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Silencing the Voice: the Fossil-fuelled Atlas Network's Campaign against Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australia

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Abstract

Australians will soon vote in a referendum to recognise Indigenous Australia in its 1901 Constitution and establish a First Nations Voice to Parliament. Earlier this year, polling suggested the referendum proposal of the 2017 National Constitutional Convention and its Uluru Statement from the Heart enjoyed 60% support. Since lead anti-Voice campaign organisation Advance Australia began its media offensive, the Yes vote has declined to 40%. This article argues the No campaign is being conducted on behalf of fossil-fuel corporations and their allies, whose efforts to mislead the public on life-and-death matters reach back over half a century. Coordinated across the Australian branches of the little-known Atlas Network, a global infrastructure of 500+ 'think-tanks' including the Centre for Independent Studies, the Institute of Public Affairs and LibertyWorks, I demonstrate that the No campaign shares the aims and methods of the longstanding Atlas disinformation campaign against climate policy. Opposition to long-overdue constitutional recognition for Indigenous Australians can be traced to fears the Voice might strengthen the capacity of Indigenous communities and Australia's parliamentary democracy to rein in the polluting industries driving us toward climate and ecological collapse.



How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.

- [Uluru Statement from the Heart, 2017](#) National Constitutional Convention

Introduction

Australians will soon vote in an historic referendum to finally recognise First Nations people's deep time habitation of their sacred country by a minor amendment to the 1901 federal Constitution of Australia. It should be a time of hope and optimism as Australia's diverse, multicultural communities unite to assert their goodness of heart, and willingness to acknowledge Indigenous peoples' deep history, profound cultural and scientific achievements, the wrongs done them by governments, and the capacity for a democratic people to alter the ways in which it consents to be governed in order to offer justice where it has long been denied.

How could anyone not be moved by the generosity of the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2023)? It invites Australians to walk with the First Nations to heal the wounds of colonial violence, disrespect and dispossession that continue to generate suffering, trauma and poverty, and remain a burden on the conscience of the nation. A successful Yes vote will be a small step toward righting constitutional wrongs. From little things, big things grow.

The sovereignty of the British Crown over the land claimed as Australia was established by the legal fiction of *terra nullius* and the overwhelming fact of land appropriation through violence, legal or otherwise. The 1901 Constitution establishing the Commonwealth of Australia was drafted by several conventions of several dozen white men and approved in some of the Colonies by vote. Delegating the British monarch's power via an appointed Governor-General to a federal parliament and judiciary, apportioning powers between federal and state governments, the Constitution makes no mention of the Australian lands and waters itself. It includes a race power aimed at preserving Anglo-Saxon supremacy over the continent. The Constitution entered into force not by a vote of free and independent Australians on the democratic principle of popular sovereignty, but by a 1900 act of Queen Victoria's Imperial Parliament of the United Kingdom ([Lindell 1986](#)), at a time when Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples were systematically denied human and civil rights. Frontier violence and punitive police raids on Aboriginal communities continued with official sanction at least as late as the Coniston massacre of 1928.

The referendum proposal for constitutional recognition and a First Nations Voice to Parliament is an outcome of the Referendum Council appointed in 2015 by Liberal prime minister Malcolm Turnbull, and the dialogues undertaken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities leading to the National Constitutional Convention held at Uluru in 2017, when delegates of First Nations communities came together with constitutional experts and judges to offer Turnbull proposals for a referendum to establish "a Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Constitution" and "the establishment of a Makarrata Commission for the purpose of treaty making and truth-telling", which can be accomplished without constitutional change ([Uluru Statement 2017](#); [Referendum Council 2017](#)). Presented with the Uluru proposals, Turnbull rejected them. The coming referendum fulfills the promise of the present Labor government of Anthony Albanese to honour the National Constitutional Convention and its Uluru Statement.

Australia is among the last of states forged in the colonial era to deny constitutional recognition to its first peoples. The referendum proposal for a Voice to Parliament composed of Indigenous representatives is altogether minimalist, intended to achieve a measure of recognition acceptable to First Nations, but without containing proposals for land rights unacceptable to the extractive interests that dominate Australia's quarry

economy. Understandably, some Indigenous leaders think it already too much of a compromise. The Voice will not have the power to introduce or vote on proposed legislation, only to retain a permanent advisory presence and to speak to Parliament on matters concerning First Nations' interests. There is no guarantee the voices of the Indigenous Australians elected to this body will be listened to, but they will be able to speak, from within the national parliament.

It is worth comparing the situation with our neighbours over the Tasman Sea. With no single constitutional document, Aotearoa/New Zealand is a plurinational, proportional democracy. The 1840 Treaty of Waitangi is integral to its constitutional settlement. With guaranteed Māori seats in the parliament, Māori voters may choose to join a special electoral roll to elect these MPs or join the general roll and vote for other candidates ([Xanthaki & O'Sullivan 2009](#)). Since 1987, Te Reo Māori has been recognised as an official language of state, taught in schools alongside English. Māori legal concepts of sacred land and water enjoy judicial recognition, for example, in the acknowledgment of the Whanganui River as a legal person with voice and rights ([Charpleix 2018](#)). The sky has not fallen on the Pākehā.

Polling cited by Uluru dialogue co-chair Pat Anderson suggests over 80% of Indigenous Australians will vote Yes at the referendum. Comprising but 3% of the voting population, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders can only depend on the goodwill and conscience of Australian voters for the recognition and justice sought for generations by Indigenous advocates, protestors and their allies. Polling suggests national support for Yes has rapidly collapsed from over 60% in April 2023, when the No campaign led by Advance Australia began its media offensive, to 40% or less by September ([Evershed & Nicholas 2023](#)).

