form of symbolic violence where dominant groups exercise hegemony by classifying individuals according to a constructed norm and sending those who differ into symbolic exile (Hall, 1997).

Within societies marked by historical colonisation, this representation often oscillates between using the Indigenous subject as a purely symbolic figurehead of national heritage or framing their demands for self-determination as an existential threat to the state's civic equality. This tension is critically addressed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), who

critiques Western bureaucracies for perpetuating imperialist discourses. She argues that state agencies systematically frame systemic inequalities as an "Indigenous problem", effectively blaming marginalised communities for their condition rather than acknowledging the historical and economic structures imposed by the State.

Tuhiwai Smith (1999) draws a sharp distinction between genuine structural decolonisation, which demands material recovery, social justice and the actual dismantling of colonial power, and mere symbolic recognition. She warns that Western bureaucratic structures often deploy new institutional language, such as "reconciliation" or "negotiation," to co-opt decolonial demands. Instead of yielding structural power, the state maintains control of the agenda, occasionally fostering new corporate Indigenous elites to neutralise grassroots resistance and commodifying "otherness" for global consumption.

Applying this postcolonial critique allows this dissertation to critically evaluate how the discursive strategies surrounding the Voice Referendum navigated the profound tension between genuine structural reform and purely symbolic recognition.

3. Background: The Sociopolitical Context of Indigenous Australia

To conduct a rigorous CDA of the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum, it is necessary to establish the historical and institutional framework in which the campaign narratives actually operated. The discursive strategies employed by both the "Yes" and "No" campaigns were predicated on Australia's constitutional history, its demographic realities, and the evolution of state policies regarding Indigenous populations. This chapter provides a factual and structural overview of this context.

3.1. Colonisation, the Stolen Generations and Systemic Exclusion

Archaeological and fossil evidence indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have inhabited the Australian continent for over 65,000 years (Clarkson et al. 2017). Prior to European arrival, the continent hosted hundreds of distinct nomadic and semi-nomadic communities with complex social, linguistic, and trade structures, including early commercial interactions with fishermen from the Indonesian archipelago. However, the political and legal foundation of the modern Australian state began in 1788 when the First Fleet, commanded by Arthur Phillip, established a British penal colony in New South Wales following James Cook's expedition (Macintyre, 2016).

Unlike in other British colonies such as New Zealand or Canada, where treaties were negotiated with native populations, British settlement in Australia was premised on the legal doctrine of *terra nullius* (nobody's land). This premise meant that the Crown claimed absolute sovereignty and ownership over the territory without formal negotiation. As scholars like Moreton-Robinson (2015) point out in their analysis of Australian statehood and the "white possessive," this legal framework structurally omitted Indigenous populations from the original concept of national sovereignty and property rights.

Following settlement, the Indigenous population experienced a drastic demographic decline. This was mainly caused by introduced diseases (such as measles, smallpox and tuberculosis) to which the native population had no immunity, and by violent frontier conflicts resulting from the expropriation of land and natural resources (Macintyre, 2016). Historical records indicate that over 10,000 Indigenous people died in massacres during these Frontier Wars (Ryan, 2023). Simultaneously, Indigenous labour was frequently coerced or utilised in state expansion; many worked as trackers for British inland exploratory expeditions or as shepherds in the growing pastoral economy. Furthermore,

historical abuses extended to the exploitation of Indigenous populations, including the abduction and forced labour of islanders and coastal communities in agricultural plantations (a practice known as "blackbirding"), as well as widespread sexual violence against Indigenous women (Reynolds, 1982).

As colonial settlements expanded, administrative policies towards Indigenous peoples were institutionalised through "protectionist" legislation. While officially enacted to safeguard native populations, state and territory governments appointed Protectors of Aborigines and established Protection Boards, which heavily regulated the movement, wages, and civil rights of Indigenous individuals (Haebich, 2000). Institutional segregation became visible in urban planning, exemplified by Brisbane's "Boundary Streets," which legally restricted the movement of Indigenous people within city limits and enforced evening curfews backed by police expulsion (Fisher, 1992).

From the late 19th century until 1969, protectionism was gradually replaced by the official policy of "assimilation". Based on concepts of "blood quantum" (McGregor, 1997), the government sought to absorb children of mixed descent into white society to eradicate Indigenous cultural traits over generations in favour of Anglo-Saxon customs. This policy facilitated the systematic, state-mandated removal of thousands of Indigenous children from their families to be raised in religious institutions or by white foster families (Haebich, 2000). These individuals are officially referred to as the Stolen Generations, with historical estimates suggesting that this policy affected between 10 and 33% of all First Nations children (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). This history of cultural eradication became central to the 2023 referendum's discourse on moral redress.

3.2. The Road to Recognition: From the 1967 Referendum to the National Apology

The institutional status of Indigenous Australians was formally codified in the first *Australian Constitution* (1901), which excluded them from the national census (sec. 127) and left their voting rights subject to individual state laws, effectively disenfranchising Indigenous populations from political participation in states like Queensland and Western Australia. Political mobilisation against this exclusion gained visibility in the 1930s. A pivotal moment was the 1938 "Day of Mourning" protest, held on the 150th anniversary of the First Fleet's arrival, which laid the foundation for the modern Indigenous civil rights movement and showed the dissatisfaction of the First Nations (Attwood & Markus, 1999).

Following Indigenous participation in both World Wars, the second half of the 20th century saw significant legal shifts. Federal voting rights were granted in 1962, and civil awareness was heightened by the 1965 Freedom Rides, led by university students to expose the severe and institutionalised racial segregation present in rural New South Wales (Curthoys, 2002).

The critical turning point occurred with the 1967 Referendum, which passed with over 90% public approval. This amendment granted the federal government the power to legislate specifically for Indigenous peoples and mandated their inclusion in the national census (National Archives of Australia, 2020). The following decades brought further institutional milestones, including the election of the first Aboriginal senator, Neville Bonner, in 1971, and the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act* (1976), which recognised the land rights system of Australian Aborigines in the Northern Territory and established the basis on which Aborigines in the Northern Territory could claim land rights based on traditional occupation. This was followed by the formal return of ownership of Uluru (Charles River Editors, 2017), a site of profound spiritual and cosmological significance, central to the “creation laws” of the local *Anangu* people, to the traditional owner community in 1985, marking an early milestone in cultural and territorial recognition.

In the legal sphere, the doctrine of *terra nullius* was formally overturned in the landmark High Court decision of *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* (1992). The ruling legally recognised "native title", acknowledging that Indigenous land rights existed prior to British sovereignty. This judicial shift was politically reinforced by Prime Minister Paul Keating's *Redfern Speech* (1992), an unprecedented institutional acknowledgment of the state's role in land and cultural dispossession, violence, and the removal of children.

Despite these advancements, administrative policies faced persistent challenges. Historically, as McCallum et al. (2014) highlight, the media and the state have often framed Indigenous affairs through a "deficit model", focusing primarily on socio-economic disparities. In 2007, the federal government launched the Northern Territory Emergency Response (often referred to as "The Intervention"), deploying military and police personnel to Indigenous communities, suspending the Racial Discrimination Act, lifting entry permits for these communities, and restricting welfare payments for essential goods purchasing, as well as prohibiting the sale of alcohol and pornography, among others, in response to national reports alleging systemic child abuse (Altman & Hinkson,

2007). This unprecedented federal intervention sparked a complex national debate regarding the balance between protecting vulnerable populations and respecting community autonomy. The core measures of this framework were subsequently extended for another decade by the Stronger Futures Policy (*Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act 2012*) in a continued attempt to alleviate these social problems.

In 2008, a significant milestone in Indigenous rights was achieved when the government initiated the "Closing the Gap" framework, a bipartisan strategy aimed at achieving statistical parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. By committing to a long-term strategy, the government elevated Indigenous welfare to a national priority and a matter of state (Macklin, 2008). Coordinated by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), this ongoing framework represents the most extensive administrative effort in Australian history to combat a broad spectrum of structural disparities, including racial issues, economic inequality, employment, drug consumption, education, violence, political representation, sexual and child abuse, health, life expectancy, culture preservation, and social awareness (Macklin, 2008).

That same year, in 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018) issued a formal National Apology to the Stolen Generations, acknowledging the historical injustices committed and attempting to draw up a vision for a reconciled nation, a declaration which obtained unanimous parliamentary acceptance (Rudd, 2008). Over the subsequent decade, the data-driven approach of "Closing the Gap" yielded measurable improvements in specific areas, such as early childhood education enrolment, high school graduation rates, and reductions in infant mortality. However, as noted by researchers like Kowal (2015), well-intentioned government initiatives aimed at reducing inequality have often generated institutional tension. Kowal argues that state-directed policies seeking to improve socio-economic indicators through bureaucratic targets frequently clash with Indigenous demands for political self-determination and structural autonomy.

