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The Liberal Party's 'no' position on Voice signals it's primarily interested in speaking to a nation that no longer exists

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The Liberal Party's decision to formally oppose the federal government's model for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to parliament amounts to a resounding "no" position – but perhaps not in the way party leader Peter Dutton thinks.

It's a "no" to the proposed Voice model, obviously, but it's also a "no" to the Australia we live in today. This position bets against Australia and its First Peoples.

The party's decision comes on the heels of a decisive loss in the Aston by-election, and polling that continues to show majority support for the Voice in five of the six states.

This decision further signals the Liberal Party is primarily interested in speaking to a nation that no longer exists.

We are not the nation we were when we voted "no" to a republic – but this seems to be the nation the Liberal Party insists on speaking to.

Read more: ***View from The Hill: Peter Dutton's risky call to campaign for 'No' in Voice referendum***

Symbolic recognition isn't enough

Dutton yesterday attempted to put a positive spin the party room's decision, announcing:

> *The Liberal Party resolved today to say yes to constitutional recognition for Indigenous Australians, yes to a local and regional body, so we can get practical outcomes for Indigenous people on the ground, [but] there was a resounding no to the prime minister's Voice.*

This position emphasises "yes" to constitutional recognition but only in its symbolic form.

Australia has already tried symbolic recognition. Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in a preamble to the Constitution was proposed at the 1999 republic referendum; the referendum was unsuccessful.

Symbolic recognition has been abandoned as a goal by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Voice proposal arises out of the 13 national dialogues, and its 1,200 delegates, who rejected symbolic recognition in favour of structural change.

The Liberal Party has said "no" to this call for structural change that redresses the torment of our powerlessness.

Local and regional voices have gone unheard in Canberra

Dutton said he wanted to get the "best possible outcomes for Indigenous Australians" but proposes nothing new to achieve this.

He emphasised "yes" to a local and regional body. But this fails to account for the fact that the many existing local and regional bodies have expressed time and time again that their voices are not heard in Canberra.

The design principles that have shaped the proposed Voice model already commit to local decision-making in determining its membership, and to working alongside existing organisations and traditional structures. This model proposes connecting local and regional voices to the national Voice.

Across the Coalition, Nationals leader David Littleproud, whose party had already decided against supporting the Voice proposal, has described the proposed Voice model as just "another layer of bureaucracy here in Canberra". But that fails to account for the fact it is aiming for the kind of structural change that has not been tried before.

The Coalition has consistently called for more detail on the model and expressed concern the proposed Voice model goes too far, and could potentially undermine parliament's authority.

This is despite the overwhelming legal advice to the contrary.

Read more: ***What happens if the government goes against the advice of the Voice to Parliament?***

In all, these arguments amount to a confusing position.

Yes to constitutional recognition, but only if it doesn't change anything.

No to the proposed referendum, because it's not going to change anything.

No to the proposed referendum, but because the changes actually go too far.

Despite the consistently supportive polling, the Voice referendum is far from a sure thing.

When the 1967 referendum provided powers to the Commonwealth to make laws about us at the national level, it was yet to be made clear that did not necessarily mean they had to be made to our benefit.

When the former Abbott government consolidated Indigenous programs into the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, cutting more than A$500 million from programs with little to no notice to communities, the Recognise campaign for symbolic recognition (established by former prime minister Julia Gillard) was still active.

Time and time again, we have seen the failure of symbolic recognition.

Australia has changed

In the 24 years since Australia last voted in a referendum, the nation has changed.

So-called "Howard's Australia" has been transformed, with a majority of Australians either now a migrant or the child of migrants.

Younger generations are more cynical than idealistic about political life and their own futures.

The Liberal and National parties are banking on the nostalgia of a nation of old, in which responsible political leadership stays the course, and repeatedly calls for trust in systems they say are not broken.

Anyone paying attention knows these systems have never worked for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. And that every success we have had has been in spite of this broken political system that was never meant to hear our many voices.

The "yes" campaign is banking on a nation that knows this.

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