Ken Wyatt, minister for Indigenous Australians in the previous Liberal/National government, has called on the nation to vote Yes. When Opposition leader Peter Dutton announced the Coalition would campaign to defeat the referendum, adopting the position proposed by the state Liberals of oil and gas dominated Western Australia, Wyatt resigned his membership of the Liberal Party in protest ([ABC 2023](#)). Noel Pearson, an architect of the Uluru Statement, says that following Dutton's decision he was "troubled by dreams, and the spectre of the Dutton Liberal Party's Judas betrayal of our country." Dutton, he says, "is behaving like an undertaker preparing the grave to bury the Voice" ([Evans 2023](#)).

How has Australia's national media informed the electorate and conducted public dialogue on the Uluru constitutional reform proposals? Have the views of diverse elders, community leaders, judges, constitutional lawyers, and civil society been fairly and widely presented to place Australia's constitutional situation in appropriate historical and international context? The most obvious feature of 'the debate' is that News Corp, the wider corporate media, the National Press Club and the public broadcaster ABC have provided daily platforms to the two Indigenous people fronting the Advance Vote No campaign: Warren Nyunggai Mundine, and Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, who occupies Wyatt's former role as shadow minister for Indigenous Australians. Upon these faces the No campaign's optics and online advertising almost entirely depends.

Commentators have noted their often-inconsistent positions and contradictory statements, which offer little considered analysis or respectful reflection on Indigenous Australia's law, lore and constitutional past, present and future. Price and Mundine's public communications feature repetitive restatements of the inflammatory slogans widely propagated by [Fair/Advance Australia \(2023a\)](#): "The Indigenous Voice to Parliament will wreck our Constitution, rewire our democracy, and divide Australians by race. It's divisive, it's dangerous, it's expensive and it's not fair." There is surprisingly little evidence that Price or Mundine can claim to speak with the endorsement of any First Nations community. The Central Land Council representing the Price family's Central Australian communities say they are "sick of her continued attacks on land councils and other peak Aboriginal organisations. [...] she needs to stop pretending we are her people" ([Vivian 2023](#)). Why have they been afforded so much airtime?

This article attempts to provide an historical and international context within which we might ask, *for whom do they speak?* What might be the possible motives of the No campaign? What methods of political communication are deployed in service of these aims? What are the origins and dimensions of the permanent, networked political infrastructure presently mobilised to defeat the 2017 National Constitutional Convention's referendum proposals? Which business interests might be the silent investors in (and potential financial beneficiaries of) a No result? How might the Vote No campaign be historically or strategically aligned with other influence campaigns conducted by this network, in Australia and other nations, in particular the promotion of counter-science disinformation and opposition to effective climate policy? Attempting to answer these questions leads us to examine the history of the 'thinktanks' comprising the Australian branch of the little-known global Atlas Network.

Advance Australia and the global Atlas Network

For months, Australian voters have been confronted across social and legacy media with a sophisticated, well-financed anti-Voice campaign, led by the organisation Advance Australia. Little attention has been paid to its origins.

Advance was established to counter GetUp, an advocacy campaign NGO, in the 2019 federal election and to defend (unsuccessfully), ex-Liberal prime minister Tony Abbot's seat of Warringah from climate and integrity independent Zali Steggall. Now a 'distinguished fellow' of the Institute of Public Affairs (est. 1943), Abbot claims it is 'an act of love' to vote down the Voice ([IPA 2023](#)). During the 2022 federal election, Advance election materials featured Chinese president Xi Jinping voting Labor, insinuating that the Australian Labor Party (ALP) is somehow a crypto-Communist party. The Australian Electoral Commission found Advance posters falsely depicting independents David Pocock and Zali Steggall as Green Party candidates in breach of the Electoral Act. Such election material was "likely to mislead or deceive an elector [...] even one who is unintelligent, or gullible, or naïve" ([AEC 2022](#)).

Registered as a third-party election campaigner with the AEC, and re-tooled to campaign against the Voice referendum, Advance no longer provides names of its responsible officers on its public website. The archived version of its website names an advisory council including Maurice Newman and Sam Kennard ([Advance 2019](#)), a board member of the Centre for Independent Studies ([CIS 2023a](#)). Established in 1976, Newman and the late Neville Kennard (of Kennard's Hire) were closely involved in the founding of the CIS ([Kelly 1992](#), p. 47), which currently names Mundine as director of its 'Indigenous Forum' and Price as an associate ([CIS 2023b](#)).

Looking beyond the impression of significant Indigenous opposition to a Yes vote generated by constant media attention to Price and Mundine, let us examine the closely integrated network of organisations with which they are affiliated and that have cultivated their public careers: the CIS, the IPA, LibertyWorks, the now defunct Bennelong Society, and the international Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). What these organisations all share, by personnel, interlocking board memberships, and/or formal affiliation, is integration with the global [Atlas Network \(2020a\)](#).

Not itself a think-tank, Atlas is 'the mother of all thinktanks', an umbrella organisation co-ordinating 515 'public policy research institutes' across 99 countries. Until recently, these were mapped and listed on the Atlas website ([Atlas Network 2020a](#)). Organisations and social networks are, of course, composed entirely of individuals. The specific public individuals, activists and responsible officers of the Atlas-linked organisations discussed in this article are mentioned by way of example, in service of my aim to contribute to academic and public-interest knowledge. The factual evidence I rely upon here to analyse the Australian outposts of the Atlas Network are the public actions and public statements of Atlas-affiliated political actors as reported in the public media, and as published on the public websites of Atlas-linked 'thinktanks' alongside the public profiles of their executive staff and board members.



Registered in Delaware in 1981 as the Atlas Economic Research Foundation by the English businessman Antony Fisher (and later renamed), the Atlas Network aims to “litter the world with free-market think-tanks” modelled on Fisher’s prototype neoliberal thinktank founded in 1955, the London-based Institute of Economic Affairs ([Blundell 2001](#); [Salles-Djelic 2017](#)). The better-known Atlas thinktanks in the Anglophone world include the Fraser Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the Manhattan Institute, and the Competitive Enterprise Institute.