3.3. The Uluru Statement from the Heart and The Voice to Parliament

The perceived limitations of strictly bureaucratic approaches, coupled with the failure of a 1999 referendum proposing a symbolic constitutional preamble honouring Indigenous Australians, led Indigenous leaders to advocate for substantive structural reform (Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians, 2012). Institutional

precedents, such as the creation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in the 1990s, had laid the groundwork for political progress. This was further enshrined in the 1999 Reconciliation Motion drafted by Prime Minister John Howard and Aboriginal Senator Aden Ridgeway, which acknowledged Indigenous mistreatment as the nation's "most blemished chapter" (Parliament of Australia, 1999). Building on this momentum, in 2010, an expert panel, comprising Indigenous leaders, members of parliament, and legal experts, was convened to explore constitutional recognition, leading to an aborted referendum attempt in 2013 due to a lack of public consensus.

In 2014, Indigenous leader Noel Pearson, collaborating with conservative legal scholars, proposed a compromise that sought to bridge the gap between Indigenous demands for empowerment and conservative fears of judicial overreach. This "radical centre" approach envisioned a constitutionally guaranteed advisory body, a "Voice to Parliament", that would hold a duty to be consulted on Indigenous matters but would lack veto power or executive decision-making authority, thereby preserving the ultimate legislative supremacy of the Australian Parliament (Morris, 2015).

This concept was solidified in May 2017 following a nationwide consultation process by the Referendum Council, a bipartisan initiative established by the Liberal and Labor parties to explore meaningful models of constitutional recognition prior to holding any national vote. This process was guided by the publication of the *Discussion Paper on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, which served as the foundational framework for regional dialogues across the country (Referendum Council, 2017a). After extensive consultations with community members, over 250 Indigenous delegates convened at the First Nations National Constitutional Convention and endorsed the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* (2017). The document called for a sequenced reform: a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution followed by a Makarrata Commission to oversee state decision-making and truth-telling regarding Indigenous rights. These demands, along with the detailed findings of the regional dialogues, were formally presented to the government in the *Final Report of the Referendum Council* (Referendum Council, 2017b). This push for tangible power reflected a broader frustration. Over the previous two decades, First Nations activists had been demanding greater media coverage of the reality of their communities, requesting that positive aspects be highlighted to shift the focus away from the negative deficit

model, while still raising awareness in society about the systemic shortcomings they faced. The Statement explicitly shifted the goal away from mere symbolic understanding toward enduring constitutional recognition that would structurally change the reality of these communities.

The conservative Turnbull government initially rejected the proposal in 2017, arguing it would function as an unconstitutional "third chamber" of parliament and undermine equal civic representation (Turnbull et al., 2017), a claim that was strongly disputed by constitutional experts who noted the proposed body lacked veto powers. However, the first practical steps toward the 2023 Voice Referendum were taken in 2019 under Prime Minister Scott Morrison. A co-design process was launched with the assistance of experts and national leaders in order to ensure Indigenous peoples had a guaranteed voice in Parliament. Nonetheless, Morrison rejected the request to change the Constitution, opting instead for a purely legislative route so that it would remain a parliamentary matter rather than a constitutionally binding one. Proponents of this approach argued that a legislative model would offer pragmatic flexibility, allowing the Voice to be tested, modified, or dismantled by Parliament if it proved ineffective, thereby avoiding the irreversible legal risks and potential judicial overreach associated with a constitutional amendment (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2021).

Faced with the administration's refusal to pursue constitutional change, the Indigenous Advisory Group proposed in its 2021 final report that the government should consult with an Indigenous commission on all matters related to racial discrimination and native titles on local, regional, and national levels. Following the government's strict parameters, this body was designed with purely advisory and consultative powers, possessing no real authority to enforce its opinions, a structural design justified by the administration as strictly necessary to maintain the fundamental civic equality of all citizens and preserve the sovereignty of the existing parliamentary system (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2021).

The political landscape shifted following the 2022 federal election, when Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese (2022) explicitly committed to implementing the *Uluru Statement* in full during his victory speech. The government called a referendum for late 2023, asking the public to approve a constitutional amendment to establish the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice, a national, permanent, and independent consultative body (Vromen et al. 2025). What originated as a targeted proposal for an advisory

committee on Indigenous affairs rapidly transformed into a complex national debate over constitutional architecture, historical grievance, and national identity, providing the discursive material analysed in the following chapters.

4. Discourse Analysis I: The “Yes” Campaign

4.1. Narrative Frames

In political communication, cognitive framing involves selecting specific aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, thereby promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993). Throughout the 2023 referendum campaign, the "Yes" side faced the complex challenge of translating a structural constitutional amendment into an accessible and compelling narrative for the general public. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's official campaign launch speech in Adelaide serves as the foundational text for this effort, establishing three primary cognitive frames designed to legitimise the Voice and neutralise conservative opposition.

The primary cognitive challenge for the government was to prevent the referendum from being perceived as a partisan initiative of the political left. To achieve this, Albanese systematically deployed a depoliticisation frame, attempting to elevate the constitutional amendment above the rigidity of political polarisation. He explicitly instructed the electorate to separate the proposal from traditional party politics, urging them to view the referendum as a foundational choice concerning the country's core values: “on October 14th, you are not being asked to vote for a political party or for a person. You’re being asked to vote for an idea” (Albanese, 2023).

To consolidate this frame of transversal unity, the Prime Minister constructed a sense of undeniable moral consensus by highlighting the support of a broad, non-political coalition across the entire sociopolitical spectrum. By stating that the Voice had been embraced by “faith groups and sporting codes and local councils and businesses and unions” (Albanese, 2023), the discourse strategically isolated the "No" campaign, framing opposition not as a legitimate political stance, but as a deviation from the established national common sense.

Secondly, anticipating the "No" campaign's reliance on risk-aversion and institutional fear, the "Yes" campaign constructed a secondary frame based on pragmatism and administrative efficiency. Rather than focusing exclusively on abstract concepts of historical justice, Albanese framed the Voice as a bureaucratic necessity designed to fix a broken policy system. He emphasised tangible, localised outcomes, projecting the Voice as a mechanism that would guarantee that “funding actually reaches the people on the

ground” (Albanese, 2023). By employing lexical choices associated with corporate and administrative efficiency, such as “better results,” “saving money,” and “no more waste”, the governmental discourse attempted to cognitively re-frame the constitutional amendment. It was not presented as a radical transfer of structural power, but rather as a “practical way of dealing with issues” (Albanese, 2023), thereby making the proposal more palatable to conservative and centrist voters who prioritise economic efficiency over symbolic recognition.

Finally, the "Yes" campaign anchored its narrative in a profound sense of historical inevitability and moral obligation; Albanese framed the "Yes" vote as the natural, forward-facing trajectory of the Australian nation. Utilising national symbolism, he drew a parallel with the Australian coat of arms, asserting that “like the Kangaroo and the Emu... they never go backwards, they just go forwards. And so do we” (Albanese, 2023).

This frame sought to position the referendum not as an isolated legal question, but as a historical test of the nation's democratic conscience. Albanese (2023) explicitly linked the Voice to a lineage of universally celebrated, yet initially contested, national milestones, including women's suffrage, the minimum wage, Medicare, and the National Apology. By establishing this historical continuum, the Prime Minister constructed a moral binary: voting "Yes" was equated with progress and national pride, while voting "No" was framed as a conscious decision to “close the door on the next generation of Indigenous Australians” (Albanese, 2023). This emotional and strategic storytelling aimed to transform the constitutional vote into a referendum on the moral identity of the nation itself.

While the governmental discourse framed the Voice through administrative necessity, Minister Linda Burney (2023) deployed a complementary cognitive frame centred on lived experience and the humanisation of structural inequality. Utilising what Lakoff (2004) defines as empathetic framing, Burney explicitly shifted the focus from abstract constitutional mechanics to the tangible suffering of individuals. She invited the audience to engage in a perspective-taking exercise: “Consider this - Stand in these shoes” (Burney, 2023), immediately followed by a devastating narrative of a close friend, Michael Riley, who died prematurely from a preventable illness due to systemic neglect.

Through this strategic storytelling, Burney reframed the entire referendum. It was no longer a debate over legal definitions or centralised administrative mechanics, but a

matter of life and death, dignity, and basic human rights. By framing the Voice as an instrument to fix a "systemic and structural disadvantage" (Burney, 2023), her discourse aimed to evoke moral accountability within the progressive and uncommitted electorate. Consequently, this narrative strategy was explicitly designed to shift the voter's cognitive calculation from a detached logical risk-assessment to an urgent moral obligation rooted in restorative justice.

