The aim of this paper is to further understand and respond to objections to the proposal for a constitutional prohibition on racial discrimination, proposed as part of constitutional reforms for Indigenous recognition. These common objections are: first, that a racial non-discrimination clause in the Constitution would be undemocratic; second, that its operation would be too uncertain; and third, that the proposal would be politically unviable in any case, and would fail at a referendum. I seek to respond to the three objections in the following manner. First, I argue that the undemocratic objection to the proposed clause is outweighed by the fact that the race clauses in the Constitution are in themselves undemocratic. In a liberal democracy, citizens should have an equal say via their equal vote, and should be treated equally by governments on the basis of individual circumstances, rather than on the basis of race, ethnicity or skin colour. I argue, therefore, that those who see the Constitution as a structural document which sets up the procedures of government and democracy — without supporting entrenchment of a broader bill of rights — should nonetheless support correcting the undemocratic ‘race error’ in our Constitution. While a restraint on government’s power to racially discriminate would be judicially adjudicated, like the rest of the Constitution, this does not necessarily mean that such a clause is undemocratic. Rather, a reform entrenching a basic element of liberal democracy — equality before the law with respect to race — would be a democratic improvement on the current situation, which promotes and allows differential treatment of citizens on the arbitrary, unfair and unclear basis of race. Second, in response to the uncertainty objection, I argue that given the fact of racial discrimination in the Constitution, the proposed racial non-discrimination clause may be the most clear and certain way to address the problems at hand. Third, responding to the political unviability objection, I make the political argument that a stable and cohesive society requires a sense of national unity on the basis
of equal citizenship that is free from racial differentiations, and that the racial non-discrimination proposal is capable of winning bipartisan and popular support by appealing to these ideals.

1 INTRODUCTION

In January 2012, the Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians (‘Expert Panel’) published its recommendations for constitutional reform. The Expert Panel proposed reforms for the constitutional recognition of Indigenous peoples, which included the recognition of Indigenous peoples as the first inhabitants of Australia, recognition of Indigenous relationships to land, and recognition of Indigenous languages, cultures and heritage. The Expert Panel also proposed reforms to eliminate racial discrimination from the Constitution, and to entrench a prohibition on racial discrimination by governments.\(^1\)

This paper will focus on the legal and political arguments regarding the racial non-discrimination reforms proposed by the Expert Panel, specifically the proposal to adopt a new provision prohibiting racial discrimination by governments. My aim is to further understand and respond to common objections to the proposed racial non-discrimination clause, and to help progress the current debate.

The introductory section of this paper examines why the Expert Panel proposed the racial non-discrimination reforms that it did. The second part explains the main objections to the racial non-discrimination proposal. I characterise these objections under three broad themes: the undemocratic (or majoritarian) objection, the related uncertainty objection, and the political unviability objection.

The third part canvasses some counterarguments to these objections. First, I contend that the undemocratic objection to the proposed clause is dwarfed by the fact of the race clauses in the Constitution, which are in themselves undemocratic. In a liberal democracy, citizens should have an equal say via their equal vote, and should be treated equally by governments on the basis of individual circumstances, rather than on the basis of race, ethnicity or skin colour. Therefore, those who see the Constitution as a structural document which sets up the procedures of government and democracy — without supporting a broader bill of rights — should nonetheless support correcting the undemocratic ‘race error’ in the Constitution. While a racial non-discrimination clause in the Constitution would be judicially adjudicated, just as the rest of Constitution is judicially adjudicated, this does not show that the clause is undemocratic. Rather, a restraint of government’s power to racially discriminate would entrench a basic missing element of liberal democracy — equality before the law with respect to race. It would therefore be a democratic improvement on current constitutional

(and also judiciarily adjudicated) arrangements which promote and allow differential treatment of citizens on arbitrary, unfair and uncertain racial grounds.

Second, in response to the uncertainty objection, I weigh up other alternatives to a racial non-discrimination clause to argue that given the fact of racial discrimination in the Constitution, the proposed racial non-discrimination clause may provide the most certain way of correcting the ‘race error’.

Third, responding to the political unviability objection, I make the political argument that a stable and cohesive society requires a sense of national unity on the basis of equal citizenship free from racial differentiations. This is an argument which I believe is capable of gaining bipartisan and popular support.

II THE EXPERT PANEL’S RACIAL NON-DISCRIMINATION RECOMMENDATIONS

The Expert Panel’s final report recommended the removal of racially discriminatory provisions from the Constitution, including s 25 which contemplates barring races from voting, and s 51(xxvi), (the ‘Race Power’), which enables the Commonwealth to pass racially discriminatory laws. The Expert Panel further recommended that a prohibition on racial discrimination, s 116A, be inserted into the Constitution to prevent governments from being able to discriminate on the basis of race. The Expert Panel’s s 116A recommendation was as follows:

Section 116A Prohibition of racial discrimination
(1) The Commonwealth, a State or a Territory shall not discriminate on the grounds of race, colour or ethnic or national origin.

(2) Subsection (1) does not preclude the making of laws or measures for the purpose of overcoming disadvantage, ameliorating the effects of past discrimination, or protecting the cultures, languages or heritage of any group.

The Expert Panel recommended these racial non-discrimination reforms because the problem of racial discrimination is central to the question of Indigenous constitutional recognition. It is inextricably related to the history of Indigenous peoples in Australia, and Indigenous relationships with Australian governments under the Constitution, which have been characterised by racial discrimination, exclusion and non-recognition of Indigenous peoples.

2 Ibid.
3 Australian Constitution s 51(xxvi) gives the Commonwealth the power to pass laws with respect to ‘the people of any race for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws’. In Kartinyeri v Commonwealth (1998) 195 CLR 337, two justices found that this power can probably be used to pass laws for the benefit of any race, or laws to the detriment of any race.
4 Expert Panel Report, above n 1, xviii.
5 Ibid 167. See also Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Parliament of Australia, Interim Report (2014) 19: ‘The committee is mindful of the Expert Panel’s view “that recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will be incomplete without a constitutional prohibition of laws that discriminate on the basis of race.”’
Indigenous Australians were excluded from the drafting of the *Constitution*. They had no say in its design or content. Racially discriminatory policies of the time meant that Indigenous Australians in some states were not allowed to vote when the *Constitution* was drafted.6

Initially, Indigenous people were explicitly excluded from the *Constitution*. Section 127 excluded Indigenous people from being counted in the official Census. They were also excluded from the operation of s 51(xxvi), the Race Power, either because it was widely believed that Indigenous people were a ‘dying race whose future was unimportant’,7 or because their welfare was considered the responsibility of the states.8

Historical evidence indicates that the Race Power ‘was deliberately inserted into the *Constitution* to allow the Commonwealth to discriminate against sections of the community on account of their race’.9 The Race Power was initially intended by the drafters to enable the Commonwealth to pass discriminatory laws against the ‘alien races’,10 particularly to exclude the ‘inferior’ and ‘coloured’11 peoples such as ‘Asiatic or African alien[s]’ from the goldfields,12 and to more easily control ‘undesirable immigrants’13 such as Chinese, Indian, Afghan and Japanese settlers and workers.14 The racism apparent in the colonial attitudes of the time was not restricted to Indigenous people.15

While the 1967 referendum reversed the explicit exclusion of Indigenous people from the *Constitution* by repealing s 127 and amending s 51(xxvi), it did not fix everything. Racial discrimination still remained. Today, the *Constitution* still contains two explicitly racially discriminatory provisions. One is s 25, a ‘[p]rovision as to races disqualified from voting’. While historically intended as a disincentive to discourage the states disqualifying particular races from voting,16

8 See also *Expert Panel Report*, above n 1, 14.
10 See Attwood and Markus, above n 7, 2.
12 Ibid 240–1 (Sir John Forrest).
13 Ibid 241.
15 Malbon, above n 7, 93.
the provision nonetheless contemplates barring Australian citizens from the
democratic right to vote on account of race.17

Similarly, s 51(xxvi), the Race Power, provides the Commonwealth with the
power to make laws relating to ‘the people of any race for whom it is deemed
necessary to make special laws’. Today, this power is only used for laws relating
to Indigenous people. The provision contains no requirement that these laws be
beneficial or non-discriminatory. In fact, though the judgments were split, the
High Court has indicated that the Race Power can probably be used for beneficial
or adverse use against particular races.18