The Atlas Network’s ever-growing roster of think-tanks have foundational histories of oil-derived core funding among wider corporate support, including from ExxonMobil and other oil majors, from the oil-refining billionaires Charles and David Koch’s ‘philanthropic’ foundations, and those of Richard Mellon Scaife, heir to the family banking, Alcoa and Gulf Oil/Chevron fortune. Thanks to US financial transparency laws, the tax deductible ‘non-profit’ Atlas think-tanks comprising the American branch of the Network have partially documented financial histories ([Rothmyer 1981](#); [Brulle 2014](#); [ExxonSecrets 2014](#); [Chafuen 2021a](#))¹. The Australian Atlas organisations have for decades worked in concert with their US-based counterparts to challenge the long-established scientific confirmation of global warming, and to oppose government policies to phase out fossil-fuel extraction and combustion, such as carbon taxation, government support for renewable energy, and an effective UN climate treaty ([Wilkinson 2020](#)). In 1988, the IPCC was formed, the global public was alerted by scientists and news media that global warming had begun, and Exxon executives were internally notified that the public position of Exxon and the American Petroleum Institute (API) would be to “emphasize the uncertainty in scientific conclusions regarding the potential enhanced greenhouse effect” ([Climate Files, 2023a](#)). Since 1988, the Atlas Network has continuously expanded its funding base and multiplied across borders into its present global constellation of 500+ thinktanks and numerous spin-off campaign units. A core aim of this expansion was to enhance oil industry efforts to undermine support for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, est. 1992) and to prevent the negotiation of binding, equitable, quantified, timetabled, legislated, science-based national CO2 reduction targets ([Walker & Johnson 2018](#)).

There is ample historical and circumstantial evidence suggesting that the anti-Voice campaign supports objectives closely aligned with the Atlas Network’s permanent anti-climate policy campaign, and is being conducted through proxies in the interests of extractive business interests that have opposed First Nations’ pleas for self-determination, recognition and land justice in the past. Whilst it is true that major mining corporations operating in Australia – e.g. BHP and Rio Tinto - have recently moved to divest their fossil fuel divisions and have publicly announced their support for the Voice, the statements of petroleum companies Woodside, Santos and the oil and gas lobby APPEA (now Energy Australia) on the Voice are equivocal at best, reflecting fossil industry concern that the numerous legal challenges mounted by Indigenous communities against new fossil fuel projects could be further strengthened by the influence an Indigenous advisory body might have on the implementation of federal laws at the executive level ([SBS 2023](#); [McKilroy & Macdonald-Smith 2023](#))². Since limited disclosure laws prevent Australians from knowing who finances the Australian Atlas organisations, it is possible that funds from any number of fossil/mining companies and their banks could be flowing through ‘dark money’ channels to them.

1 Search DeSmog.com for individual organisation profiles (including financial data compiled from publicly available Form 990s) of US institutes listed on the [Atlas \(2020a\)](#) ‘global partner directory’.

2 The state governments of South Australia, the Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania, New South Wales and Victoria have declared their support for and initiated dialogues and processes toward state-level Treaties with First Nations communities ([Hobbs 2020](#)). Given that major fossil/mining project approvals require authorisations from the Commonwealth government, these developments lie beyond the concerns of our present interest in the inter-national Atlas Network’s obstruction of Australian constitutional reform.

The first rule of Atlas Network is never talk about Atlas Network

Few have heard of the Atlas. Presenting itself as “a non-profit organization that aims to secure for all individuals the rights to economic and personal freedom through its global network of strategic partners”, the [Atlas Network \(2023\)](#) carefully avoids publicity in its own name. This is key to its capacity to constantly generate abundant, seemingly diffusely-sourced ‘independent’ publications and media content promoting the same agendas, to exert influence on public opinion and policy without its corporate investors or the global Network itself being exposed to public scrutiny. Importantly, the Atlas Network is not itself a ‘think-tank’. It rather acts as a tax-deductible fundraising, networking and advisory service which services private billionaires, ‘philanthropic’ foundations and corporations by assisting them to found new tax-deductible Atlas institutes and temporary campaign units. Through these, the Atlas Network and its private investors coordinate permanent political influence campaigns on behalf of international business, variously at state, national, regional and international scales. At the centre of this global architecture of corporate political communication is the Atlas headquarters at the Virginia campus of George Mason University, which, like the US thinktanks of the wider Atlas Network, has a history of funding from the Koch foundations ([Stripling 2016](#); [MacLean 2017](#)). The name ‘Atlas’ may refer either to this central office, or to the entire set of thinktanks comprising the Network. Whilst its existence is all but unknown to political commentators, as [Fang \(2017\)](#) observes of its role in the election of Brazil’s radically anti-Indigenous president Jair Bolsonaro, the Atlas has “reshaped political power in country after country”.

As historians of the neoliberal counter-revolution have shown (e.g. [Cockett 1995](#); [Mirowski & Plehwe 2009](#)), the ideology of ‘free market’ globalisation – deregulation, privatisation, repression of trade unions, anti-environmentalism, regressive tax cuts – was forged over time by the original globalists, the invite-only private membership of the elite Mont Pelerin Society (MPS), the ‘inner sanctum’ of the neoliberal movement. Executive and academic board positions of Atlas think-tanks are usually held by MPS members ([Mirowski & Plehwe 2009](#), p. 4). The inaugural 1947 MPS conference included the ultra-libertarian Austrian economists Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, and Milton Friedman of the Chicago School. Born to a wealthy family of mine owners and educated at the elite schools of Eton and Cambridge ([Blundell 2001](#), p. 48), Antony Fisher became a disciple of Hayek following his shock at UK Labour’s 1945 election win, and was inducted into the MPS in 1954.