While Albanese appealed to administrative logic and Burney to empathetic urgency, Noel Pearson (2023) introduced a profound philosophical frame based on *oikophilia*, the civic love of home and country. Pearson recognised the demographic reality that the 97% non-Indigenous majority could not be expected to vote "Yes" purely out of interpersonal affection or shared historical experience, as those bonds did not yet exist at a national level. Instead, he framed the Voice as an act of mutual fealty to the Australian continent: "It is not love of each other that joins us, it is our mutual Love of Country that unites us" (Pearson, 2023).

Furthermore, Pearson (2023) strategically deployed a "Middle-Path" frame, presenting the referendum as a definitive mechanism for conflict resolution. By describing a "Yes" vote as "the peace dividend of the middle way" and explicitly framing a "No" vote as an active choice to remain "suspended in the neverland" of endless debate (Pearson, 2023), he cognitively structured the constitutional amendment not as a concession, but as a reciprocal treaty. In this framing, Indigenous Australians offered the gift of their ancient heritage in exchange for democratic inclusion, constructing the Voice as the final necessary step to legitimise modern Australian identity.

Replacing the realm of political marketing with civil and constitutional advocacy, Professor Megan Davis and Pat Anderson AO deployed a strict frame differentiating between substantive structural reform and mere performative political gestures. Representing the foundational architects of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, they explicitly framed the Voice as a definitive rejection of "weak recognition" (Davis & Anderson, 2022). Davis (2022) argued that Australian political history is characterised by a "proclivity of retail Australian politics for minimalism and symbolism when it comes to Indigenous matters," arguing that without a constitutional mandate, Indigenous affairs are subjugated to "bureaucratic and public policy rationalisation that was entirely disconnected from the reality of the lives that First Nations peoples live" (Davis & Anderson, 2022).

By framing the amendment as a structural safeguard against the historical unreliability of politics and parliamentary processes, their discourse sought to convince the electorate that a constitutionally enshrined Voice is the only mechanism that "compels the state to listen" (Davis & Anderson, 2022). This frame effectively shifted the narrative from a polite gesture of goodwill to a pragmatic and non-negotiable prerequisite for genuine democratic participation. In doing so, the civil campaign established a cognitive boundary: symbolic acknowledgment without a transfer of structural, advisory power was framed as fundamentally unacceptable to Indigenous communities.

4.2. Discursive Strategies

While cognitive frames establish the thematic boundaries of a political narrative, discursive strategies are the specific linguistic and rhetorical tools deployed to legitimise that narrative and persuade the audience. Drawing on CDA, this section examines how the governmental "Yes" campaign utilised language not merely to inform, but to construct authority, neutralise opposition, and shape social reality. Anthony Albanese's campaign launch speech reveals the discursive strategies designed to counter the conservative opposition's rhetoric.

A central objective of the "Yes" campaign's discourse was to neutralise the risk-aversion strategy popularised by the "No" campaign's slogan, "If you don't know, vote no". To counter the weaponisation of legal uncertainty, Albanese employed a strategy of intense lexical simplification and syntactic repetition. By reading the exact constitutional amendment aloud, the discourse attempted to strip the proposal of its perceived legal complexity.

Following each clause of the proposed constitutional alteration, Albanese systematically deployed a repetitive triad of adjectives: "Simple. Clear. Straightforward" and "Straightforward. Clear. Unambiguous" (Albanese, 2023). In CDA terms, this is a strategic use of overlexicalisation; in other words, repeating quasi-synonymous terms to conscientiously reinforce a specific ideological point. By portraying the legal text as straightforward, the governmental discourse implicitly pathologised the "No" campaign's concerns, suggesting that any perceived confusion was manufactured rather than genuine.

To further insulate the constitutional amendment from accusations of radicalism, the speech heavily relied on legitimation strategies based on authority and consensus (Van Dijk, 2008). Albanese systematically engaged in strategic "name-dropping," leveraging

the symbolic capital of widely respected societal figures to construct an aura of unquestionable institutional backing.

The discourse explicitly appealed to the electorate to "listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and elders like Noel Pearson and Aunty Pat Anderson" and "trailblazers working with the next generation like Evonne Goolagong or Eddie Betts" (Albanese, 2023). Crucially, to fracture the partisan divide, Albanese explicitly co-opted the authority of the opposition by listing "respected Liberals like Premier Jeremy Rockliff, Ken Wyatt... and Julian Leeser" (Albanese, 2023). By accumulating these diverse sources of authority, ranging from sports icons to conservative politicians, the discourse sought to construct the "Yes" vote as the default, mainstream position, thereby framing the "No" vote as a socially isolated and fringe alternative.

In traditional political polarisation, as theorised by Van Dijk's (2008) Ideological Square, elites often rely on a rigid "Us vs. Them" dichotomy characterised by positive self-representation and negative other-representation. However, the governmental discourse surrounding the referendum required a more unifying approach. Instead of aggressively attacking "No" voters, Albanese utilised inclusive pronouns and forward-looking metaphors to construct an all-encompassing, inclusive national "We".

The speech repeatedly invoked the collective responsibility of "non-Indigenous Australia" to "grasp that hand of friendship" (Albanese, 2023). By structuring the relationship as an invitation, the discourse strategically placed the moral burden on the non-Indigenous majority; rejecting the Voice was discursively framed as rejecting a gesture of goodwill. Furthermore, Albanese defined the opposition not through active malice, but through stagnation. The repeated anaphora "Don't close the door on..." explicitly linked a "No" vote with a national standstill, asserting that "Voting No leads nowhere. It means nothing changes" (Albanese, 2023). Through this deictic positioning, the discourse presented the electorate with a binary choice not between two political ideologies, but between historical progress and national stagnation.

A primary discursive strategy deployed by Burney to validate the necessity of the Voice was the heavy reliance on statistical accumulation to build an undeniable proof of institutional failure. Rather than using numbers merely as raw data, she weaponised them rhetorically to create stark moral contrasts. This is evident when she juxtaposed Indigenous incarceration with academic success, noting that the number of Indigenous

people in prison cells was “four times as many as those who celebrated graduating Uni that year” (Burney, 2023). Furthermore, her systematic breakdown of the Closing the Gap metrics—repeating the rhythmic refrain “not on track” for life expectancy, infant health, and education—served as a discursive indictment of the status quo. This strategy was designed to dismantle the conservative argument that existing systems were sufficient, establishing a linguistic reality where voting "No" was synonymous with endorsing a failing, multi-generational crisis.

In alignment with Van Dijk’s (1993) Ideological Square, Burney’s speech features a direct and aggressive strategy of negative other-representation aimed at delegitimising the opposition. Unlike Albanese’s softer approach, Burney actively pathologised the "No" campaign group, Fair Australia, by explicitly anchoring them to external, highly polarised political phenomena: “It is importing Trump-style politics to Australia. It is post-truth. And its aim is to polarise” (Burney, 2023). By utilising highly charged political descriptors like "post-truth" and accusing them of making "false claims", Burney attempted to strip the conservative opposition of its democratic legitimacy. Through this discursive manoeuvre, opposing the Voice was no longer framed as a conservative policy preference, but as an embrace of deceptive, un-Australian political extremism.

Finally, Burney heavily relied on intertextuality to reinforce her symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) and political authority. Her speech opened with a formal address in her native Wiradjuri language, establishing an immediate postcolonial counter-narrative against institutional Anglo-Australian discourse. Crucially, Burney closed the structural loop of her speech by reading extensive literal extracts from the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, specifically evoking the concept of "the torment of our powerlessness" (Burney, 2023). By embedding the collective authority of the 250 Indigenous elders who signed the Statement directly into her own speech, Burney discursively positioned herself not as an isolated minister enacting public policy, but as a direct catalyst for a historic, grassroots Indigenous consensus.

Noel Pearson’s discourse presents a fascinating subversion of Van Dijk’s (1993) Ideological Square. Rather than emphasising a victim-oppressor dichotomy to induce guilt, a strategy often associated with progressive activism, Pearson actively deployed a de-victimisation strategy designed to reassure the conservative and centrist electorate. He explicitly absolved the non-Indigenous majority of historical blame, stating: “You are not guilty for the past. Neither are we...our victimhood ends with our empowerment”

(Pearson, 2023). By discursively severing the constitutional amendment from the rhetoric of historical guilt, Pearson neutralised one of the primary emotional barriers to conservative support.

Pearson also utilised powerful metaphorical synthesis to construct a unified national narrative. He discursively integrated the three distinct strands of the Australian historical experience into a single, cohesive identity: “A Nation Blessed – with an Indigenous Heritage spanning 60 millennia – a British Democracy captured in its Constitution – and a Multicultural Unity that is a Beacon to the World” (Pearson, 2023). By capitalising the key terms of this triad, Pearson linguistically elevated Indigenous heritage to the same structural and moral level as both British democratic institutions and modern multicultural migration. This rhetorical strategy functioned to legitimise the Voice not as an alteration of the Australian Constitution, but as the long-overdue completion of it, forging a fully inclusive national identity.