While the explicit exclusion of Indigenous people has, since 1967, been eliminated,
the continued existence of s 25 and the Race Power in the Constitution, without
any protection against adverse discrimination on racial grounds, is arguably
incompatible with our international obligations to eliminate racial discrimination
under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (‘CERD’),19 to which Australia is a party. As the 1988
Constitutional Commission Report stated:

   It is inappropriate to retain section 51(xxvi) because the purposes for which,
historically, it was inserted no longer apply in this country. Australia has
joined the many nations which have rejected race as a legitimate criterion
on which legislation can be based.20

In 2010, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination also
expressed its concern that Australia’s Constitution retained ss 25 and 51(xxvi)
and recommended that Australia adopt ‘entrenched protection[s] against racial
discrimination’.21

In reforming the Constitution to amend the discriminatory non-recognition of
Indigenous peoples, the Expert Panel therefore had to contend with the problem
that our Constitution falls short of international standards regarding racial non-
discrimination, and Australia’s commitment to those standards as demonstrated
by ratification of the relevant human rights treaties.22

17  Section 25 provides: ‘For the purposes of the last section, if by the law of any State all persons of any
race are disqualified from voting at elections for the more numerous House of the Parliament of the
State, then, in reckoning the number of the people of the State or of the Commonwealth, persons of that
race resident in that State shall not be counted’.
18  Kartinyeri v The Commonwealth (1998) 195 CLR 337, 378–81 [82]–[89] (Gummow and Hayne JJ);
cf. at 367–8 [44]–[45] (Gaudron J), 410–11 [152] (Kirby J). Williams explains that the court was ‘split
on whether the races power can still be used to discriminate against Indigenous or other peoples. This
19 Griffith Review 11, 27.
19  International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, opened for
21  Report of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, UN GAOR, 76th–77th sess, Supp
No 18, UN Doc A/65/18 (27 August 2010) 18.
Similarly, the Expert Panel had to deal with the problem posed by the race clauses in the context of Australia’s democratic system, and by reference to certain liberal democratic values and public expectations with respect to individual equality before the law. The Expert Panel’s polling indicated that the majority of Australians (around 80–90 per cent), across political persuasions, supported the idea of a racial non-discrimination clause in the Constitution.23 Many of the submissions to the Expert Panel strongly advocated the value of individual equality, and highlighted the problematic nature of the race provisions for a democracy like Australia.24 Similarly, the importance of a protection against racial discrimination was strongly advocated by Indigenous people, and has been passionately promoted by Indigenous leaders.25

Public views, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, on the matter of the racial discrimination present in the Constitution are unsurprising. The race provisions in the Constitution can be said to represent an undemocratic anomaly in an otherwise fair and democratic Constitution. In other regards the Constitution is a neutral document, written in mostly neutral language. It operates as a minimalistic document that sets out the procedures of government and democracy. In doing so, it imposes some important limitations on government power, and therefore protects some basic democratic freedoms. For example, s 116 of the Constitution prohibits the Commonwealth from imposing a religion, thus protecting the democratic value of freedom of worship and belief. With respect to race, however, the Constitution arguably abandons basic democratic principles. It refers to overriding the right to vote — one of democracy’s most important rights — on the basis of race. It also talks about passing different laws for different so-called races, explicitly undermining the democratic value of equality before the law.

But the particular importance of the racial non-discrimination aspect of the proposed reforms for Indigenous spokespersons arises from the fact that the democratic exclusion and differential treatment on the basis of race, allowed under and promoted in the Constitution, has been mostly directed at Indigenous Australians. The Expert Panel therefore concluded that Indigenous recognition and removal of racial discrimination from the Constitution were intimately linked. As Noel Pearson argued:

The racial discrimination allowed by our Constitution is inextricably linked to the Indigenous history we want recognised. So extreme was the discrimination against Indigenous people, it initially even denied that we

24 Expert Panel Report, above n 1, 120.
exists. This is what Indigenous recognition is all about — overturning the fallacies of non-existence and racial inequality.26

Pearson makes the point that Indigenous non-recognition — whether in the Constitution or in the English or Australian law under the doctrine of terra nullius, which justified the non-recognition of Indigenous polities, property rights, and indeed human rights — is a product of past racially discriminatory attitudes and beliefs. The belief that Indigenous people were an inferior race justified Indigenous non-recognition and, in essence, the denial of Indigenous equal humanity.27

Professor Megan Davis has similarly argued that the racial discrimination in and Indigenous exclusion from the Constitution sanctioned Indigenous marginalisation:

beginning with their exclusion from the constitutional drafting process in the late 19th century, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have on the whole been marginalised by both the terms and effect of the Constitution.28

From a domestic democratic perspective, therefore, the Constitution cannot be said to have set up conditions such that each Australian is treated equally before the law with respect to race. Indigenous Australians especially have suffered as a result. For these reasons, the Expert Panel recommended that ss 25 and 51(xxvi) be removed and a new racial non-discrimination clause be adopted.

As will be explained later, simple removal of the Race Power was not considered by the Expert Panel to be a sufficient solution. Section 51(xxvi) would need to be replaced by a new power to ensure that the Commonwealth can continue to pass necessary laws with respect to Indigenous affairs, currently supported by the Race Power, such as native title and Indigenous heritage protection laws.29 But this new power should not be able to be used for adverse racial discrimination, or discriminatory interference into Indigenous people’s lives. Similarly, simple removal of the race clauses would not prevent the Commonwealth using its other powers in a racially discriminatory way. In contending with these issues, the Expert Panel therefore recommended that a racial non-discrimination clause be adopted to ensure that governments cannot adversely discriminate on the basis of race.30

III UNDERSTANDING OBJECTIONS TO A RACIAL NON-DISCRIMINATION CLAUSE

When the Expert Panel’s report was published, there were objections to the racial non-discrimination clause proposal. The proposed clause was described by some constitutional scholars and politicians as a ‘one clause bill of rights’\(^{31}\) that would give the High Court a ‘blank cheque to decide that something is a problem’.\(^{32}\) First, there were concerns that such a clause would be undemocratic, because it would need to be interpreted by the unelected judiciary.\(^{33}\) Secondly, there were related concerns about the legal uncertainty of such a provision; some argued that the clause was ambiguously worded and would likely lead to unintended consequences when being interpreted by the judiciary.\(^{34}\) And third, there were concerns that the proposal was politically unviable, and would fail at a referendum.\(^{35}\)

A The Undemocratic and Uncertainty Objections

The first two objections are closely related and are entwined with a long-established opposition in Australia to constitutional rights and bills of rights in general. The debates surrounding the recognition of Indigenous peoples and the removal of racial discrimination from the Constitution have therefore highlighted a tension between a human rights focussed approach, and the majoritarian approach that is intent on protecting parliamentary sovereignty. The human rights focussed approach is usually not averse to entrenched rights and their interpretation by the judiciary — this is not seen as a contradiction to democracy. The majoritarian view objects to judicial review of what are often contentious moral questions on the basis that these types of decisions should be left to elected representatives.

This paper questions whether these common objections to a racial non-discrimination clause are sufficient in the Australian context, given that Australia’s Constitution currently contains two explicitly racially discriminatory

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34 See, eg, Anne Twomey, ‘Indigenous Constitutional Recognition Explained — The Issues, Risks and Options’ (Constitutional Reform Unit, University of Sydney Law School, 26 January 2012) 7–9.

provisions. Arguably, with respect to race, our Constitution cannot be said to be democratically neutral. This is the problem to which constitutional experts should try to find the most certain and democratic solution.

1 Australia’s Constitution Is Not a Vehicle for Rights or Values?

The undemocratic and uncertainty objections to the proposed racial non-discrimination clause are found in a common view of Australia’s Constitution as a structural rather than rights or values laden document. As Professor Jeffrey Goldsworthy has described:

The whole idea of the Constitution as an object of quasi-religious veneration, inspiration, and redemption is alien to Australians, although an increasing number would like to amend the Constitution so that it could play a more ‘educative’ role in spreading a ‘human rights culture’. … I concede that formally declaring the nation’s commitment to abstract moral principles might serve to educate and inspire, as Abraham Lincoln suggested. But Australians seem to get by without constitutional prompting. For them, basic values and commitments are up for grabs along with everything else in politics. 36

Further, the undemocratic objections to the proposed racial non-discrimination clause arise from a broad belief that the Constitution is sensibly structural rather than rights-laden. This view sees the Constitution as successful because it is a basic charter of government, rather than an aspirational or moral document. The view opposes entrenchment of rights into the Constitution, because it is believed that matters of morality and values should be argued out by elected representatives, not embedded in a Constitution where they must be interpreted, probably unpredictably, by unelected judges. 37

Goldsworthy explains that unlike the USA, the Australian Constitution serves as a basic law, not a ‘higher law’. According to Goldsworthy, the Australian Constitution perhaps cannot even be considered a ‘people’s law’, because many Australians do not even know we have a Constitution. 38 The Constitution sets up the structures in which moral debates and matters of justice can be argued out in the political realm, but it enumerates no morals or values itself. So, unlike in the USA, most Australians do not appeal to the Constitution when arguing matters of justice. The Constitution is considered a dull, ‘prosaic document expressed in

38 Goldsworthy, ‘Constitutional Cultures, Democracy, and Unwritten Principles’, above n 36, 685.
lawyer's language'. And this is how those who object to entrenchment of rights or values would prefer it stay.