On Hayek’s advice, Fisher devoted himself to a life-long mission to influence the views of the ‘second-hand dealers in ideas’ – journalists, teachers, lecturers – and devised for this task the prototype neoliberal thinktank: the Institute of Economic Affairs (est. 1955). By the mid-1960s, the IEA had secured continuing support from Shell and BP. By the mid-late 1970s, the IEA was supported by numerous transnational banks and corporations, including Shell, BP, Rio Tinto, Exxon, Texaco and Gulf Oil ([IEA, 1980](#)). The public remained in the dark regarding IEA’s sources of funding, money deployed to commission, purchase, publicise and mass-disseminate the books, pamphlets and op-eds of MPS academics in easily digestible formats through libraries and the mass media to the general public. Thus was generated the ‘climate of opinion’ to which Margaret Thatcher attributed her 1979 election victory. Without Fisher’s IEA and the subsequent global proliferation of think-tanks deploying its methods, MPS scholars may well have remained marginalised on the radical right-wing fringes of legal and economic thought.

In public, neoliberals claim to defend ‘freedom of the individual’ through ‘free markets’, ‘the rule of law’ and ‘small government’. In reality, the MPS/Atlas Network aims to institutionalise a supra-national legal order of rules to ‘encase’ the global market, immunising wealthy elites and transnational corporations from the unwanted ‘government interventions’ of majoritarian democracy and national parliaments, whilst simultaneously striving to capture, transform and strengthen the coercive, interventionist powers of the strong state ([Slobodian 2018](#); [Whyte 2019](#)). The cynical, often authoritarian attitudes of MPS scholars toward universal suffrage, parliamentary sovereignty, human rights, and third-world decolonisation and

independence movements have been noted by scholars ([Brown 2015](#); [Biebricher 2020](#); [Cornelissen 2017](#) & [2023](#)), as have the efforts of MPS legal theorists to devise near-irreversible constitutional restrictions on the powers of democratic governments to impose redistributive taxation to fund public provision of universal healthcare and higher education ([Maclean 2017](#); Farrant & Tarko 2019; [Silva 2020](#), [Alemparte 2022](#)).

Australian business and political elites have taken a leading role in the Network. A 2013 directory of MPS members across 67 countries obtained by [DeSmog \(2021\)](#) includes numerous Australians: the largest national cohort after the United States. Many of the names listed will be unfamiliar to most Australians. Others will be, such as John Howard, Liberal prime minister of Australia (1996-2007), who joined the MPS in 2010³. Promising ‘bucket loads of extinguishment’ of native title, the Howard government came to power amidst a mining industry fear campaign against the 1992 Mabo judgement, the 1993 Native Title Act, and the 1996 Wik decision. Confessing ‘climate scepticism’, Howard refused Australia’s ratification of the UN Kyoto Protocol. Cultivating white nationalism and the Christian right, Howard shifted the Liberal party’s secular liberalism to conservative neoliberalism. Howard lost the 2007 election, in part for obstructing climate policy and refusing an apology to the Stolen Generations, victims of government-mandated child removal and cultural assimilation.

Another well-known MPS member is ex-Member for Goldstein Tim Wilson ([MPS 2012](#)). For several years prior to his 2013 entry to parliament with the incoming Liberal/National government of Tony Abbott, Wilson worked as climate policy director of the [IPA \(2012\)](#), which the [Atlas Network \(2015\)](#) credited with co-ordinating the relentless media campaign against the climate policies of Julia Gillard’s Labor government. In recent years the executives and corporate board members of the IPA have been recruited amongst the senior managers of Rio Tinto, Shell, Woodside, and petroleum engineering company Clough. In 2013, the Abbott government introduced a raft of bills to repeal the previous government’s clean energy and carbon pricing legislation.

In parallel, News Corp and the local Atlas thinktanks launched a campaign against human rights protections for minorities in Australian law. In 2011, the Federal Court ruled in favour of nine prominent Aboriginal leaders who sued lead News Corp ‘opinion’ columnist Andrew Bolt under section 18C of the 1975 Racial Discrimination Act, which offers protection from abusive racial vilification ([ABC 2011](#)). The Murdoch press and local Atlas units promptly joined an attack on 18C. The IPA went further, demanding the abolition of the Australian Human Rights Commission ([IPA 2013](#)). In 2013, Wilson was appointed Human Rights Commissioner, ostensibly to ‘restore balance’ ([Jabour 2013](#)). The role was recently assumed by Lorraine Finlay, another IPA staffer ([Remeikis 2021](#)). International human rights covenants affirming Indigenous people’s rights to culture, consultation and consent over traditional lands are a key frontier in legal efforts to limit new rounds of fossil fuel production and thus the damage caused by it ([United Nations 2022](#); van Asselt 2023).

The MPS membership meets annually in international hotels, often in parallel with Atlas workshops restricted to funders and think-tank directors. Claiming the tax-deductible ‘non-profit’ status of educational ‘research institutes’, individual Atlas units rigorously hide from the public their common sources of fossil fuel and other corporate funding, and the fact that their for-profit campaigns are conducted in concert with other Atlas units. Neither Atlas or MPS conferences are open to the public; they do not issue press statements and rarely publish proceedings (although see [Bennett 2020](#)). Each thinktank is designed to generate a constant flow of easily read outputs, duly amplified by aligned media to influence public opinion and shape government policy. Flooding the public sphere with constantly repackaged ‘opinion’ pieces, ‘research’ papers, submissions to government inquiries, Facebook memes and shock-jock outrage, these agenda-setting policy campaigns present to the citizen as a diverse array of opinion from multiple

3 MPS members are hereafter denoted by year of acceptance as members, according to the [DeSmog \(2021a\)](#) member list, and scholarly literature reporting on primary documents held in the MPS archives.



independent sources on a wide set of policy issues, such that it would be reasonable to accept some of these views as one's own, or at least believe they are widely held by fellow citizens. Meanwhile, Atlas affiliates such as the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) draft radically pro-corporate, anti-labour and anti-climate legislation to be introduced by aligned politicians ([Wilce & Graves 2014](#)).