To mobilise the electorate and legitimise the Voice proposal, Davis and Anderson (2022) utilised a discursive strategy grounded in grassroots authority, actively distancing the initiative from the traditional political elite. Davis repeatedly emphasised the “deliberative process” of the First Nations Regional Dialogues, noting that the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* was an unprecedented consensus achieved by deliberately excluding “professional politicians,” “CEOs,” and “people with a voice...who regularly lobby in the halls of the Parliament” (Davis & Anderson, 2022). By linguistically constructing the Voice as a “bottom-up process” driven by “people that were actually genuinely voiceless” (Davis & Anderson, 2022), they strategically insulated the proposal from accusations of elitism, validating it instead as a pure expression of democratic self-determination.

Furthermore, the civil leaders utilised a strategy of direct moral interpellation to bypass collective partisan identities. Anderson explicitly isolated the voter in a space of individual moral responsibility, removing the shield of political tribalism: “There comes a time when you’re in the ballot box yourself, it is just you and your conscience” (Davis & Anderson, 2022). Finally, by structuring the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* explicitly as an “invitation to the Australian people” rather than a demand handed to politicians (Davis & Anderson, 2022), they discursively positioned the Australian public not as political arbiters evaluating a policy, but as moral agents tasked with answering a historic,

community-led call for justice. Rejecting the Voice was thus framed not merely as an electoral choice, but as the active repudiation of a peaceful national invitation.

4.3. Discursive Vulnerabilities

While the cognitive frames and discursive strategies employed by the "Yes" campaign were meticulously designed to project unity and historical progress, the narrative contained profound structural vulnerabilities. Rather than functioning as a cohesive persuasive tool, these linguistic and strategic flaws generated cognitive resistance among undecided voters. Drawing on post-referendum academic analysis, this section identifies four primary discursive vulnerabilities that the governmental campaign failed to mitigate, which were subsequently weaponised by the "No" campaign.

The first major vulnerability was the strategic reliance on elite legitimisation, which ultimately trapped the "Yes" campaign in an anti-establishment paradox. Consequently, the campaign's heavy dependence on endorsements from high-profile celebrities and multinational corporations inadvertently signaled to the working-class electorate that the Voice was an initiative aligned with the wealthy and privileged, implicitly contradicting the interests of ordinary citizens (McAllister & Biddle, 2024). This is further evidenced by reports detailing how the massive corporate donations from Australia's "Big Four" banks, mining conglomerates, and supermarket monopolies were actively utilised by opposition figures to highlight a profound disconnect between corporate boardrooms and mainstream conservative values (Smith, 2025). By linguistically relying on top-down authority figures to legitimise a community-driven movement, the "Yes" campaign alienated its popular base, noting that this over-reliance on national elite figures severely limited the campaign's popular resonance (Carson et al., 2024). As a result, this provided the "No" campaign with the perfect conditions to deploy successful populist rhetoric, effectively framing the constitutional amendment not as an Indigenous empowerment tool, but as an elitist project designed by and for the political class (Rowse, 2024).

The second vulnerability emerged from a profound information void, specifically the government's refusal to articulate the legislative mechanisms of the Voice prior to the referendum. De Villiers (2024) identifies this strategic ambiguity as a fatal error, noting that the decision to withhold statutory details left the electorate deeply unsettled. When confronted with legitimate questions regarding the functional model of the Voice, Prime Minister Albanese's repetitive insistence that the necessary answers were already

available, or that details would be debated post-referendum, entirely failed to cure the public's constitutional scepticism.

It must be noted that in discourse analysis, an information vacuum is rarely left empty; it is rapidly filled by opposing narratives. Therefore, this absence of concrete detail handed the "No" campaign a critical tactical advantage; by capitalising on the public's anxiety regarding unseen constitutional risks, the opposition successfully introduced their highly effective "*If you don't know, vote no*" slogan. This catchphrase discursively transformed the electorate's natural desire for legislative clarity into a legitimate justification for an outright rejection (Biddle et al., 2023; McAllister & Biddle, 2024; Smith, 2025).

The third vulnerability was the deployment of an excessively aggressive moral framing that ultimately alienated uncommitted voters. The attempt to socially shame the opposition and conflate political scepticism with bigotry triggered a severe defensive backlash. As Wood highlights (as cited in De Villiers, 2024) the strategy of labelling undecided citizens as racists simply for harbouring genuine constitutional concerns completely destroyed the atmosphere required for reasoned democratic debate, leading voters to feel patronised and insulted by their leaders.

This moral superiority was not confined to social media fringes but was embedded within the governmental approach. Begg and Storey (2023) reveal that senior government officials acted upon the premise that any opposition to the proposal was inherently rooted in racism, to the extent of influencing early decisions regarding official campaign funding. This polarising dynamic was equally replicated in the digital sphere where "Yes" advocates routinely weaponised accusations of racism, generating intense cognitive dissonance and defensive indignation among voters who felt unjustly attacked (Graham, 2024). Conversely, the "No" campaign expertly navigated this moral pressure by employing deliberately neutral terminology, such as referring to disadvantaged communities rather than race, which allowed the electorate to reject the Voice without suffering moral guilt or social ostracisation (Gabsi, 2026).

Finally, the "Yes" campaign suffered from a fatal rhetorical dissonance, structurally paralyzing its own narrative by attempting to appease contradictory audiences simultaneously. Evans and Grattan (2023) identify this governmental paradox: the Voice was simultaneously framed as a highly powerful instrument capable of closing the systemic inequality gap, and merely as a modest, harmless opportunity for First Nations

people to be heard. This fundamental contradiction is attributed by some experts directly to the Prime Minister, who projected this duality across media appearances, selling the amendment as both a modest administrative adjustment and an unprecedented shift in structural power (De Villiers, 2024). Ultimately, as Biddle et al. (2023) conclude, this discursive incoherence cost the "Yes" side the referendum; in their attempt to soothe the fears of conservative voters by minimising the magnitude of the constitutional change, the "Yes" campaign inadvertently portrayed the Voice as an inconsequential and purely administrative proposal, thereby stripping the initiative of the inspirational momentum required to overcome the perceived legal risks.

5. Discourse Analysis II: The “No” Campaign

5.1. Narrative Frames

To understand the efficacy of the "No" campaign, it is necessary to analyse the foundational discourse of the institutional opposition. The second reading speech delivered by the Leader of the Opposition, Peter Dutton (2023), serves as the primary linguistic architecture for the conservative veto. Rather than relying on a singular ideological rejection, Dutton systematically deployed two highly effective cognitive frames designed to maximise electoral anxiety and neutralise the moral urgency of the "Yes" campaign.

Dutton's (2023) primary narrative strategy was to reframe the referendum from a question of historical justice to one of unprecedented institutional danger. He deliberately anchored his discourse in an extreme form of risk aversion, portraying the constitutional amendment as a threat to the stability of the nation. By asserting that a successful vote would mean the country's democracy would be "fundamentally altered—and, in this case, not for the better", Dutton (2023, p. 3235) established a cognitive boundary where voting "Yes" was synonymous with national regression.

To consolidate this frame of institutional hazard, Dutton (2023) utilised lexical choices drawn from the semantic field of reckless consumerism and gambling. He described the Voice as a "reckless roll of the dice" and a "poorly defined, untested and risk ridden" model, explicitly warning voters that the amendment comes with a "no-returns policy" should they experience "buyer's remorse" (Dutton, 2023, p. 3236). This framing intentionally bypassed complex legal debates, replacing them with highly relatable metaphors of financial risk. Furthermore, by projecting a catastrophic future scenario where the Voice could "grind our system to a halt from the resulting years of litigation" (Dutton, 2023), the opposition leader successfully framed the status quo not as an injustice, but as a necessary constitutional safeguard.

This primary source analysis is heavily corroborated by academic literature. Carson et al. (2024) identify this exact rhetorical manoeuvre as a subsidiary fear-based narrative, effectively functioning as a cascade-effect argument that convinced voters the Voice would trigger unpredictable legal and economic upheavals. Furthermore, by introducing a highly complex structural change without bipartisan consensus, the government inevitably allowed the opposition to weaponise the lack of detail, transforming the

referendum into an uncompromising binary choice focused entirely on institutional hazard (De Villiers, 2024).