The undemocratic and uncertainty objections are founded in the belief that the absence of rights and values in the Constitution is one of the Constitution's greatest democratic strengths, and that the Constitution is overwhelmingly successful; it works well as it is, and should not be fundamentally changed. For those who oppose its fundamental alteration, the Constitution often represents our forefathers' collective wisdom; it is a treasured link with history and the past. It also represents Australia’s continuous and successful democracy. As James Allan wrote:

Australia is one of the oldest democracies. Yes, our young nation has been a democracy, a successful democracy, longer than all but a half-dozen or so other countries. And that is in part because the Constitution we have is the best written Constitution. A continuous, stable Constitution presiding over a continuous, stable democracy is regarded as a great source of pride.

The influence of this mindset goes some extent to explaining resistance to the entrenchment of notions such as ‘equality’ or ‘non-discrimination’ into the Constitution, for it may be unclear what such ideals mean in day-to-day practice, particularly when interpreted by the judiciary. Because constitutional stability, continuity and certainty are seen as all-important, constitutional imperfection seems to be more readily tolerated in order to avoid unpredictable consequences. Rather, such imperfections, in this line of thinking, are best addressed by sovereign Parliaments through democratic processes, not by inserting ambiguous words into the Constitution which must then be interpreted by unelected judges.

2 A ‘Thin’ View of Democracy

Majoritarian objections to the proposed racial non-discrimination clause and entrenched rights in general stem from a ‘thin’ view of democracy, under which majoritarian decision-making is all-important and ideas about the existence of any democratic values or rights are less important.

Allan has described what he calls a more progressive characterisation of the term ‘democracy’ as one that is ‘morally pregnant’: something more than just majoritarian decision-making. Allan argues that progressives incorrectly ascribe the outcomes of decisions as either democratic or undemocratic. According to Allan, it is only a decision-making process that can be democratic or undemocratic.
Hence the assertion that judicial decision-making is undemocratic, because judges are not elected. For Allan, therefore, the existence of written constitutions that must be interpreted and applied by judges, or entrenched bills of rights also subject to judicial review, are in themselves undemocratic because the decision-makers are unelected judges.43

Jeremy Waldron, a chief proponent of the majority-rule view of democracy, wrote of the democratic process that: ‘accordig equal weight or equal potential decisiveness to individual votes is a way of respecting persons. In this sense, majority-decision is a respectful procedure — not just an admirable technical device for securing action-in-concert in the circumstances of politics’.44 Waldron therefore argues that decision-making over moral matters, over which reasonable people are likely to disagree, needs to be left to popularly elected Parliament rather than the judiciary, because this is the only way for individuals to have a say in matters affecting them.45

So, because bills of rights deal in ‘moral abstractions … at a level of indeterminacy that finesse disagreement’,46 bills of rights leave it up to judges to decide the extent and practical application of such morality-laden rights. Thus, Allan concludes, “[b]ills of rights hand power to judges at the expense of the elected legislature. They diminish democracy”.47 Australia, mainly because of its absence of a bill of rights, according to Allan, is ‘remarkably democratic’.48

The proposal to entrench a racial non-discrimination clause into the Constitution has therefore been regarded by objectors like Allan as one that would erode and disrupt Australia’s remarkably successful democracy.

3 A Belief That Entrenched Rights Do Not Necessarily Protect Rights

Scepticism regarding the efficacy of bills of rights in Australia began with the conception of the Constitution itself. When the Constitution was being developed, the prevailing argument, particularly potent in the British and Australian legal traditions, was that the English rule of law system provided better protection for individual rights than any declared general rights that can be written down in a

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The suspicion of entrenched rights carried significant weight in Australia. Goldsworthy explains:

The founders of Australia’s Constitution … deemed it both unnecessary and unwise to impose substantive fetters on their parliaments’ powers. One of their reasons was that judicial interpretations of abstract rights could have unpredictable and undesirable consequences.

Goldsworthy argues that Australia’s human rights record, while ‘far from perfect, … [is] at least as meritorious as that of the United States’, where a constitutional bill of rights has been in operation. Professor Suri Ratnapala similarly notes that ‘[o]ver 130 countries have a bill of rights in one form or another but only a minority of them can truly claim a reasonable record of respect for human rights’.

Supporting this assertion, a widely held view in Australia propounded by influential early writers such as Quick and Garran, themselves original drafters of Australia’s Constitution, was that entrenched rights were not necessarily effective in protecting individual freedoms in general — the common law and democratic process was a far more effective method of rights protection. Democracy, by giving individuals an equal as possible share of power to citizens, enabling all to influence the laws affecting them, is adequate to protect individual rights.

Today there is also scepticism towards ‘universal’ or international human rights declarations and their practical efficacy. As a result, Australian High Court judges have often been criticised when they have turned to international law as an aid to constitutional interpretation.

4 **Uncertain Words**

A common, related objection is that there is uncertainty in the meaning of the words proposed by the Expert Panel’s racial non-discrimination clause, and that

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The Founders, rightly or wrongly, believed wholeheartedly in that mythical beast the ‘British Constitutional Genius’, operating via a concept of parliamentary and responsible government, as the very best means by which to protect (and indeed to define) human rights. Consequently, such rights were to be protected by the elected Parliaments and not by the courts.


51 Goldsworthy, ‘Constitutional Cultures, Democracy, and Unwritten Principles’, above n 36, 687.


this may lead to unintended consequences and unwise risks. For example, Jess Natoli has highlighted the potential practical uncertainty around the wording of the special measures sub-clause, which allows positive measures to address disadvantage or create equal opportunities similar to that currently provided by s 8 of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth) (‘RDA’):

The Expert Panel has recommended inserting an anti-racial discrimination provision into the federal constitution. The goal is to ensure more robust protection against discrimination for Indigenous people and members of all cultural backgrounds. While most Australians would agree with this sentiment, entrenching such a provision in the Constitution is not without its risks. … It is by no means certain that the High Court would interpret proposed constitutional provision 116A(2) in the same way as the existing ‘special measures’ exemptions, particularly as the language used is not identical to section 8 of the Racial Discrimination Act (Cth) …

Uncertainty in wording, it is argued, is likely to lead to unpredictable exercise of judicial power in interpreting the provision. This would give the judiciary too much power and scope in interpreting such a clause and deciding its practical operation.

This objection is again underpinned by a concern to maintain parliamentary sovereignty, and an opposition to judicial review of parliamentary action concerning largely moral questions. As Allan explained, he opposes the proposed racial non-discrimination clause:

Because no one has the slightest idea … how it will be interpreted. … Anything beyond the minimalist repeal option is basically an anti-democratic proposal. It is a proposal that carries with it the potential for much greater judicial power in terms of invalidating and striking down parliament’s statutes, meaning the majority of voters’ statutes. … No one should sensibly be asked to buy something whose contents are in reality unknown and unknowable.

As will be discussed later, Allan’s view is perhaps rhetorically overstated: there is a significant body of racial non-discrimination case law in Australia, interpreting the RDA, that can help us rationally predict how a racial non-discrimination clause in the Constitution would probably be applied and interpreted by the courts. Similarly, we can look to judicial interpretation of other existing constitutional rights, such as s 116, which prevents governments from imposing a religion, to predict how courts would likely interpret this kind of restraint on legislative power.


Nonetheless, Allan’s point about the risk of unintended consequences in relation to the proposed clause warrants discussion. Allan’s view is not only that uncertainty would be created by inserting a racial non-discrimination clause into the *Constitution*, but that problematic uncertainty would be created by putting anything new in there, because the words would then be subject to judicial interpretation, and could mean that laws enacted by elected representatives are struck down at judicial discretion. Allan also, therefore, opposes symbolic recognition of Indigenous peoples in the *Constitution*. His view in this respect differs from many other commentators, who oppose the racial non-discrimination proposal, but nonetheless support Indigenous recognition in a preamble.