Scholars have expressed concern regarding the limited capacity of citizens to identify intentional disinformation and its intended side-effect, the voluntary propagation of disinformation by those who believe it to be true (misinformation). Disinformation campaigns aim to 'shift the Overton window', taking advantage of the false-balance framing of 'both sides' journalism. As Alejandro Chafuen ([MPS 1980](#), Atlas Network president 1991-2017) reports, it was Joseph Overton of the Atlas-affiliated Mackinac Centre who developed the concept of the Overton window "as a process that leads to policy change". This involves crafting ideological messages "that can increase or decrease the number of ideas politicians can support without unduly risking their electoral support", and by other means, such as "*taking control of organizations and institutions, modifying processes* so outcomes can be more favourable to freedom, and pushing for middle-of-the-road solutions which might create a culture more respectful of freedom" ([Chafuen 2023](#), p. 68; my italics).

The Advance strategy of generating extensive media coverage of a small number of Indigenous speakers to create the impression of significant Indigenous community opposition to legal reforms which would enhance their rights has been applied by Atlas elsewhere. In Canada, proposed legislation to give effect to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was targeted by the Atlas Network through the Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI) ([Atlas Network 2020b](#)). The UNDRIP affirms Indigenous peoples' right of free, prior and informed consent before governments approve large development projects significantly impacting upon traditional lands. As political momentum began building in 2016 for Canada to implement UNDRIP, this "concerned the team at MLI". As an internal Atlas report noted, the aim of the MLI campaign was removing potential barriers to the expansion of oil and gas projects ([Dembicki 2022](#)). Although the UNDRIP bill "got a rough ride in the Commons and in the Senate", with Conservative MPs voting against the bill claiming it would give Indigenous people a veto over natural resource projects, the UNDRIP Act was eventually passed into law ([CBC 2021](#)).

Whilst there is no land justice element to the Voice proposal, the co-ordinated opposition to Indigenous constitutional recognition by the Australian arm of the Atlas Network we can assume is motivated by the same intentions underlying the permanent Atlas campaign against climate policy, that is, to minimise the possibility of democratic government challenging the ever-expanding frontier of fossil fuel extraction. Traditional owners have raised legal challenges to fossil fuel projects, for instance, to Santos, and Woodside (and thereby to foreign joint-venture partners like ExxonMobil, BP and Shell) in the Murujuga/Burrup, Pilliga and Tiwi Island gas basins. Should an Indigenous Voice be constitutionalised in Parliament, First Nations representatives might raise objections to such fossil and mining projects. Ratification of UNDRIP (and with it the right to informed, freely given, prior consent over changes in land use) might also be raised on the agenda of a Makarrata truth commission and in treaty negotiations. This would seem a likely motive of the Australian Atlas units and their (undeclared) corporate investors for the defeat of the Voice, and with it the national unity and political momentum required to implement the Uluru process.

Advance claims that the Voice is a project of 'inner city elites and woke politicians', that it will 'divide us on the basis of race' and 'wreck your constitution' ([Advance 2023](#)). Although its elsewhere-declared funders include hedge fund millionaires and well-heeled owners of Sydney Harbour waterfront properties ([Wilson & Buckley 2023](#)), Advance's website features dumbed-down slogans, clearly aimed at stoking white nationalist grievance among rural and suburban voters against the First Nations voice, and also against 'woke climate hysteria' ([Advance 2023](#)). Known as 'astroturfing', this corporate PR strategy creates the artificial impression of an authentic grassroots mobilisation ([Beder 2002](#)). The claims made by Advance have proliferated across the electorate, supported by an amnesiac press and a legion of fake social media accounts.



Fact-checking efforts, though well intended, merely re-broadcasts the disinformation as the media ‘both sides’ distracting, inflammatory, untrue and trivial claims, sucking oxygen from democratic deliberation on the relative merits of the referendum proposal. Unidentifiable social media accounts have propagated ‘serious misinformation’, alleging the Voice (with no decision-making powers) will veto laws and court decisions, or require new land taxes, reparations payments, the closure of national parks and the surrender of farms to First Nations. The No campaign has created an atmosphere of license for hate speech and overtly racist attacks on Indigenous people, who report daily distress and dread at the prospect of the referendum being defeated ([Connick 2023](#)).

The Voice is a project of ‘elites’: oil company owners and the origins of the Australian Atlas

In 1974, Antony Fisher was invited to Vancouver by petroleum, logging and other business interests to establish the Fraser Institute, his first known IEA-cloning effort outside of Britain. In 1976, Fisher’s services were retained by oil and mining executives to build an Australian version of the IEA, his second international commission. The origins of the CIS are indicative of the origin story of the Atlas Network, of which the anti-Voice campaign is only the most recent Atlas intervention altering the course of Australian history. The CIS was provided with foundation grants by transnational resource exporting companies to counter the popular program of the Whitlam government (1972-1975): to restore Australian sovereignty, control and ownership over hydrocarbon and uranium resources, universal access to healthcare and tertiary education, a national system of environmental law and national parks, and the promotion of Aboriginal equality through land rights ([Walker 2022](#); [Huf 2023](#)).