To insulate the institutional opposition from accusations of racial prejudice, Dutton (2023) masterfully co-opted the classical liberal framework of equality before the law, effectively weaponising the concept of colour-blindness. He framed the Australian Constitution as the ultimate equaliser, claiming that "we're all equal before the law... whether you're an Indigenous Australian, you're Australian born or you have come from around the world" (Dutton, 2023, p. 3237). By establishing this egalitarian baseline, Dutton executed a profound discursive inversion: he framed the "Yes" campaign, not the opposition, as the true agents of racial division. This rhetorical manoeuvre was particularly effective in a highly multicultural nation, resonating deeply with immigrant demographics who, despite facing their own historical hardships, perceived the structural elevation of one specific group as a violation of the egalitarian social contract. He explicitly warned that the Voice would have an "Orwellian effect, where all Australians are equal but some Australians are more equal than others", and deliberately leveraged the historical legacy of the civil rights movement by arguing that progress is defined by the push to "judge each other on the content of our character, not the colour of our skin" (Dutton, 2023, p. 3237). Through this strategic intertextuality, Dutton (2023, p. 3237) cognitively framed the Voice as a "symptom of the madness of identity politics" that would re-racialise the Australian nation.

This discursive manoeuvre is widely recognised in post-referendum analyses as the ideological cornerstone of the conservative victory. Begg (2023) argues that framing the Voice as an initiative that grants separate political rights based on race allowed the opposition to position the amendment as a direct attack on Australia's most basic egalitarian values. This explains the efficacy of the selected frame, noting that non-graduate voters inherently presume equality regardless of community identity (Birrell & Betts, 2023). Consequently, as Dutton's speech exemplifies, the opposition successfully convinced a large portion of the electorate that the advocates of the Voice were the actual racists promoting structural separatism. Ultimately, this colour-blind narrative allowed the "No" campaign to position itself as the truly inclusive choice, successfully neutralising accusations of prejudice by framing the rejection of the Voice as a rigorous defence of democratic equality (Stevenson, 2024).

While Peter Dutton established the institutional justification for the "No" vote, the conservative campaign required a powerful emotional and moral narrative to dismantle the "Yes" campaign's monopoly on Indigenous empathy. This was achieved through the discursive framing provided by Shadow Minister for Indigenous Australians, Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price (2023) during her pivotal National Press Club address. Acting as the primary spokesperson for the Fair Australia campaign, Price deployed two devastating cognitive frames that shifted the debate from constitutional theory to material reality and racial separatism.

Price (2023) aggressively rejected the progressive frame of the Voice as a unifying act of recognition, reframing it instead as an institutionalisation of racial division. She established a cognitive boundary where supporting the Voice was synonymous with "segmenting our nation into us and them" (Price, 2023). Crucially, Price attacked the foundational premise of the "Yes" campaign by framing the very concept of a singular Indigenous Voice as a form of "backwards, neo-colonial racial stereotyping" that falsely presumed Aboriginal Australians were a "homogenous group" who all think and feel the same way (Price, 2023).

By linguistically listing historical and contemporary Indigenous parliamentarians, Price framed the constitutional amendment not as a step forward, but as an insult to the existing democratic achievements of First Nations people. As Vromen et al. (2025) analyse, this framing allowed Price to propel a highly effective conservative vision of equality, utilising her identity as a powerful Aboriginal woman to legitimise the rejection of structural separatism without appearing prejudiced.

The most potent frame deployed by Price was the radical deflation of the constitutional amendment's urgency by contrasting it with tangible ground-level trauma. Price (2023) systematically diverted the discursive focus away from the federal government's legal architecture and towards the "rampant abuse and neglect" occurring in remote communities. She framed the constitutional Voice as a distraction engineered by an elite "Aboriginal industry" that would inevitably fail to address the true causes of marginalisation, such as "domestic violence, abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, lack of education" (Price, 2023).

This material frame effectively neutralised the moral high ground of the "Yes" campaign. Roussos (2024) highlights the efficacy of this strategy, noting that Price successfully

challenged the government's narrative by demanding a focus on stepping away from separatist policies and prioritising the protection of vulnerable children. By framing the Voice as an elite bureaucratic indulgence that ignored practical realities, Price provided uncommitted voters with a compelling moral justification to vote "No": rejecting the Voice was discursively transformed into a demand for genuine, pragmatic accountability.

Crucially, the opposition to the referendum was not exclusive to the political right; it featured a highly progressive and radical flank led by the Blak Sovereign Movement. Spearheaded by independent Senator Lidia Thorpe (2023) in her National Press Club address, this frame offered a profound decolonial critique that rejected the referendum from a standpoint of systemic self-determination. Rather than framing the Voice as an overreach of Indigenous power, Thorpe framed it as a mechanism of colonial assimilation.

Within this narrative, the proposal was discursively constructed as a "powerless advisory body" and mere "window dressing for constitutional recognition" (Thorpe, 2023). Thorpe (2023) argued that incorporating an Indigenous council into a constitution established by a colonial power constituted an illegitimate act of political surrender, stating explicitly: "we are not bowing to the white man and the colonial system". Consequently, this radical frame demanded that the government prioritise a legally binding treaty and the implementation of existing human rights frameworks, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, over a subservient advisory entity. As Stevenson (2024) notes, this frame effectively portrayed the Voice not as an act of reconciliation, but as an "insult" to the political intelligence of First Nations peoples.

5.2. Discursive Strategies

Dutton's parliamentary speech also reveals the precise rhetorical manoeuvres deployed by the "No" campaign to dismantle the government's discursive authority. Through the strategic pathologisation of the legislative process and the exploitation of socioeconomic divides, the opposition transformed legal mechanics into an anti-establishment battleground.

A central discursive strategy for the "No" campaign was to linguistically weaponise the lack of legislative detail provided by the Albanese government. Dutton (2023) systematically attacked the government's procedural legitimacy, characterising the parliamentary committee reviewing the Voice as an illegitimate, predetermined tribunal

and accusing the Prime Minister of wanting Australians to endorse the constitutional change based purely on emotional resonance rather than factual substance. Rather than attempting to clarify the legal complexities, Dutton (2023) linguistically isolated the Prime Minister's timeline as an affront to democratic logic, repeating the rhythmic accusation that legislative clarity must logically precede electoral consent (Dutton, 2023). In terms of CDA, this constitutes a strategy of negative other-representation, wherein the government's approach is framed as an active deception that prefers Australians to be politically uninformed and unquestioning (Dutton, 2023).

This strategy of pathologising uncertainty proved lethal; the opposition seamlessly translated this cultivated ambiguity into the high-impact slogan "If you don't know, vote no" (Evans & Grattan, 2023). This catchphrase operated as a highly efficient linguistic heuristic (Carson et al., 2024); instead of resolving the complexity of constitutional law, the slogan and Dutton's accompanying rhetoric legitimised doubt, transforming a lack of detailed knowledge from a civic deficit into a rational, defensive electoral choice.

Dutton heavily relied on a classic anti-elite discursive structure, aggressively pitting a romanticised vision of the ordinary Australian against an out-of-touch progressive establishment. He explicitly rejected the "top-down" methodology of the Voice, arguing that Indigenous policy should not be dictated by urban intellectual circles and centralised political authorities who presume to know what is best for local communities while prioritising their own bureaucratic expansion (Dutton, 2023).

This strategy of spatial and moral distancing was essential to fracture the transversal unity that the "Yes" campaign had attempted to build. In his concluding remarks, Dutton (2023, p. 3237) systematically dismantled the symbolic capital of the government by explicitly instructing the public to disregard the endorsements of "corporate entities," "sporting codes," "celebrities," and "social media influencers". The efficacy of this dissenting dichotomy is overwhelmingly validated by political analysts; in fact, the "No" vote heavily reflected working-class resentment toward the prominent corporate elites advocating for the Voice (Birrell & Betts, 2023). Crucially, this strategy of elite-distancing was not confined to parliamentary rhetoric, but was systematically amplified by the broader opposition machinery. Advance, the primary organisation behind the "No" campaign, structurally mirrored Dutton's rhetoric by publishing open letters urging ordinary Australians who were struggling financially to send a message to the political and media elites. Ultimately, this framing transformed the referendum into a triumph of a

genuine bottom-up popular mobilisation, allowing voters to use the ballot box as a powerful rejection of the wealthy and disconnected urban establishment (Fielding, 2023).

Shifting from institutional populism to moral authenticity, Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price (2023) utilised a sophisticated set of rhetorical strategies to operationalise her material and anti-separatist frames. Her discourse reveals a masterful use of personal authenticity, the strategic pathologisation of her opponents, and a profound discursive inversion of progressive terminology.

In CDA, the construction of ethos (speaker authority) is critical for persuasion. Price (2023) weaponised her personal identity and lived experience to construct an impenetrable rhetorical shield against accusations of racism. Opening her speech by referencing her long-standing fight against "family violence and sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities" (Price, 2023), she established a level of unassailable authenticity that non-Indigenous urban politicians could not match.

