

'Reconciliation is dead': Indigenous Australians vow silence after referendum fails

Australian Indigenous leaders called on Sunday for a week of silence and reflection after a referendum to recognise First Peoples in the constitution was decisively rejected.

More than 60% of Australians voted "No" in the landmark referendum on Saturday that asked whether to alter the constitution to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people with an Indigenous advisory body, the "Voice to Parliament", that would have advised parliament on matters concerning the community.

Australia's first referendum in almost a quarter of a century needed a national majority and majorities in at least four states to pass. All six states rejected the proposal.

"This is a bitter irony," the Indigenous leaders said in a statement. "That people who have only been on this continent for 235 years would refuse to recognise those whose home this land has been for 60,000 and more years is beyond reason."

They said they would lower the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island flag to half-mast for the week and urged others to do the same.

The outcome is a major setback for reconciliation efforts with the country's Indigenous community and damages Australia's image in the world regarding how it treats First Nations people.

Unlike other nations with similar histories, such as Canada and New Zealand, Australia has not formally recognised or reached a treaty with its First Peoples.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people make up 3.8% of Australia's 26 million population and have inhabited the country for about 60,000 years. But they are not mentioned in the constitution and the country's most disadvantaged people by most socioeconomic measures.

"It's very clear that reconciliation is dead," Marcia Langton, an architect of the Voice, said on NITV. "I think it will be at least two generations before Australians are capable of putting their colonial hatreds behind them and acknowledging that we exist."

Reconciliation Australia, an Indigenous body, said the community was left to grapple with the "ugly acts of racism and disinformation" that they said were a feature of the debate.

Australian Indigenous leader and former national rugby union player Lloyd Walker said the path to reconciliation seemed difficult now but the community needed to keep fighting.

"We can say it got out-voted but there was still 40% of the people that wanted it. Years and years ago we wouldn't have that percentage for sure," Walker said.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese staked significant political capital on the Voice referendum, but his critics say it was his biggest misstep since coming to power in May last year.

Opposition leader Peter Dutton said it was a referendum "that Australia did not need to have" and that it only ended up dividing the nation.

One of the biggest reasons for the loss was a lack of bipartisan support, with leaders of the major conservative parties campaigning for the "No" vote. No referendum has passed in Australia without bipartisan backing.

"Much will be asked of the role of racism and prejudice against Indigenous people in this result," leaders said in the statement. "The only thing we ask is that each and every Australian who voted in this election reflect hard on this question."

Reuters, Praveen Menon October 15, 2023