In 1975, Maurice Newman ([MPS 1976](#)) organised Milton Friedman’s Australian speaking tour. Friedman was flown direct from Chile ([Courvisanos & Millmow 2006](#)), where he and other MPS economists were advising General Augusto Pinochet’s military dictatorship, in the neoliberals’ first experiment in radical free-market ‘shock therapy’ ([Klein 2017](#), pp. 49-128). At the time, supporters of the democratically-elected socialist government of Salvador Allende deposed in the coup were being tortured and ‘disappeared’ *en masse*. Friedman’s implicit critique of Whitlam’s economic policy was widely lauded in the press. In 1976, Ron Kitching ([MPS 1983](#)) and Roger Randerson ([MPS 1983](#)) arranged Hayek’s Australian speaking tour. A self-confessed “radical anti-socialist”, in one lecture, Hayek prosecuted his critique of “unlimited democracy” in terms reflecting the collaboration of MPS economists and constitutional theorists with Pinochet’s brutal dictatorship: “What present trends point to is the emergence of ever larger numbers, for whose welfare and status government has assumed responsibility it cannot discharge, and whose revolt when they are not paid enough, or asked to do more work than they like, will have to be subdued with the knout and the machine-gun” ([Hayek 1979](#), p. 96).

The same year, John Bonython, manager of News Corp’s *Adelaide Advertiser* and co-founder of gas giant Santos, arranged two Australian visits from Antony Fisher to privately gather support from corporates, wealthy individuals and right-wing politicians for an Australian IEA-clone. In a 1976 letter, Bonython described the origins of the CIS to John Murchison of the ultra-rich Texas oil family, head of Santos’ joint-venture partner Delhi International (later acquired by Esso Australia):

We have had a sad time here of recent years with the very regrettable Labour-Socialist Federal Government [...] I hope that, Labour having been expelled from office, the Liberals under Fraser may get us back to a better state before long.

Describing the think-tank method perfected by Fisher through which corporations could exert influence over public opinion, education, elections and legislation whilst appearing not to engage in political activity at all, Bonython writes:

Recently, at my instigation, Australia has had a visit from one Antony Fisher of London. [...] What you may say, what any business itself may say, is put down by many to 'vested interest' [...] Fisher has a technique of getting academics to say and write under their own names what business cannot say for itself. [...] Fisher's method seems to me to be the best I have come across. Sporadic attempts to defend private enterprise, private property, freedom of choice, must of course be made whenever possible. However, Fisher's method is not so sporadic. It is a continuing process. *The method can be backed up in many ways - by a society etc.* [...] Fisher's ideas as to method should be of real interest and benefit, and incidentally, they should benefit you. (Bonython 1976; my emphasis)

The founding grants of the CIS were supplied in 1979 by Santos, Shell, BHP, Rio Tinto, Western Mining Corporation (WMC) and News Corp's *Adelaide Advertiser*, arranged by Newman, Bonython, and Hugh Morgan (Kelly 1992, p. 47). Morgan was a powerbroker in Australian and international mining politics: chair of WMC (later acquired by BHP), chair of Alcoa Australia, a board director of the Alcoa parent company based in the Scaife-Mellon seat of Pittsburgh, a leader of the Australian Mining Industry Council (AMIC) and its successor, the Minerals Council of Australia (Order of Australia 2021). He was variously a board director of the CIS, and (with Woodside's Charles Goode) of the IPA and the Liberal Party's Cormack Foundation; in 1983 Morgan accepted Fisher's invitation to join the inaugural Atlas business advisory board (Chafuen 2012b).

The Voice will 'Divide us on the basis of race': against Aboriginal self-determination and land rights

Offering impoverished Aboriginal communities standing to negotiate with powerful mining companies that had never had to consult with them before, Whitlam's ALP promised First Nations a right of veto on unwanted mining projects, including for protection of sacred sites. British company Rio Tinto voiced its opposition through its Australian subsidiary, in terms reminiscent of the Fair/Advance claims that constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australia is 'unfair' and 'divisive':

Giving mineral rights, in effect, to Aboriginals and not to other landholders is divisive. CRA believes that Aboriginal title to land should be held on the same basis as that of any other Australian. (Roberts 1981, p. 91)

Rio Tinto then possessed major cross-holdings in Australian uranium leases, as did other known think-tank funders Exxon, BP, and WMC (Roberts 1981, p. 126). At the time, the ALP opposition supported the policy of the powerful anti-nuclear alliance of the peace, labour, environment and Aboriginal land rights movements: 'leave it in the ground'. This changed after Bob Hawke returned the ALP to government in 1983.

From the late 1980s to early 2000s, Morgan collaborated with his speechwriter Ray Evans (MPS 1988) and John Stone (Federal Treasury Secretary 1979-1984; MPS 2008) to found four single-issue campaign groups (Kelly 2019). Each were designed to push public debate rightward in pursuit of the political goals of mining capital; abolishing wage arbitration and weakening unions (HR Nicholls Society), 'states-rights' constitutionalism (Samuel Griffiths Society); climate disinformation and policy obstruction (the Lavoisier Group) and the Bennelong Society. Advocating the return of 1950s-style assimilationist policy, the Bennelong Society sought to delegitimise the consensus on Indigenous self-determination, alleging that the causes of contemporary poverty and disadvantage were not, as Aboriginal leaders maintained, in



colonial land dispossession, systemic incarceration and child removal, but in social welfare payment and the inalienable, collective land titles awarded under the limited scope of the 1976 Aboriginal Land Rights Act and the 1993 Native Title Act. Stone opened a 2017 *Quadrant* article by “acknowledging the traditional owners of this country: King George III and all his heirs and assigns” ([Kelly 2019](#), p. 93).

Ex-Labor minister and IPA fellow Gary Johns was president of the Bennelong Society in its later years ([BS 2012](#)). Largely composed of white business conservatives, the society cultivated Indigenous figures willing to criticize Aboriginal leaders and organisations in support of the Howard government’s policies. Mundine was awarded the 2005 Bennelong Medal for his “proposal to change the way community owned land is controlled”. Bess Price (Jacinta’s mother) received the 2009 medal for her “challenge to white students and cranky Kooris and Murriss from down south who know nothing about Aboriginal people and who hate whitefellas” and “her forthright defence of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response” ([BS 2012](#)). As [Watson writes \(2010, p. 605\)](#):

[..] the NTER was a raft of measures introduced by the Commonwealth in August 2007, in response to allegations of child sexual abuse in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities. The measures included the compulsory acquisition of Aboriginal lands, the quarantining of welfare payments, prohibitions on alcohol, and the vesting of expansive powers in the Commonwealth Minister to intervene in the affairs of Aboriginal organisations.