This authenticity was further operationalised through the strategic use of narrative interpellation. Price (2023) introduced the harrowing personal story of Cheron Long, an ordinary Aboriginal woman caring for victims of severe domestic violence whose pleas for help had been ignored by existing bureaucratic organisations. By juxtaposing this suffering against the "Qantas sponsored leaders of the activist industry" and politicians who only travel to do events with "friendly audiences", Price successfully painted the "Yes" campaign as a performative and deeply disconnected elite project (Price, 2023). Albrechtsen (2023) confirms the lethality of this strategy, observing that Price's firsthand experience growing up in Alice Springs allowed her to credibly challenge the core claims of the "Yes" camp, dismantling the assumption that a Canberra-based body would address on-the-ground dysfunction.

A highly sophisticated linguistic manoeuvre in Price's speech was the reappropriation and inversion of the progressive concept of "truth-telling". In the context of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, truth-telling refers to acknowledging the historical atrocities of colonisation. However, Price (2023) rhetorically hijacked this term, claiming that there is "no genuine appetite in Canberra to tell the truth or to hear the truth" regarding the internal dysfunction of Indigenous communities. By doing so, she discursively insinuated that the political establishment is exclusively concerned with performative optics and reputational

management, fundamentally failing to implement tangible improvements in the day-to-day realities of Indigenous families.

She systematically pathologised the "Yes" campaign by utilising a lexical repertoire associated with deception and moral vanity, accusing the government of offering "falsehoods, misleading information and promises that can't be kept" (Price, 2023). Furthermore, she explicitly characterised progressive advocacy as mere "moral posturing and virtue signalling", accusing progressive truth-telling commissions of seeking to "nurture a national self-loathing" (Price, 2023). Through this aggressive discursive inversion, Price linguistically stripped the "Yes" campaign of its moral legitimacy, positioning the conservative "No" vote not as a rejection of Indigenous rights, but as a courageous embrace of "uncomfortable truths" against a self-serving elite.

Regarding the operationalisation of the decolonial frame, Senator Lidia Thorpe deployed a discursive strategy that denounced the "Yes" campaign as a neo-colonial project. In her rhetoric, Thorpe (2023) explicitly delineated the political landscape by identifying three distinct positions: the "yes", the "conservative racist no", and the "progressive no". By carving out this third discursive space, Thorpe insulated the Blak Sovereign Movement from right-wing conservatism while simultaneously attacking the progressive establishment.

Her primary linguistic tactic was to strip the "Yes" campaign of its benevolent aura, reframing progressive advocates as paternalistic "hand on heart do-gooders" who suffer from an "underlying racism" by presuming to know what is best for First Nations people (Thorpe, 2023). Thorpe (2023) weaponised this critique by describing the Voice as a "destructive distraction" that merely absolves the government of its continued colonial crimes. Furthermore, she effectively employed the rhetoric of systemic power dynamics, characterising the referendum as a trick designed to manufacture consent for a "colonial project" that ultimately keeps Indigenous Australians subordinate (Thorpe, 2023).

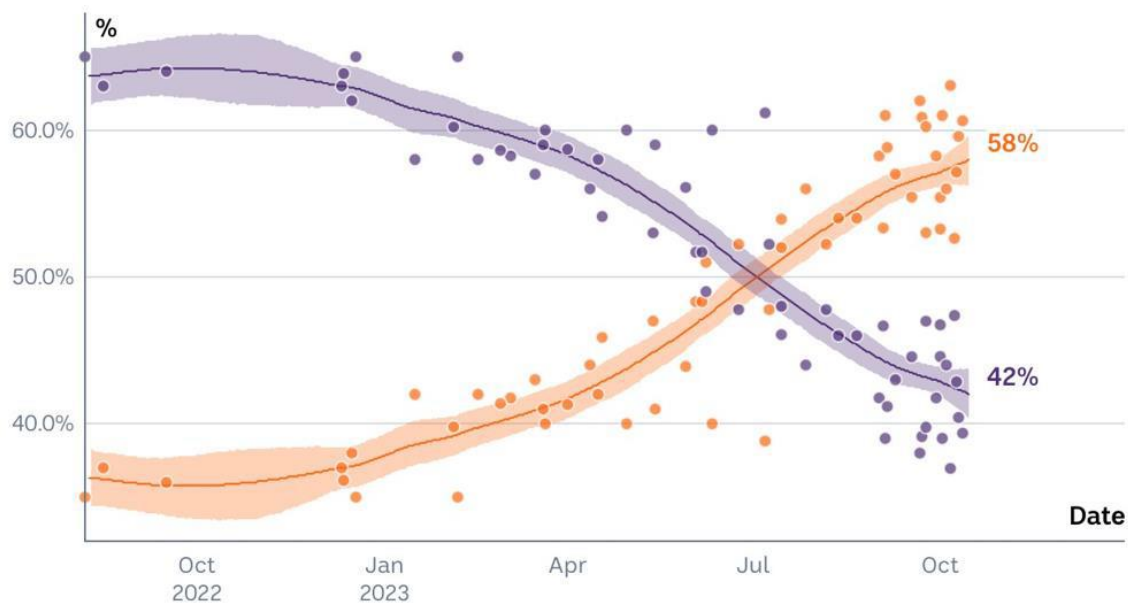
Carson et al. (2024) confirm the strategic efficacy of this approach, noting that by defining the Voice as a colonial mechanism of control, the progressive "No" campaign successfully fractured the left-leaning electorate, specifically attracting younger progressive demographics, anti-colonial activists, and sovereignty-focused Indigenous communities who viewed the constitutional amendment as an unacceptable compromise. Thorpe's discourse provided progressive voters and radical activists with a legitimate, anti-racist

rationale to reject the constitutional amendment, arguing that true solidarity required demanding structural sovereignty and a Treaty, rather than accepting a purely symbolic advisory body.

5.3. Discursive Efficacy: The Anatomy of a Successful Rejection

The ultimate victory of the "No" campaign was not an inevitable outcome, but the result of a highly disciplined discursive dismantling of the government's narrative. As visualised in the polling trajectory (see *Figure 1*), the consistent decline of the "Yes" vote and the corresponding surge of the "No" campaign throughout 2023 perfectly maps onto the opposition's successful exploitation of the government's structural vulnerabilities. The electoral rejection was achieved by systematically turning the "Yes" campaign's perceived strengths into fatal discursive liabilities.

Figure 1: Polling Trajectory and Voting Intention for the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum



Note. Adapted from Evans & Grattan (2023). Original data compiled by Professor Simon Jackman and ABC News.

First, the government's strategic decision to withhold legislative details, creating the conditions for an information vacuum, provided fertile ground for the opposition's risk-aversion framework. The "No" campaign weaponised the inherent danger of permanently altering the nation's constitutional rulebook without a clear explanation of its practical and legal consequences. By transforming the government's ambiguity into a looming institutional threat, the "If you don't know, vote no" heuristic effectively gave anxious voters a rational, defensive justification to reject the amendment.

This risk aversion was compounded by a profound clash with Australia's multicultural identity. In a highly diverse society built upon successive waves of migration, the electorate inherently resisted constitutional changes that appeared to disrupt the egalitarian social contract. The "No" campaign successfully framed the Voice not as an act of historical justice, but as the imposition of a racial hierarchy. By arguing that the amendment would elevate one specific demographic above others, the opposition co-opted the concept of colour-blind equality, convincing voters that rejecting the Voice was the only way to prevent a racially divided, tiered citizenship.

Furthermore, the government's reliance on elite legitimation became a critical vulnerability. The "Yes" campaign's high-profile endorsements from multinational corporations, such as Qantas and the major banks, among many others, were expertly inverted by the opposition. Rather than projecting transversal unity, these corporate alliances were transformed into a populist projectile. This allowed the "No" campaign to establish a classic "us versus them" dichotomy, framing the referendum as a vanity project driven by an out-of-touch, wealthy establishment ("them") that was completely disconnected from the socioeconomic struggles of ordinary Australians ("us").

The progressive strategy of moral overreach also collapsed when confronted with the material authenticity of conservative Indigenous figures. The attempts by "Yes" advocates to shame undecided voters and frame opposition as inherently racist shattered against Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price's discursive shield. By shifting the debate away from the moral posturing of urban progressives and focusing relentlessly on the tangible, ground-level trauma in remote communities, Price successfully neutralised the accusations of prejudice, exposing the progressive narrative as performative and practically ineffective.

