



## The Art Of Persuasion Needs More Than Abusive Language

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The Institute of Public Affairs is on a unity ticket with Noel Pearson, whether he cares to admit it or not. Like the work of the respected indigenous leader, our work endeavours to help people overcome disadvantage, to enjoy the dignity that comes from work, and the human flourishing that comes from greater freedom and economic prosperity.

Like Pearson, we strive for more localism because decision-makers closer to the ground understand issues better than Canberra bureaucrats. To that end, the debate about a constitutionally entrenched indigenous voice to parliament is not a contest over who cares more about indigenous Australians. We simply disagree with Pearson about the means to overcome disadvantage.

We favour universal rights and freedoms over a separate voice for one class of Australians. As we say at the IPA, the essence of human equality is that there is no “them”. There is only us.

It was unfortunate that a clever man such as Pearson accused the IPA of sending in “child

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soldiers”, all young white conservative men, he said, to peddle lies about the campaign for a constitutionally entrenched indigenous voice.

Pearson’s claim, made at the Garma festival on the weekend, is unworthy of him, and of intellectual curiosity. Is he saying that young white conservative men have no place in national debates? If so, and this is only one flaw among his many claims, he will need to muster more rational arguments to draw millions of Australians to his cause. We believe race should not attract special advantages or special opprobrium.

Aboriginal leader Galarrwuy Yunupingu may need to revise his strategy too. At the annual gathering in northeast Arnhem Land, he said that if indigenous people did not get what they wanted, the Yolngu people would throw the Australian Constitution into the sea. Are these the sounds of men on the losing side of a debate?

Our IPA team contributes to important national debates by using research, principled reasoning and always a respectful tone. Not everyone agrees with us. That is not the point of what we do. We engage in Australia’s big conversations because a thriving contest of ideas is the single most important piece of intellectual machinery that will lead us to rational policies enabling people to flourish and the country to prosper.

For many years, our research has shown why there is no place for race in our Constitution. Analysis by our researchers Morgan Begg and Daniel Wild, to be released this month, will build on our principled position: as a tolerant and democratic country, we should be colourblind; everyone is equal under the law; our universal rights accrue to us as human beings, not as gifts from government. This is classical liberalism writ large, and the foundation stones of our democratic project.

Pearson’s weekend pique was a calculated snub to debates that keep our democracy healthy and strong. Pearson’s deliberately colourful and carefully crafted claim about “child soldiers” was a reminder of a ploy used more than a decade ago by historians when their cosy and tight control over the teaching of Australian history came under threat.

In his 2004 book, *The History Wars*, historian Stuart Macintyre conjured up the imagery of war to impugn the views of those with different views about our history: like war, their arguments were brutal and unjust, and had to be stopped. Macintyre labelled those who challenged the then left-leaning orthodoxy about Australian history as “neo-conservative ideologues”, “right-wing polemicists”, “the History War Crusaders”, the “fundamentalists”, the “Australian deniers” of the Stolen Generations. He took aim at “opinionated columnists” who wrote with the “ring of a Stalinist ideologue”.

It was nonsense. It was not a war; it was a long overdue debate about our history. If it felt brutal for Macintyre and his fellow travellers it was because they had grown soft, forgetting what it feels like to have their positions probed and challenged and, in some cases, overturned. Pearson is not soft. He knows plenty about confrontation. That makes his ratcheting up of fake war talk so damaging to his credibility. It makes no sense for Pearson to allude, in the same weekend



address, to that sparkling age of Enlightenment only to then try to shut down people with different views. He may as well just say stop testing ideas, stop probing for details, stop teasing out the consequences of our proposal. Just stop challenging me.

Accusing the IPA of using “child soldiers” to delegitimise our role in national debates won’t further the cause of a constitutionally entrenched indigenous voice. By coarsening debate, imbuing language with gratuitous violence and desperate assertions, Pearson undermines that broader cause.

This is not a war. There are no soldiers. This is an important debate about a proposal to fundamentally alter the guidebook to our democracy. How will this change alter the sovereign power of parliament if parliament cannot abolish this constitutionally entrenched special right for one group of Australians? Doesn’t constitutional entrenchment give that separate voice for one class of Australians a level of legal power and political heft that makes comparisons with other bodies, such as the Productivity Commission, entirely spurious?

Why is Pearson splitting hairs to assert a distinction between race and indigeneity without explaining the difference? More to the point, Pearson’s label change from race to indigeneity makes no difference to the core issue of why one group should have separate constitutional privileges. What is the purpose of a separate voice for one class of people given indigenous people sit in our parliament under democratic processes that give every voter, indigenous and non-indigenous, the same rights? And why are advocates of the voice whitewashing the dismal record of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, that earlier voice to parliament?

Changing our Constitution warrants a full and frank testing of all pertinent issues. And this raises Pearson’s other flawed claim that we should all roll over and agree because a few former chief justices and a few conservative commentators side with Pearson. None of that seals the deal for constitutional change. Neither Pearson nor former High Court chief justice Murray Gleeson have answered a critical question: how can our federal parliament remain sovereign if parliament is not empowered to abolish a separate voice for one class of Australians?

A referendum will not be won by telling Australians they must vote yes to a voice. The art of persuasion needs more than abusive language. A hero for a cause is someone who matches his skill with literary flourishes and thundering intonation with sound substance and principled arguments.

Australians can rest assured that the IPA will remain respectful and principled in a contest of ideas over whether we should cement in our Constitution a separate voice for one class of Australians. That contest of ideas is the best hope for the government settling on a sensible resolution. That is also, by the way, the sign of a magnificent working democracy.



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