### 5 The Perceived Untrustworthiness of the High Court

Greg Sheridan has argued:

> it is virtually impossible to stop activist judges reading things into any part of the *Constitution*. Any grandiloquent word in any constitution becomes in time a licence for judges to make law. That is profoundly anti-democratic.

Anxiety about potential judicial activism, and the perceived undemocratic nature of judicial decision making, exacerbates concerns about constitutional reform.

Constitutional experts like Nicholas Aroney, Jeffrey Goldsworthy and James Allan have criticised the High Court of Australia for the method some judges have taken in constitutional interpretation, and this increases the concern regarding uncertainty associated with the proposed constitutional amendment. In particular, these critics tend to disagree with the ‘living tree’ approach to constitutional interpretation, which sees the *Constitution* as a document whose meaning evolves in accordance with the developing values of society. These objectors tend to prefer an originalist or ‘locked in’ approach.

The major criticism of the ‘living tree’ approach to constitutional interpretation relates closely to a majoritarian understanding of democracy, in which the democratic legitimacy of decision-makers depends on whether or not they are elected. Allan and Aroney argue that the originalist approach to constitutional interpretation constrains judges, and does not give them power elevated above ordinary citizens. The ‘living tree’ approach gives judges an exclusive power and privilege: they can interpret and impose their personal understanding of changing

58 Ibid.
59 Craven, ‘Keep the Constitutional Change Simple’, above n 31, 55.
60 Sheridan, above n 33.
62 Allan and Aroney, above n 61, 247–9. See also the discussion of the importance of the intentions of the original drafters of the *Constitution* in Craven, ‘The High Court of Australia: A Study in the Abuse of Power’, above n 49, 220–2.
societal values into the Constitution, in a way that ordinary citizens cannot. This, they argue, is undemocratic.63

Even when judges purport to use a literalist approach to interpreting the text, Allan and Aroney contend that this often:

collapses into the second ['living tree'] view of constitutions and constitutionalism sketched above, one where 99.99 percent of the population is locked-in but where judges sitting at the zenith of the court hierarchy are left free to upgrade or change or alter it as they think best or right. Insisting on ‘the authoritativeness of the text and nothing but the text’ when it comes to constitutionalised rights guarantees is akin to handing the judges a blank cheque.64

The implied rights cases65 were criticised on this basis, for involving judicial arguments which read in rights that some argue are not present in the constitutional text.66 Goldsworthy explained his own reaction to this perceived usurpation of the people’s democratic power:

It seemed obvious to me that the Court had changed the system of government established by our Constitution in a substantial way, without asking me or my fellow Australians whether we approved of the change, as required by s 128.67

More recently, cases such as Roach68 and Rowe69 have been criticised as demonstrating a ‘fast-and-loose’ approach by majority judges to the task of constitutional interpretation,70 or for finding ‘spurious constitutional implications’ that would not necessarily have been found had better interpretative methods been employed.71 The overall worry is that High Court judges are tending to be unduly activist and are usurping democratic power from the people, as represented by Parliament.72

Allan in this vein argues that if the aim is to have a legal system which keeps up to date with evolving social values, then it is better not to have a written Constitution at all:

63 Allan and Aroney, above n 61, 249–50.
64 Ibid 254 (citations omitted), quoting Waldron, Law and Disagreement, above n 44, 145.
By all means, if you want to keep pace with society and you don’t want to lock yourself into anything, then don’t have a written constitution. … But if you are going to have a constitution, it seems to me that the whole point of a written constitution is to lock in certain outcomes. … Everyone knows that judges make law. … I don’t think anyone believes that there are no constraints on the judge. We differ on the extent of constraints and their desirability.73

For this reason, Allan and others prefer originalism as an approach to judicial constitutional interpretation. The sense of opposition between the two approaches may, however, be exaggerated. Goldsworthy has questioned the dichotomy between the ‘living tree’ approach and originalism on this basis:

I agree that the supposed dichotomy between originalism and living constitutionalism is a false one; that originalism is concerned with a constitution’s original meaning rather than its founders’ application intentions; and that if a constitution requires judges to apply abstract moral principles, then they must do so according to their own best judgment of what those principles require — not according to the founders’ possibly partial and imperfect understanding of them.74

Nonetheless, Goldsworthy notes that Australia’s Constitution is not one with a moral or rights content. The Constitution provides the framework in which moral debates can go on in the political sphere, but it does not generally inform their content.75 Therefore, Goldsworthy believes that departure from originalism in judicial decision-making, in the Australian context at least, is undemocratic.76

Because some of these critics believe that the High Court is wayward in its approach to constitutional interpretation, the risks seen as being associated with entrenching a racial non-discrimination clause in the Constitution are being given greater weight. That is why objectors argue that the proposed amendments would be like handing unelected judges a ‘blank cheque’ to do what they want.77 A racial non-discrimination clause, it is argued, would entail much uncertainty and risk. It would undermine parliamentary sovereignty and the preferred ‘thin’ view of democracy.

B The Political Unviability Objection

The weakest, but most common, objections to the racial non-discrimination clause proposal were the political unviability objections. These were actually political

74 Goldsworthy, ‘Constitutional Cultures, Democracy, and Unwritten Principles’, above n 36, 684 (citations omitted).
75 Ibid 685.
76 Ibid 690.
77 Allan and Aroney, above n 61, 254.
predictions or assessments as to the likely success of the proposal, rather than substantive objections to the ideas being proposed. These objections tend to turn the objectors into political predictors with their fingers on the pulse of Australian public opinion, but while doing so often fail to acknowledge that the speakers themselves, as political leaders with a privileged position and strong voices in the media, would play and were playing a crucial role in leading, shaping and influencing that public opinion.

Some of these initial political viability assessments have since changed. For example, Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Nigel Scullion, initially criticised the proposed racial non-discrimination provision on the basis that "clauses about discrimination will lead to a much wider debate about multiculturalism and I think the debate will really ambush the process." Scullion since seems to have shifted his view, arguing that Australia should amend the Constitution to show that racial discrimination is unacceptable. George Brandis also appears to have shifted his views to some extent.

The political unviability objection will be countered towards the end of this paper.

IV RESPONDING TO THE OBJECTIONS

A Responding to the Undemocratic Objection

1 The Judicial Activism Concern Is Probably Overstated

The criticism of the proposed prohibition on racial discrimination on the basis of parliamentary supremacy is generally not based on the presupposition that Parliament should be able to pass race-based laws, but that it should not be left up to the courts to decide which laws and policies breach the new racial non-discrimination provision. The concern is that a racial non-discrimination clause in the Constitution would encourage undemocratic judicial activism. In deciding what is discriminatory and what is not, it is argued, judges would be required to apply social values to their decisions. Such assessment of values, it is said, is better left to elected politicians who are more in touch with the people, not to judges, who as Goldsworthy describes, are essentially unelected ‘aristocrats’. Judicial activism in this context is the criticism that a judge has inappropriately exceeded his or her adjudicatory function in breach of the doctrines of parliamentary supremacy.

79 Commonwealth, Parliamentary Debates, Senate, 26 February 2013, 877–9 (Nigel Scullion).
80 Compare George Brandis’ comments in Rintoul, above n 35, 9, to his comments in Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Parliament of Australia, Sydney, 30 April 2013, 19, 22.
supremacy and the separation of powers — ‘betraying its own constitutional role’ — and that this is undemocratic.

First, the concern about the undemocratic nature of judicial decision-making in general is perhaps exaggerated. A judge’s power is not unlimited. An Australian judge’s authority is bestowed via democratic processes: judges are appointed by elected governments. Similarly, Kirby’s argument is that judicial decision-making does not take power from the people, because in fact it is the people who choose which laws they want to dispute and bring them to court — judges do not choose which decisions they resolve.

Second, the concern about the wayward activism of the High Court of Australia is perhaps also overstated, and there is probably an element of political bias inherent in the claim. As many commentators have pointed out, judges in Australia are usually criticised for being activist when their decision, usually one upholding the rights of a minority, displeases conservatives. Professor George Williams has argued:

The label is normally only applied when someone disagrees with a High Court decision that is viewed as liberal or progressive, perhaps because it protects the rights of someone like an asylum seeker or prisoner. By contrast, decisions that uphold strong, even draconian, government action against the same people tend to attract little comment.