Ultimately, the referendum was defeated by a discursive pincer movement that expertly exploited the Prime Minister's rhetorical dissonance. Albanese's attempt to appease all demographics by selling the Voice as a "modest" and harmless change left the proposal fatally exposed on two fronts. On the institutional right, Dutton successfully attacked it as a radical and dangerous constitutional threat. Simultaneously, on the progressive left, Senator Thorpe and the Blak Sovereign Movement attacked it as a powerless, tokenistic surrender to colonial assimilation. Trapped between a conservative electorate terrified of the amendment's potential power and a radical flank disillusioned by its perceived

weakness, the "Yes" campaign's narrative completely collapsed, resulting in a highly effective electoral rejection.

6. Discussion of Results

6.1. The Multicultural Paradox and the Egalitarian Ethos

The overwhelming defeat of the Voice to Parliament extends far beyond the rejection of a singular constitutional amendment; it serves as a profound diagnostic tool for understanding the sociopolitical realities of modern Australia. One of the most significant sociopolitical implications of the referendum is the exposed tension between Indigenous constitutional recognition and Australia's multicultural identity.

Australia is fundamentally a nation built upon successive waves of migration, unified by a deeply rooted foundational principle of the “fair go”, a strictly egalitarian social contract. The discourse analysis reveals that the "No" campaign successfully weaponised this egalitarianism, convincing the electorate that the Voice was incompatible with the historical multicultural framework that built contemporary Australia. For a diverse population, including immigrant demographics who have historically navigated their own systemic barriers to integrate into Australian society, the prospect of permanently enshrining a race-based differentiation within the Constitution was deeply unsettling.

The progressive argument, that First Nations people hold a unique, prior status that requires structural elevation, failed to resonate across broader, non-Indigenous demographics. Instead, the referendum demonstrated that the contemporary Australian electorate overwhelmingly prioritises a universalist interpretation of citizenship over historical restitution, rejecting any institutional reform that can be perceived as creating a tiered hierarchy of civic rights.

6.2. Media Logic and the Erosion of Constitutional Nuance

From a global communication perspective, the 2023 referendum serves as a textbook case study on the incompatibility of complex constitutional reform with contemporary media logic. In a highly mediatised political landscape driven by algorithmic amplification, 24-hour news cycles, and social media fragmentation, political discourse is structurally incentivised to prioritise brevity, emotional resonance, and conflict over nuanced legal pedagogy.

The asymmetric results of the campaign highlight a structural advantage for opposition movements in the digital age: it is exponentially easier to cultivate uncertainty through short, high-impact heuristics than it is to build consensus around complex legislative architecture. The necessity to explain complex constitutional mechanics was obliterated

by the fast-paced, combative logic of modern media, where the slogan "If you don't know, vote no" thrived perfectly. Furthermore, the mediatisation of the debate accelerated its polarisation; the media's inherent tendency to frame political issues as zero-sum conflicts transformed a proposed gesture of national reconciliation into a hostile, partisan battleground, effectively destroying the bipartisan consensus historically required for constitutional change in Australia.

Ultimately, the discursive defeat of the Voice establishes a new institutional reality for Indigenous affairs. The rejection of a federal, top-down model of constitutional recognition suggests that future policymaking will likely decentralise. As the federal path is virtually closed for a generation, political and legislative efforts regarding Indigenous relations are expected to reorient towards state-level agreements and regional legislative frameworks. However, the legacy of the 2023 referendum, characterised by a deeply entrenched anti-establishment ideology and a hardened resistance to institutionalised differentiation, ensures that any future attempts at systemic reform will face an electorate that is highly sceptical of elite consensus and highly responsive to narratives of constitutional risk and its irreversible consequences.

7. Conclusions and Proposals

7.1. General Conclusions

The primary objective of this research was to analyse how the official "Yes" and "No" campaigns utilised political discourse to mobilise the electorate during the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum. By reevaluating the initial research questions through the lens of CDA, several conclusive patterns regarding the nature of modern constitutional debate in Australia emerge.

Addressing the first and third research questions, the analysis conclusively demonstrates that neither campaign functioned primarily as a pedagogical tool to objectively explain the legal implications of the constitutional change. Instead, both sides operated fundamentally as instruments of emotional and ideological mobilisation; the reliance on strategic storytelling systematically overshadowed the technical realities of the proposed amendment. The "Yes" campaign relied heavily on the romanticised narrative of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, framing the referendum as a moral imperative and a historical destiny, yet frequently failing to articulate the functional mechanics of the advisory body. Conversely, the "No" campaign countered with highly concrete, ground-level storytelling, most notably through Senator Price's testimonies of remote community dysfunction, to emotionally deflate the government's abstract constitutional theory. Consequently, the referendum was not decided on civic literacy, but on the success of competing emotional heuristics: the government's appeal to moral duty versus the opposition's cultivation of national and constitutional risk-aversion.

In response to the second research question, a central finding of this dissertation is the profound discursive asymmetry in how both sides instrumentalised identical core concepts to legitimise entirely opposing agendas. The concepts of "fairness", "national unity", and "equality" became heavily contested linguistic territory. The "Yes" campaign framed equality through the progressive lens of historical equity and structural restitution; unity, in their discourse, could only be achieved by acknowledging and structurally elevating the marginalised First Nations. However, the conservative opposition effectively countered this frame by co-opting the classical liberal definition of equality; they defined civic fairness as strict egalitarianism before the law among all Australians. By forcefully arguing that the Constitution is inherently impartial regarding racial identity, possessing no "good or bad" demographics, only equal citizens, the "No"

campaign successfully weaponised the concept of equality against the government. This allowed them to reframe the Voice not as an equaliser, but as an elitist institutionalisation of racial privilege that would permanently fracture a unified, multicultural Australia.

Finally, addressing the fourth research question, the discourse analysis reveals how the institutional campaigns navigated the complex paradox of representing Indigenous voices to a non-Indigenous majority. The Albanese government ultimately failed to resolve this tension; in its attempt to mass-market the Voice to conservative and centrist voters, the "Yes" campaign sanitised the proposal, framing it merely as a "modest" and "safe" gesture of national reconciliation, heavily endorsed by corporate Australia. This discursive strategy proved fatal on two fronts: it triggered a popular, anti-establishment backlash from broad segments of the electorate, while simultaneously alienating the radical Indigenous base, who viewed the sanitised Voice as a purely symbolic surrender lacking substantive material reform. In stark contrast, the "No" campaign navigated this paradox with devastating efficacy; by strategically elevating conservative Indigenous spokespersons, the opposition established unquestionable institutional legitimacy. This provided the non-Indigenous majority with a powerful moral shield, allowing them to reject the progressive proposition without incurring the social cost of perceived prejudice.

7.2. Limitations and Future Lines of Research

While this dissertation provides a comprehensive analysis of the official discursive strategies employed during the referendum, it is necessary to acknowledge certain methodological boundaries that contextualise its findings. The primary limitation of this study lies in its strict focus on elite and institutional discourse. The analysis is intentionally anchored in primary sources derived from political leaders, parliamentary speeches, official campaign materials, and high-profile press addresses. Consequently, this research does not capture the organic, grassroots mutation of these discourses as they circulated among the general public. Furthermore, the methodological scope of this dissertation did not include empirical audience reception studies or quantitative polling analysis beyond the macro-level trajectory of the vote.

Recognising these limitations, this research opens several vital avenues for future academic inquiry. Primarily, future studies should transition from institutional discourse to digital media logic, investigating how the "Yes" and "No" narratives were algorithmically amplified or distorted on platforms such as TikTok, X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook, and how this digital ecosystem specifically influenced social media users.

Beyond the digital sphere, a highly valuable line of research would involve a comparative analysis of the Australian Voice referendum alongside other recent constitutional processes involving Indigenous populations, such as the 2022 Chilean constitutional plebiscite on plurinationality or the ongoing co-governance debates in New Zealand. Comparing these distinct discursive environments could reveal universal patterns in how modern multicultural democracies navigate the complexities of structural Indigenous recognition. However, any such comparative research must carefully account for the singularity of the Australian case, acknowledging its unique historical status as the only Commonwealth nation without a founding treaty with its First Peoples, which inherently shapes its constitutional tensions.

Finally, as the federal pathway for constitutional reform is effectively closed for the foreseeable future, subsequent research must analyse how political discourse adapts to the state and regional levels. Investigating the rhetorical strategies surrounding ongoing state-based treaty negotiations will be crucial for understanding the future trajectory of Indigenous affairs and self-determination in Australia.

8. Bibliography

Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (Cth).

Albanese, A. (2022, May 21). *Anthony Albanese's acceptance speech*. ABC News.

https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-22/anthony-albanese-acceptance-speech-full-transcript/101088736?utm_campaign=abc_news_web&utm_content=link&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_source=abc_news_web

Albanese, A. (2023, August 30). *Transcript of official Yes campaign launch speech, Playford Civic Centre, Adelaide* [Speech transcript]. Prime Minister of Australia.