Weakening native title rights and Aboriginal land councils, in a traumatic re-invasion of Country, Howard mobilised the Army in 2007 to enforce the NTER upon remote communities.

In the sensitive context of the Voice referendum campaign, Gary Johns has revived 1930s-style ‘blood quantum’ racial biology, proposing that since “It is possible to test Aboriginal lineage [...] blood will have to be measured for all benefits and jobs” ([Hurst 2023](#)). Johns is now a spokesman of the anti-Voice campaign unit [Recognise a Better Way \(2023\)](#). He was a speaker at the 2023 Sydney conference of the international Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) which headlined the Vote No campaign, as were fellow Atlas networkers Newman, Price, and Mundine, along with One Nation senator Pauline Hanson ([CPAC 2023a](#)). In 2018, officers of Hanson’s One Nation party were secretly filmed by *Al Jazeera* in a Washington meeting pitching to Koch Industries for funding: “What you can do to help us, and it’s going to go down to money at the end of the day [...] we can change the voting system in our country, the way people operate, if we’ve got the money to do it” ([Charley 2019](#))⁴.

The Voice will ‘wreck your Constitution’ and ‘rewire your democracy’: authoritarian neoliberalism, the CPAC, and the criminalisation of climate protest

In 2007, Newman was appointed by Howard to chair the ABC board. Also appointed was the revisionist historian Keith Windschuttle, following an attack on historians who had influenced legal opinion away from judicial denial of Aboriginal property rights in land (e.g. [Reynolds, 1981 & 1987](#)). [Windschuttle \(2002\)](#) denied evidence of widespread massacres, arguing that Aboriginal resistance to violent frontier land appropriation should rather be understood as criminal violations of settler’s property rights. Additional Howard appointments to the ABC board included IPA fellow Ron Brunton, News Corp columnist Janet Albrechtsen ([MPS 2011](#); IPA director 2016) and Steven Skala, a board director of Deutsche Bank and the CIS. From 1984 to 2001, Newman was also a director of Deutsche Bank, still among the worlds’ largest financiers of new hydrocarbon development ([ABC 2008](#); [BankTrack 2023](#)), and since 2002, an advisor to

4 There is no known evidence that Koch actually supplied any such funds.



Marsh McLennan, insurance brokers to the Adani coal project long resisted by Wangan and Jagalingou custodians ([Fernyhough 2020](#)).

A vocal science sceptic and opponent of clean energy, as chair of the ABC Newman criticized the media for being too willing to accept the scientific consensus on global warming ([Elliot 2014](#)). In a speech to ABC staff, Newman declared climate change an example of “group-think”, complaining that “contrary views had not been tolerated, and those who expressed them had been labelled and mocked” ([Trembath 2011](#)). Since the 1988 ‘Exxon position’, most of the ‘contrary voices’ platformed by media covering ‘both sides’ of the ‘climate debate’ have been published by or otherwise associated with Atlas-affiliated groups, whose funding sources are never disclosed by the speakers or their interviewers to audiences. The Howard era marked a profound shift in the ideology of the Liberal Party, from secular ‘broad-church’ liberalism to the radically anti-scientific, reactionary neoliberalism promoted via the MPS/Atlas Network by its fossil-fuel (and other) corporate sponsors.

Fifty-four years ago, scientists’ warnings that unchecked fossil-combustion emissions would cause catastrophic global heating by the early to mid-21st century were foregrounded in the opening paragraphs of the 1969 report of the [Senate Select Committee on Air Pollution \(1969, p. 2\)](#) convened by John Gorton’s Liberal government, which drew on extensive sworn evidence submitted in public by government, university and fossil/mining industry scientists. Convened in response to mounting calls from governments and citizens for comprehensive national and international regulation of polluting industry, the proceedings of the 1971 AMIC conference *Progress: Mining and the Environment* likewise noted scientists’ warnings that irreversible atmospheric CO₂ accumulation would eventually melt the icecaps ([Nelson 1971](#), p. 3). From the mid-1960s through the mid-1980s, confidential internal scientific reports commissioned by Shell, Exxon and the American Petroleum Institute reported this evidence in detail, also without challenge to well-established science ([Climate Files 2023b](#)).

In 2013, incoming Liberal PM Tony Abbott appointed Newman chair of a business advisory council, which called for stringent budget cuts to eliminate ‘green and red tape’. Soon after, Newman declared there was no evidence linking fossil-fuel combustion to global warming: the real agenda was a conspiracy of the United Nations for world take-over ([Cox 2014](#)). Newman made similar claims in his speech to the 2023 Sydney CPAC conference, warning that young minds were being “bombarded” with relentless “doomsday climate propaganda”, drawing parallels between the 1930s Nazi subversion of the democratic Weimar constitution and the present political situation in Australia ([CPAC 2023b](#)). Javier Milei, current front-runner for the presidency of gas-rich Argentina, with extensive connections to Argentina’s Atlas think-tanks, has similarly described climate change as “another lie of socialism”, “part of the agenda of Cultural Marxism” ([Araldi 2022](#)).

Placed in the international context of Newman’s career as Australia’s veteran MPS/Atlas networker, the [Advance \(2023\)](#) claim that the Voice will ‘wreck your constitution’, and its seemingly bizarre labelling of Indigenous Yes campaigners as ‘communists’ are concerning. This is more than an anachronistic appeal to the Cold War worldview of an ageing voting demographic. Real or imaginary, for the transnational corporation, the ‘pro-Western’ dictatorships of the Cold War, and the libertarian-authoritarian far-right, the communist is the primordial enemy, someone who can be deprived of rights, or life, without sanction.