Others have argued that the term ‘judicial activism’ is not particularly useful as an analytical tool in discussing different approaches to judicial interpretation.

In my view, the argument as to how entrenching a racial non-discrimination clause into the Constitution would increase inappropriate judicial activism has not been successfully made. Indeed, Ratnapala has argued that given Australia’s

83 See also Heydon, above n 72, 495: ‘judicial activism’ is explained as:
using judicial power for a purpose other than that for which it was granted, namely doing justice according to law in the particular case. It means serving some function other than what is necessary for the decision of the particular dispute between the parties. Often the illegitimate function is the furthering of some political, moral or social programme: the law is seen not as the touchstone by which the case in hand is to be decided, but as a possible starting point or catalyst for developing a new system to solve a range of other cases. Even more commonly the function is a discursive and indecisive meander through various fields of learning for its own sake.
84 Allan and Kirby, above n 73, 1047.
institutional and political stability, the risks associated with entrenching some ‘narrowly-focussed’ rights into the Constitution would be relatively few.\textsuperscript{88}

In addressing the ‘unelected judges’ criticism of implied rights, Chief Justice Robert French has asked us to:

reflect upon what it is that courts already do in applying the common law which has been developed by the unelected judges of England and Australia. … [M]any of the things we think of as basic rights and freedoms come from the common law and how the common law is used to interpret Acts of Parliament and regulations made under them so as to minimise intrusion into those rights and freedoms.\textsuperscript{89}

Further, French CJ argues that:

The common law interpretive principle protective of rights and freedoms … has a significant role to play in the protection of rights and freedoms in contemporary society, while operating in a way that is entirely consistent with the principle of parliamentary supremacy.\textsuperscript{90}

As noted, courts have gone even further than the principle of non-abrogation of individual rights, to imply a specific right to freedom of political communication, imputed from the structure of the Constitution and the representative democracy it establishes.\textsuperscript{91} But equally, courts have implied non-explicit powers in favour of the Commonwealth, such as the implied ‘nationhood power’,\textsuperscript{92} and by interpreting the scope of the s 51 powers broadly.\textsuperscript{93}

Professor Adrienne Stone argues that democracy-based objections to judicial interpretation of constitutionalised rights should apply equally to judicial interpretation of structural elements of the Constitution and the scope of Commonwealth power, which also allow judges to decide ‘matters of moral or political significance in the face of reasonable disagreement’ and that ‘those who

\textsuperscript{88} Ratnapala, above n 52, 616–17.

\textsuperscript{89} Chief Justice R S French, ‘The Common Law and the Protection of Human Rights’ (Speech delivered at the Anglo Australasian Lawyers Society, Sydney, 4 September 2009) 1–2 [3] <http://www.hcourt.gov.au/assets/publications/speeches/current-justices/frenchcj/frenchcj4sep09.pdf>. Chief Justice French has explained that the term ‘unelected judges’ ‘has been used to suggest that a kind of democratic deficit would result if judges were to be required to make decisions involving the weighing up of important but competing societal values — the kind of judgments not unusual in human rights jurisprudence’: at 1 [1].


\textsuperscript{92} Australian Communist Party v Commonwealth (1951) 83 CLR 1; R v Sharkey (1949) 79 CLR 121.

\textsuperscript{93} See, eg, the broad scope given to the external affairs power in Koowarta v Bjelke-Petersen (1982) 153 CLR 168 (‘Koowarta’); Commonwealth v Tasmania (1983) 158 CLR 1 (‘Tasmanian Dam Case’).
object to constitutional rights should also object to structural judicial review. Indeed, in construing the s 51 powers, the court had to decide on the scope of the s 51(xxvi) Race Power, a decision which was the subject of extensive moral disagreement, and the High Court found that the Parliament did possess the power to racially discriminate. Judges already decide moral matters in interpreting the Constitution.

In this vein, Kirby argues that Allan’s argument about the inappropriateness of judicial references to values is flawed:

> The contradiction lies in his statement that we all know judges make law. Yet, on the other hand, he adheres to a ‘fairy tale’ view that there can be no moral input by the judge at the point of the decision. Well now, how then do the judges make the law? They make it by reference to values.

In some respects, therefore, the argument about whether it is right that judges should be interpreting moral matters in Australia is exaggerated — because they already do. Judges already play a role in developing the common law and interpreting the Constitution. Supposedly ‘activist’ judges are already interpreting constitutional clauses to do with race. Arguably, the parliamentary sovereignty objection to a prohibition on racial discrimination in the Constitution is therefore weak. The judicial activism concern regarding a new racial non-discrimination clause is probably overstated.

### 2 Parliamentary Sovereignty Is Already Limited by the Constitution as Interpreted by the Courts

Allan’s preferred state of affairs is not the reality in Australia. We have a written Constitution. In Australia therefore, Parliament is not strictly sovereign. Rather, the status of the Australian Parliament is better described as parliamentary supremacy. This is because the Australian Parliament, unlike in the UK, is already limited in its lawmaking powers by the existence of our written Constitution, which binds Parliament to the rule of law as set out, or implied, by our Constitution.

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94 Adrienne Stone, ‘Democratic Objections to Structural Judicial Review and the Judicial Role in Constitutional Law’ (2010) 60 *University of Toronto Law Journal* 109, 110. Note that Goldsworthy and Aroney have criticised Stone’s argument on the basis that the undemocratic objection can only apply to judicial review of rights. They draw on Waldron, who proceeds from the starting point that judicial review of constitutional rights is wrong because it is individuals themselves, as moral beings (as represented by Parliament), who are the best protectors of their own rights. Because human beings have rights, they should be trusted to protect them through self-government. Aroney therefore argues that democracy should be preferred for resolving political disputes to do with individual rights, but not necessarily other types of disputes. See Jeffrey Goldsworthy, ‘Structural Judicial Review and the Objection from Democracy’ (2010) 60 *University of Toronto Law Journal* 137; Nicholas Aroney, ‘Reasonable Disagreement, Democracy and the Judicial Safeguards of Federalism’ (2008) 27(1) *University of Queensland Law Journal* 129; Waldron, *Law and Disagreement*, above n 44, 223.


96 Allan and Kirby, above n 73, 1039–40 (citations omitted).

Since its inception, the Constitution has had to be interpreted by judges. Judges have engaged in structural interpretation, figuring out the nature of our system of federal government, and how our democracy works. Part of a judge’s job is to draw implications from the constitutional text. The idea of the separation of powers is itself one such constitutional implication, drawn from s 71.

Courts have also had to interpret the scope of the Commonwealth’s s 51 powers and what they mean. As noted, over time, courts have interpreted the scope the s 51 powers broadly, so as to maximise federal Parliament’s legislative freedom and power. Judges have also over the years interpreted the Constitution in a way that implies the protection of certain human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In Australia, this important principle of statutory interpretation began with Potter v Minahan in 1908, and developed such that common law rights and freedoms could not be impinged upon by legislation, except by ‘plain words’ or necessary implication. Later, the language shifted from ‘common law’ rights, to a presumption that ‘individual rights and fundamental freedoms’ of a more universal nature must not be abrogated unless there is a clear and unambiguous legislative intention to do so.

While Stone has argued that those who object to judicial review of constitutional rights should also object to judicial review of other elements of the Constitution, objectors usually have a special problem with broader rights being inserted into the Constitution, because they leave largely moral matters to an unelected judiciary, and therefore are likely, it is argued, to encourage judicial activism.

This, they argue, diminishes parliamentary supremacy.

On one hand, objectors to the racial non-discrimination proposal are correct. The Expert Panel’s proposed s 116A would obviously restrict Parliament’s lawmaking power: it would limit parliamentary supremacy with respect to being able to pass race-based laws. The question is: why would this be a bad thing?

The judiciary already interprets the Constitution. Judges already draw implications from it. They already interpret the existing race provisions, laden with controversial and highly political questions of morality as they are. And judicial activism is already a concern for many commentators, even though we


100 Potter v Minahan (1908) 7 CLR 277, 304 (O’Connor J); Re Cuno; Mansfield v Mansfield (1889) 43 Ch D 12, 17; Melbourne Corporation v Barry (1922) 31 CLR 174, 206. See also French, ‘The Common Law and the Protection of Human Rights’, above n 89, 8–9 [13]–[15].

101 Bropho v Western Australia (1990) 171 CLR 1; Coco v The Queen (1994) 179 CLR 427; French, ‘The Common Law and the Protection of Human Rights’, above n 89, 9 [16].