<https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-45258>

Albrechtsen, J. (2023, October 15). *'Bonfire of cash': The small motley No crew that beat Yes*. The Australian.

Altman, J. C., & Hinkson, M. (2007). *Coercive reconciliation: Stabilise, normalise, exit Aboriginal Australia*. Arena Publications.

Appleby, G., Brennan, S. & Kildea, P. (2023). *Expert analysis of the 'Official Yes/No Cases' published by the Australian Electoral Commission*. Gilbert + Tobin Centre of Public Law; Indigenous Law Centre; University of New South Wales (Sydney).

Attwood, B., & Markus, A. (1999). *The struggle for Aboriginal rights: A documentary history*. Allen & Unwin.

Begg, M. (2023). *One voice: Racial equality in the Australian Constitution*. Institute of Public Affairs.

Begg, M. & Storey, J. (2023). *Voice to Parliament: Research report provided to the Parliamentary Joint Committee into the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice Referendum*. Institute of Public Affairs.

Biddle, N., Gray, M., McAllister, I., & Qvortrup, M. (2023). *Detailed analysis of the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum and related social and political attitudes*. ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods.

Birrell, B., & Betts, K. (2023). *Why the Voice Referendum is failing*. The Australian Population Research Institute.

- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Polity Press.
- Burney, L. (2023, July 5). *Address to the National Press Club of Australia* [Speech transcript]. Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/former-ministers/burney/2023/national-press-club-address>
- Carson, A., Evans, M., Strating, R. & Grömping, M. (2024) Voiceless: A multi-level analysis of the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum outcome and its implications: an introduction, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 59(3), 308-313.
- Carson, A., Strating, R., Jackman, S., Grömping, M., Hayman, P., & Gravelle, T. B. (2024). *Influencers and messages: Analysing the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum campaign*. La Trobe University
- Charles River Editors. (2017). *Uluru: The history and legacy of the Australian landmark considered sacred by the local Aborigines*.
- Chilton, P. (2004). *Analysing political discourse: Theory and practice*. Routledge.
- Clarkson, C., Jacobs, Z., Marwick, B., Fullagar, R., Wallis, L., Smith, M., Roberts, R. G., Hayes, E., Lowe, K., Carah, X., Florin, S. A., McNeil, J., Cox, D., Arnold, L. J., Hua, Q., Huntley, J., Brand, H. E. A., Manne, T., Fairbairn, A., ... Pardoe, C. (2017). Human occupation of northern Australia by 65,000 years ago. *Nature*, 547(7663), 306-325.
- Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1901*.
- Commonwealth of Australia. (2023, May 22). *Parliamentary debates: House of Representatives. Peter Dutton - Constitution Alteration (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice) 2023 (Second Reading)*, pp. 3235-3238.
- Curthoys, A. (2002). *Freedom ride: A freedom rider remembers*. Allen & Unwin.
- Davis, M., & Anderson, P. (2022, November 9). *Address to the National Press Club on the Uluru Statement from the Heart* [Speech transcript]. National Press Club of Australia.
- Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018). *Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2018*. Australian Government.

- De Villiers, B. (2024). The Rejection of the Voice for Aboriginal People in Australia - A Postmortem of Causes of Failure, *Constitutional Review*, 10(2), 266-306.
- Entman, R. (1993). Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43(4), 51-58.
- Evans, M., & Grattan, M. (2023). *Reflection on the Voice to Parliament: The Voice to Parliament and the silent majority*.
- Evans, M. & Grattan, M. (2024). The 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum. In M. Evans, P. Dunleavy, & J. Phillimore (Eds.), *Australia's evolving democracy: A new democratic audit*, pp.84-94. LSE Press.
- Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians. (2012). *Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution: Report of the Expert Panel*. Australian Government.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press.
- Fielding, V. (2023). *Under the facade of journalism: How News Corp used fear, manipulation and division to campaign against the Indigenous Voice to Parliament*. Australians for a Murdoch Royal Commission.
- First Nations National Constitutional Convention. (2017). *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.
- Fisher, R. (1992). *Brisbane: The Aboriginal presence 1824-1860*, 39-59. Brisbane History Group.
- Gabsi, Z. (2026). Consent by ambiguity: political rhetoric and media framing in Australia's Voice Referendum. *Journal for Cultural Research*.
- Graham, T. (2024). Exploring a post-truth referendum: Australia's Voice to Parliament and the management of attention on social media. *Media International Australia*, 198(1), 152-175.
- Haebich, A. (2000). *Broken circles: Fragmenting Indigenous families 1800-2000*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. SAGE Publications.

- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (1997). *Bringing them home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*.
- Keating, P. (1992, December 10). *Redfern Speech (Year for the World's Indigenous People)*. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Australian Government.
- Komesaroff, P., Ryan, M., James, P., Jackson Pulver, L. & Gardner, S. (2023). *The Voice, a question to the people*. Palaver.
- Kowal, E. (2015). *Trapped in the gap: Doing good in Indigenous Australia*. Berghahn Books.
- Lakoff, G. (2004). *Don't think of an elephant!* Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Mabo v Queensland (No 2), 175 CLR 1 (1992).
- Macintyre, S. (2016). *A concise history of Australia* (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Macklin, J. (2008). *Closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians*. Commonwealth of Australia.
- McAllister, I. & Biddle, N. (2024). Safety or change? The 2023 Australian voice referendum, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 59(2), pp.141-160.
- McCallum, K., Meadows, M., Waller, L., Dunne Breen, M., & Reid, H. (2012). *The media and Indigenous policy: How news media reporting and mediatized practice impact on Indigenous policy*. University of Canberra.
- McGregor, R. (1997). *Imagined destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the doomed race theory, 1880-1939*. Melbourne University Press.
- Moreton-Robinson, A. (2015). *The white possessive: Property, power, and Indigenous sovereignty*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Morris, S. (2015). The argument for a Constitutional Procedure for Parliament to consult with Indigenous Peoples when making laws for Indigenous affairs. *Public Law Review*, 26, 166-192.
- National Archives of Australia. (2020). *The 1967 referendum* (Fact sheet 150).

- National Indigenous Australians Agency. (2021). *Indigenous Voice Co-Design Process*. Law Council of Australia.
- National Indigenous Australians Agency. (2021). *Indigenous Voice co-design process: Final report to the Australian Government*.
- National Press Club of Australia. (2023, August 16). *Senator Lidia Thorpe - "The Blak Sovereign Movement and the Voice to Parliament"* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EN4rMlvD-cY>
- Parliament of Australia. (1999, August 26). Motion of reconciliation. *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)*. House of Representatives.
- Pearson, N. (2023, September 27). *For the love of country: Address to the National Press Club*. Cape York Partnership. <https://capeyorkpartnership.org.au/for-the-love-of-country/>
- Price, J. N. (2023). *National Press Club address*. Jacinta Nampijinpa Price. https://www.jacintaprice.com/npc_jp_speech
- Referendum Council. (2017a). *Discussion Paper on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*. Australian Government.
- Referendum Council. (2017b). *Final Report of the Referendum Council*. Australian Government.
- Reynolds, H. (1982). *The other side of the frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia*. Penguin Books.
- Roussos, E. (2024, May 3). *Jacinta Nampijinpa Price voice referendum no campaign reflection*. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-03/jacinta-nampijinpa-price-voice-referendum-no-campaign-reflection/103779330>
- Rowse, T. (2024, October 7). *Why did Australia reject the Voice?* Inside Story. <https://insidestory.org.au/why-did-australia-reject-the-voice/>
- Rudd, K. (2008). *Apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples*. House of Representatives, Parliament of Australia, Hansard, 13 February 2008.

- Ryan, L. (2023). *The Australian Wars: new insights from a digital map*. Australian Academy of the Humanities. <https://humanities.org.au/power-of-the-humanities/the-australian-wars-new-insights-from-a-digital-map/>
- Smith, R. (2025). The 2023 Voice Referendum and Current Challenges to Australian Democracy, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 38, 40-53.
- Stevenson, A. (2024). *Uluru Statement from the disheartened: A critical discourse analysis of how Australian online news media helped defeat the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum*. University of Bristol.
- Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act 2012* (Cth).
- Tuhiwai Smith, L. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. Zed Books Ltd.
- Turnbull, M., Brandis, G., & Scullion, N. (2017, October 26). *Response to Referendum Council's report on Constitutional Recognition*. Prime Minister of Australia.
- Van Dijk, T. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2) 249-283. SAGE.
- Van Dijk, T. (2008). *Discourse and power*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vromen, A., Rutledge-Prior, S., & Vaughan, M. (2025). Storytelling in the Australian 2023 voice referendum campaign. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 28(1) 165-186.