The admiration of the CPAC for autocratic governments should be carefully scrutinised. In 2022, the CPAC held a conference in Hungary, addressed by far-right president Viktor Orbán, who has eroded the country’s democratic and judicial safeguards in pursuit of ‘illiberal democracy’. Since 2013, according to [Dorosz \(2020\)](#),

Hungary’s carbon emissions have increased, and its share of renewables has fallen substantially. The government has abolished its environmental ministry, banned wind energy and introduced a

special tax on solar panels. [...] Orban is now building new nuclear reactors. [In 2019] he vetoed the European Union's 2050 carbon neutrality goal.

Orbán's opposition to clean energy and promotion of nuclear reactors parallels the policy position now widely advocated by Australian Atlas pundits and the LNP federal opposition. [Beauchamp \(2022\)](#) reports that in a speech prior to the 2022 Texas CPAC conference, Orbán said "we do not want to become peoples of mixed-race"; in his Texas conference speech, Orbán encouraged the Trumpian assault on electoral institutions, civil and minority rights, and environmental protection: "we cannot fight successfully by liberal means, because our opponents use liberal institutions, concepts, and language to disguise their Marxist and hegemonic plans."

LibertyWorks is yet another Australian Atlas unit. Chaired by Warren Mundine, LibertyWorks has failed to repay to the public revenue the costs of its failed High Court challenge aiming to overturn Australia's foreign influence registration scheme, designed to render transparent foreign influences on domestic politics ([Taylor 2023](#)). The case was mounted after Tony Abbot was requested to register following his attendance at a 2019 Budapest conference organised by the Hungarian government, at which Abbot praised Orbán. LibertyWorks, which has hosted several of the American Conservative Union's CPAC events in Australia, refused requests from the Australian government to comply with the disclosures required under the scheme ([Karp 2020](#)). Now defunct, its archived website features Price claiming s18C of the Racial Discrimination Act "encourages rather than discourages racism" ([LibertyWorks 2017](#)), alongside a stream of articles opposing renewable energy and climate policy. [LibertyWorks \(2018\)](#) board members have included ex-IPA executive Alan Moran ([MPS 2011](#)) - now working with Chicago's anti-climate policy Atlas unit the [Heartland Institute \(2019\)](#) - and John Humphreys ([MPS 2011](#)). Humphreys was a founder of the Australian Libertarian Society (est. 2000) and is presently chief economist with the Australian Taxpayers Alliance (est. 2011). Both organisations are affiliated with the [Atlas Network \(2014, 2020a\)](#). Reports that Mundine is being considered for pre-selection to a safe Liberal Senate seat ([Maddison & Massola 2023](#)) provides further evidence of the Atlas Network's long march through the Liberal Party and Australian public institutions.

The role of senior Liberal ex-politicians in such international networks does not stop with Abbott and the CPAC. John Howard works with London-based climate disinformation unit the Global Warming Policy Foundation. Tony Abbott recently joined its board. In 2019, another London organisation, Policy Exchange (PE) released a report branding Extinction Rebellion and non-violent climate protest movements as 'extremists' aiming to overthrow the British state ([Wilson & Walton, 2019](#)). Just as corporate-drafted bills generated by ALEC and passed in US states reclassified non-violent environmentalists as 'terrorists' ([Parker 2009](#)), PE's calls for aggressive prosecution and expanded police powers were promptly made law by the Conservative government, with similar policy shifts achieved through similar methods recently in Germany and elsewhere ([Barnett & Bright 2023](#); [Westerwelt & Dembicki, 2023](#)). In the subsequent UK police crackdown, climate protestors have received long jail sentences. Some have been jailed for contempt of court, in breach of rulings made by a judge forbidding them to speak to juries about the climate crisis or the history of peaceful civil rights movement in their defence ([Laville 2023](#)). State governments in Australia, with bipartisan support of Labor and the LNP, have similarly rushed through draconian laws without public debate, criminalising non-violent protestors who face police surveillance, jail and heavy fines ([Rowlands 2023](#)). Such laws can only be for the benefit of the predominantly foreign-owned oil, gas and coal companies operating in Australia, many of which pay zero company tax and zero Petroleum Resource Rent Tax on hundreds of billions of dollars in annual revenues ([ATO 2023](#)). Reportedly funded by ExxonMobil ([Horton 2022](#)), the registered owner of Policy Exchange is Alexander Downer ([OpenCorporates 2023](#)), foreign minister in the Howard government, who is presently advising UK Border Force on its policy to 'stop the boats' ([Attorney General's Department 2023](#)).



Conclusion

Australian voters carry an historic responsibility in the coming referendum. Not only do they have the opportunity to celebrate and affirm First Nation's profound knowledge as cultural custodians of country for untold generations, they also carry the weight of responsibility for the integrity of Australia's our liberal democratic institutions and systems of elected government, our reputation among the nations of the world, and the right of our children to have hope for the future. Should the Atlas Network's 'Vote No' campaign shout down a profoundly important constitutional vote through racial provocation and ubiquitous disinformation, Australians will have conceded yet more power to the most powerfully-organised opponents of national self-determination and parliamentary sovereignty, to those who would, in pursuit of temporary riches for a tiny elite, render the Earth progressively uninhabitable. If Australians continue to turn a blind eye to the shadowy, far-right political infrastructure of the Atlas think-tanks and campaign organisations, which exert considerable influence over elections and public life without transparency or accountability, Australians may find themselves increasingly voiceless in the illiberal democracy of a petro-state.

Are Australians ready to listen, instead, to the voices of the most ancient abiding culture on Earth, which teaches respect, responsibility, reciprocity and the sacred obligation to care for country? I hope the answer is Yes, for the hour is late.

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