103 Goldsworthy, ‘Structural Judicial Review and the Objection from Democracy’, above n 94; Aroney, above n 94.
have no bill of rights. How would removal of the race clauses and insertion of a racial non-discrimination clause make the situation worse than it is now?

Yes, it would change the text of the Constitution. It would change the situation from one in which race-based laws are explicitly allowed, to one where race-based laws are generally not allowed. But in my view this would be an improvement on the current situation. It would be correcting an injustice.

It would not, however, change the structure of our system, or give judges more power than they currently have. What it would do is impose a judicially adjudicated restraint on Parliament’s power to pass race-based laws. While this would certainly allow judges some scope in interpreting the restraint, it would not be a radical departure from the current situation, in which judges already determine the scope of Parliament’s power to pass race based and racially discriminatory laws.

After all, analogous restraints already exist. The drafters of the Constitution thought it prudent to incorporate various judicially adjudicated restraints on parliamentary power, including many restraints to prevent discrimination against the states. However, because of the discriminatory attitudes of the time, the drafters did not include a restraint with respect to racial discrimination — in fact they included clauses to actively discriminate against Indigenous people.

If the Australian people voted to rectify this, by embedding a judicially adjudicated restraint on race-based laws and policies, this would not be a radical change. It would simply add to the array of judicially adjudicated limitations which are already a part of our constitutional arrangements.

3 The Undemocratic Objection Is Somewhat Circular

There is something circular about the reasoning which favours the ‘thin’ view of democracy, and therefore opposes changing the Constitution to entrench a racial non-discrimination clause on majoritarian grounds.

Allan on one hand argues that so-called progressives are wrong to ascribe a ‘morally pregnant’ democratic or undemocratic quality to the outcome of democratic decisions. Allan says all that matters is whether the decision was made via a democratic procedure. Yet on the other hand, Allan contends that the outcome of a referendum to entrench a racial non-discrimination clause would be undemocratic, even though a referendum is clearly a democratic procedure — and arguably a superior democratic procedure than the parliamentary process in terms of allowing individuals a direct say (and certainly a more democratic process than that undertaken by the drafters of the Constitution, given that Indigenous people

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104 See for example s 116 of the Constitution, as well as the variety of express limitations on Commonwealth powers: the ‘just terms’ qualification in 51(xxxi), the state non-discrimination requirements in s 51(ii), the prevention of discrimination against State residents in s 117, as well as State consent or concurrence requirements in ss 51(xxxiii), 51(xxxiv) and 51(xxxviii).

and women were not given a fair say or vote). That is, Allan contends that if the people were to exercise their democratic will under s 128 to insert a judicially adjudicated racial non-discrimination clause, which constrains majoritarian decision-making found to be in breach of the clause, then this outcome would be undemocratic. But what of the fact that, if it succeeds at referendum, then that means that the Australian people want this to be the case?

My objection could of course be taken to the point of absurdity: does my argument mean that we cannot criticise as undemocratic a successful referendum that abolished the voting rights of all citizens and established a dictatorship instead? As Waldron has argued, ‘[i]f the people voted to experiment with dictatorship, democratic principles might give us a reason to allow them to do so. But it would not follow that dictatorship is democratic’. Drawing on this analysis, Stone observes that ‘a democratic procedure for adopting some institution of government does not in itself make that institution democratic’. While in one sense, this observation weakens my argument that a racial non-discrimination clause inserted into the Constitution via a popular referendum would not be undemocratic because the people voted for it, in another sense, it further illustrates my point. For Allan, a judicially adjudicated constraint on majoritarianism, like that presented by a racial non-discrimination clause, must be undemocratic. But the irony of democracy — that an unconstrained majority might vote to subject itself to a dictator — demonstrates that certain constraints on majoritarian decision-making, such as constraints that prevent the majority from eroding certain basic aspects of democracy, are not necessarily undemocratic. This is arguably why the basic elements of the democratic process are enshrined in the Constitution, as our basic charter of government, and protected from ordinary legislative amendment. Allan is therefore incorrect to contend that a racial non-discrimination clause in the Constitution would be undemocratic simply because it is judicially enforced.

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106 See also Greg Craven’s comments in Craven, ‘The High Court of Australia: A Study in the Abuse of Power’, above n 49, 220–1, 226 which characterise the referendum process as more democratic than the democratic process undertaken by the founders of the Constitution, which excluded Indigenous people and women:

[T]he Founders comprised a group of mercifully deceased, white, male Anglo-Saxons, whose racist, sexist and dietarily unacceptable assumptions should have no controlling force over the Constitution.

However, the conclusive answer to such essays in anachronistic constitutional correctness lies in the democratic origins of the Constitution and the processes by which it was adopted. Put simply, from 1897, the delegates to the Conventions (except for those from Western Australia) were popularly elected. They framed their Constitution pursuant to mandates from the peoples of their respective colonies, under intense public scrutiny and surrounded by community debate. That document, which was in every sense the embodiment of their collective intentions, was in turn voted upon in a series of popular referenda and ratified. This is a formidable, indeed an unbeatable, democratic pedigree for the Australian Constitution … Of course, there is one process that clearly will produce a superior democratic will to those which originally underlay the formulation and adoption of the Constitution, and that is an amendment of the Constitution under s 128.

107 Waldron, Law and Disagreement, above n 44, 255.

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and capable of blocking some majoritarian decisions. The relevant question is: is equality before the law with respect to race a democratic essential that should be enshrined in the Constitution? Given the racial discrimination currently present in Australia’s Constitution, I argue that it is. There is a need to explicitly correct the undemocratic ‘race error’.

Further, the fact that Allan describes the proposed racial non-discrimination clause as undemocratic demonstrates that elements of the Constitution can be undemocratic, even if they have been inserted by the people via referendum. I agree with Allan on this point. The decision by the drafters of the Constitution to insert ss 25 and 51(xxvi) was one such example of a democratic process (albeit one that largely excluded Indigenous people) embedding undemocratic provisions into the Constitution. However, I do not agree that the proposed racial non-discrimination clause would be undemocratic. Certainly it would be a clause that, like the rest of the existing Constitution, would be interpreted by the unelected judiciary. But this would be a democratic improvement on the current situation, which promotes differential treatment of Australian citizens on the basis of race, through clauses which are also currently interpreted by the unelected judiciary.

The difference lies in the meaning being ascribed to the ‘democratic’ description. If Australia is, or is supposed to be a liberal democracy, and a liberal democracy means a system of governance in which citizens are free and equal, in that they have an equal say through their equal vote, and have free and equal participation in the democratic system, then the Constitution as it currently stands poses some serious problems with respect to its treatment of citizens on the grounds of race. The race provisions in the Constitution arguably undermine the ‘free and equal’ nature of Australian citizens and their democratic participation under the Constitution. These race provisions could be described as undemocratic.

4 The Race Clauses in the Constitution Are Themselves Undemocratic

Let us agree, as Goldsworthy describes, that our minimalist Constitution provides the structures within which political arguments about moral matters and matters of justice take place. Can it be said that our Constitution sets up structures whereby Australian citizens are free and equal, enjoy a fair and equal cooperation and participation in the democratic process, and whereby each person is shown equal respect through their equal vote, with respect to race? This is not a question about how Australian democracy works in practice, who votes and how, nor about substantive outcomes. It is a question about the text of the Constitution.

109 Thank you to Professor Patrick Emerton for his guidance in articulating this argument. For further explorations of the paradoxes of democracy, see Waldron, Law and Disagreement, above n 44; Jeffrey Goldsworthy, ‘Abdicating and Limiting Parliament’s Sovereignty’ (2006) 17 King’s College Law Journal 255.


111 Goldsworthy, ‘Constitutional Cultures, Democracy and Unwritten Principles’, above n 36, 685.


The view that prefers the democratic process alone to protect individual liberty presupposes first that every section of the population will have a vote, and second, that every section of the population will have a proper say in matters affecting them — that is, they will not be unfairly hindered from participating in the democratic process. Accepting the view that the democratic process alone is good enough to ensure that Australians are not racially discriminated against by governments presumes the neutrality and fairness, with respect to race, of the democratic process, or structure, itself.

Waldron has conceded that majority rule may not be the best option where there are disparate views about the democratic decision procedure itself.114 Similarly, Eisgruber has argued that ‘Waldron cannot successfully defend “majority rule” on the ground that it is neutral among, or abstracts from, competing conceptions of equal respect’.115 Rather, Eisgruber points out that ‘[i]n circumstances of deep and durable disagreement, it is a mistake to suppose that unrestricted majority rule, or any other procedure for resolving the disagreement, can count as neutral’.116

The point about neutrality and fairness in the democratic decision-making process itself is important when considering the strength of Waldron’s argument with respect to the Constitution. Arguably, it is only correct to say that the democratic procedures alone are adequate to protect rights in Australia if:

1. there exists a free and equal citizenship in Australia; and
2. citizens participate fairly in that democratic procedure.

How are we to know, firstly, if citizens are free and equal in Australia, under the Constitution? It should be noted here that the Constitution itself does not refer to ‘citizens’ or ‘citizenship’. Some High Court judges have, however, established a notion of ‘constitutional citizenship’ implied from terms such as ‘the people’, ‘the electors’, and as the opposite of ‘aliens’.118 However, not using the word ‘citizen’ was a deliberate choice by the constitutional drafters.119 There is therefore dispute about whether constitutional citizenship exists under the Australian Constitution,120 as the idea of citizenship ‘connotes a rights-bearing status’ where words like ‘people’ and ‘electors’ do not.121 For our present purposes, given that

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114 Ibid 299–300.
116 Ibid.
118 In Hwang v Commonwealth (2005) 222 ALR 83, McHugh J described the notion of ‘constitutional citizenship’ as being the opposite of the constitutional term ‘alien’: at 89 [18]. See also Christopher Tran, ‘New Perspectives on Australian Constitutional Citizenship and Constitutional Identity’ (2012) 33 Adelaide Law Review 199, 201.
119 Kim Rubenstein, Australian Citizenship Law in Context (Lawbook, 2002) 29–30; Tran, above n 118, 201.
121 Tran, above n 118, 203.
Australia is known as being a liberal democracy, and given that the notion of Australian citizenship is a term widely used and given an everyday meaning in the Australian national and political discourse, I use the term ‘citizenship’ on the understanding that some form of common citizenship, national membership or Australian peoplehood is implied by the Constitution. The pertinent question is whether the individuals within this citizenship or Australian peoplehood are free and equal with respect to race, under the Constitution. If we limit the discussion to the constitutional text itself, rather than history or substantive outcomes, then the relevant equality of citizenship is equality before the law, as ascertained from the constitutional text. Does the Constitution demonstrate that we have free and equal citizenship in Australia with respect to race? And, does the Constitution demonstrate fair participation in democracy with respect to race?

I argue, with respect to race only, that our Constitution does not establish a free and equal citizenship nor does it establish a structure for fair participation in democracy by all Australian citizens. This is undemocratic. Therefore, the concept of race should be removed as a basis for discrimination in the Constitution.

5 A Liberal Democracy Requires Free and Equal Citizenship with Respect to Race

As Goldsworthy describes, our Constitution is a structural document. It sets up our political and democratic processes. If the Australian Constitution sets up how democratic decision-making in Australia functions, then democratic decision-making in Australia will only be fair and democratic if the Constitution itself is fair and democratic. Arguably, the Constitution is not fair and democratic with respect to its treatment of citizens on the basis of race.

The existence of the Race Power and the historical evidence informing its intended purpose does not support the existence of a free and equal citizenship in Australia with respect to race. While equal citizenship, post-1967, may have developed in practice, it is not set up nor guaranteed by the structure of the Constitution. This means the Constitution is democratically deficient; it contains an error or corruption with respect to race.

During the constitutional conventions, there was debate about whether, once admitted to the country, the ‘coloured or inferior’ races should be given equal citizenship. Sir Samuel Griffith was concerned about being ‘flooded’ by ‘eastern people’, perhaps indicating that the power was meant to control immigrants on the basis of race, rather than citizens. But these comments were not decisive. They were part of an argument about whether discriminating against Australian citizens on the basis of race was acceptable. The existence of various other powers to deal with immigration and foreign affairs, including s 51(xix) the ‘naturalization and

122 Goldsworthy, ‘Constitutional Cultures, Democracy and Unwritten Principles’, above n 36, 685.
123 Official Record of the Debates of the National Australasian Convention, Sydney, 8 April 1891, 703 (Sir Samuel Griffith).
aliens’ power, s 51(xxvii) the ‘immigration and emigration’ power, s 51(xxviii) the ‘influx of criminals’ power and s 51(xxix) the ‘external affairs’ power, would seem to support a contention that the Race Power was initially intended to discriminate both against foreign outsiders and those people who had become Australian citizens, but who were of different ethnic backgrounds.

James Howe argued that ‘we should as far as possible make Australia home for Australians and the British race alone’, and emphasised the importance of Parliament retaining power to control ‘coloured persons’ in various ways.\(^{124}\) John Reid’s comments at the time support this notion, but for more benevolent reasons. As the Expert Panel explained:

John Reid … agreed with Forrest that it was ‘certainly a very serious question whether the internal management of these coloured persons, once they have arrived in a state, should be taken away from the state’. He was prepared, however, to give that power to the Commonwealth because ‘it might be desirable that there should be uniform laws in regard to those persons, who are more or less unfortunate persons when they arrive here’.\(^{125}\)

As noted, the 1967 referendum removed the exclusion of Indigenous Australians from the ambit of the Race Power, but it did not confirm that the power could only be used for beneficial rather than discriminatory purposes.\(^{126}\) Leaving to one side the policy argument that benevolent government action in a liberal democratic society should address demonstrable individual disadvantage and need, not race,\(^{127}\) Reid’s benevolent intentions must be read alongside the other malevolent purposes: the Race Power was inserted to control, exclude and subordinate those who were not white.

What does this mean about whether there is equal citizenship under the *Australian Constitution* with respect to race? In my view, the existence of s 51(xxvi) provides

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\(^{126}\) Though judgments were split, in *Kartinyeri v Commonwealth* (1998) 195 CLR 337, 378–81 [82]–[89] two justices, Gummow and Hayne JJ, held that this power could be used to pass laws for the benefit of any race, or laws to the detriment of any race’. Similarly in *Koowarta* (1982) 153 CLR 168, Gibbs CJ held (at 186) (citations omitted):

> It would be a mistake to suppose that s 51(xxvi) was included in the *Constitution* only for the purpose of enabling the Parliament to make laws for the special protection of people of particular races. Quick and Garran, in their Annotated *Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth*, correctly observed that by ‘sub-sec xxvi the Federal Parliament will have power to pass special and discriminating laws relating to “the people of any race”’. Such laws might validly discriminate against, as well as in favour of, the people of a particular race.

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evidence against it. The counter argument is that, because the Race Power applies
in theory to everyone equally now that the exclusion of Indigenous peoples has
been removed, the power is not discriminatory as it could in theory be used
for or against any so-called race. But this does not refute the argument that the
existence of such a power in the Constitution is undemocratic. While the power
may in theory be used to target any section of the population on the basis of race,
it is still a power to target on purely racial grounds. It means that Parliament is
theoretically empowered to prevent Asian Australians from voting on account of
supposed race, or to prevent Indigenous Australians from earning equal wages.
The existence of the Race Power supports the contention that the Constitution
does not establish free and equal citizenship with respect to race.

The existence of s 25, which talks about barring races from voting, also
supports this contention. The High Court has pointed to s 25 to show that
there is no equality before the law with respect to voting or citizenship under the Constitution. Twomey, however, has challenged the assumption that s 25
is racially discriminatory, pointing to its anti-racist intent and its derivation
from the US 14th Amendment, a view supported by Kirby J, who saw it as
a disincentive or deterrent to racial disqualification from voting. Twomey
nonetheless notes that s 25 ‘did not apply to discourage discrimination against
Australian Aboriginal people with respect to voting rights in the States for as long
as s 127 existed’. Similarly:

the consequences of s 25 were easily avoided. Section 25 refers to State
laws which disqualify ‘all persons of any race’, rather than the ‘people of
any race’. It was therefore relatively simple for a State to enact a law that
had the consequence that most people of a particular race were disqualified,
rather than all, with the effect that the application of s 25 was avoided.

While it is correct that s 25 was inserted to operate as a disincentive to barring
races from voting, it is nonetheless a provision that acknowledges that barring
races from voting is allowed within the democratic system created by the Constitution, an assertion supported by the existence of the Race Power, allowing
and promoting differential treatment of citizens on racial grounds.

The right to vote is a crucial right of citizenship, and demonstrates the ‘equal
respect’, as Waldron puts it, given to citizens’ views in the democratic process.
The fact that the Constitution contemplates taking this basic right of citizenship
away on the basis of race demonstrates the way in which the ‘race error’ in our Constitution undermines the notion of any equal Australian citizenship.

132 Ibid 135–6 (citations omitted).
133 Waldron, Law and Disagreement, above n 44, 115.
If we can agree, then, that the race clauses should be removed from the Constitution for the reasons given, because they are undemocratic and unjust, the next step is to deal with the problems that this removal creates, and to draft the most appropriate, certain and democratic solution.

B Responding to the Uncertainty Objection

1 How Do We Best Correct the Undemocratic ‘Race Error’?

Removal of references to ‘race’ is less disputed than putting new sections into the Constitution. Allan, for example, sees no problem with removing s 25, which is relatively uncontroversial, nor with removing the Race Power.\(^{134}\) However, removing the Race Power gives rise to some complications. If it is removed, it would need to be replaced by a power that would still enable and support Commonwealth laws with respect to Indigenous affairs, such as native title\(^ {135}\) and Indigenous heritage laws.\(^ {136}\) The Race Power therefore needs to be replaced with something. The Expert Panel proposed it be replaced with a new s 51A, to provide the necessary Commonwealth power, but that would also contain a preamble style statement of Indigenous recognition.\(^ {137}\)

This proposal was criticised by some on the basis that a statement of Indigenous recognition should go in the Preamble to the Constitution, not into a substantive section.\(^ {138}\) The qualifying word ‘advancement’ was also objected to, on the basis that it would involve high levels of constitutional uncertainty.\(^ {139}\)

135 Native Title Act 1993 (Cth).
136 Expert Panel Report, above n 1, 138; Pritchard, above n 29, 52. See also Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Parliament of Australia, Interim Report (2014) 9 [2.26]–[2.27].
137 The proposed s 51A would read:

Recognising that the continent and its islands now known as Australia were first occupied by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
Acknowledging the continuing relationship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with their traditional lands and waters;
Respecting the continuing cultures, languages and heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
Acknowledging the need to secure the advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
the Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws for the peace, order and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Expert Panel Report, above n 1, xviii.
138 Craven, ‘Keep the Constitutional Change Simple’, above n 31, 55.
139 See for example Warren Mundine’s comments in Rintoul, above n 35, 9.
that using a word like ‘advancement’ was condescending, as it would define Indigenous people in terms of disadvantage.\(^{140}\)

The qualifying word ‘advancement’ seems to have been included to ensure that the replacement power cannot be used to the detriment of Indigenous people — so it cannot be used in a discriminatory way. ‘Advancement’ appears to refer to the use of the word in CERD’s characterisation of special measures in art 1(4), as measures for the advancement of certain disadvantaged groups to ensure the equal enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms.\(^{141}\)

If constitutional experts can agree that the Constitution’s ‘race’ provisions should be removed, then we need to resolve how best to replace the Race Power to enable laws with respect to Indigenous affairs, and how to ensure that this power, and other powers, cannot be used in a racially discriminatory way.

Currently, individuals, corporations and the states are prevented from racially discriminatory behaviour under the RDA. The only body within our system that is allowed to racially discriminate, and indeed has an explicit power to do so, is the Commonwealth. This anomaly should be rectified so that all levels of government and society are held to the same democratic standard with respect to racial non-discrimination — the question is, how?

2 Racial Non-Discrimination versus Qualifying a New Head of Power: What Is the Best Way to Minimise Uncertainty?

The Joint Select Committee has expressed agreement with the Expert Panel about the need to remove references to ‘race’:

the committee believes that the issue of racial discrimination goes to the heart of the broader question of constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Therefore, it is entirely appropriate and necessary that the removal of references to ‘race’ in the Constitution form part of a broader proposal for constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.\(^{142}\)

\(^{140}\) Evidence to Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Parliament of Australia, Sydney, 30 April 2013, 15 (Peter Dawson). For these reasons the Joint Select Committee says it will probably not use the word ‘advancement’: see Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Progress Report (2014) 6–7.

\(^{141}\) CERD art 1(4) states:

Special measures taken for the sole purpose of securing adequate advancement of certain racial or ethnic groups or individuals requiring such protection as may be necessary in order to ensure such groups or individuals equal enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms shall not be deemed racial discrimination, provided, however, that such measures do not, as a consequence, lead to the maintenance of separate rights for different racial groups and that they shall not be continued after the objectives for which they were taken have been achieved.

It has also agreed that removing references to ‘race’ from the Constitution, necessitates a Race Power replacement.\textsuperscript{143} Given that, we must contend with whether to qualify the new head of power, or whether to insert a general prohibition on racial discrimination that applies equally to all Australians.

Arguably, if a racial non-discrimination clause was inserted into the Constitution, there would be no need to qualify the replacement power with a word like ‘advancement’. There are also several reasons to prefer a racial non-discrimination clause that is equally applicable to all Australians, over a qualification to the new Indigenous affairs power.

Simply qualifying the new head of power would do little to quell concerns about past racial discrimination against Indigenous people, nor to support hopes that constitutional amendment might prevent similar discriminatory government action in the future, or at least render it legally challengeable. Without a racial non-discrimination clause, governments could use other heads of power to pass racially discriminatory laws. As Associate Professor Sean Brennan argued in his submission to the Expert Panel:

I am not convinced that the answer lies in conditioning the power in s 51(xxvi) by use of the word ‘benefit’ or ‘advancement’ and then carving out the laws enacted under this power as exceptions to the non-discrimination principle. There are two main reasons. The first is that such a change alone will not address the adverse use of other legislative and executive powers, such as the Territories power in section 122 of the Constitution, the corporations power, State legislative powers and so on. That, however, is more an argument which reinforces the need for a broad non-discrimination clause than a conclusive case against including ‘benefit’ or ‘advancement’ in a reworded s 51(xxvi).

The second and more specific reason is that I believe that moving beyond neutral wording in the power risks neutralising the impact of the non-discrimination clause in the ultimate judicial calculus. When confronted with a future challenge by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people to an Indigenous-specific federal law, on the grounds that it breaches the non-discrimination clause, the High Court will ask first whether the law is supported by a power and then second whether it constitutes impermissible racial discrimination, … The risk is that a full and clear-sighted analysis of the non-discrimination principle will be impeded by the prior legal finding of benefit. A neutral worded power may better clear the way for the discrimination analysis.\textsuperscript{144}

From the point of view of addressing concerns regarding uncertainty, a racial non-discrimination clause may be a better option than a qualification of the


\textsuperscript{144} Sean Brennan, Submission No 3351 to Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians, 30 September 2011, 7.
power. Attorney-General George Brandis, as Shadow Attorney-General and Chairman of the Joint Select Committee in 2013, expressed the view that a racial non-discrimination clause was a more attractive option than qualifying the new power, because it would be difficult to predict how courts would interpret a qualifying word like ‘advancement’. Brandis described the proposed racial non-discrimination clause as ‘perfectly commonplace’, and ‘unexceptionable from a legal point of view’, though he did question its political viability. The ‘advancement’ qualification of the replacement power, by contrast, was in Brandis’ view not a term of ‘received legal meaning’. This view has also been supported by Brennan, who has noted that the lack of domestic precedent in Australia means that it would be difficult to predict how courts might interpret qualifying words like ‘advancement’. As a result, the Joint Select Committee reported that they would reconsider using the word.

Various other alternatives to qualify the replacement power have been suggested, including constructing it as a power to pass laws with respect to Indigenous people, ‘but not so as to discriminate adversely against them’.

Williams and Dixon argue that because the High Court has held that ‘express qualifications’ to other powers are interpreted to apply to Commonwealth powers generally, the court may interpret such a qualification to the new Indigenous power in a similarly broad way to constrain Commonwealth powers generally. This is an important argument, because powers other than the Race Power are often used to support laws with respect to Indigenous people, sometimes in a way that is considered discriminatory. But while the case law indicates that the High

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145 Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Parliament of Australia, Sydney, 30 April 2013 19, 22 (George Brandis).  
146 Ibid 22.  
147 Ibid 18.  
148 Sean Brennan, ‘Constitutional Reform and its Relationship to Land Justice’ (Land, Rights, Laws: Issues of Native Title vol 5, Issues Paper No 2, Native Title Research Unit, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, October 2011) 6.  
151 Citing Bourke v State Bank (NSW) (1990) 170 CLR 276 with respect to the s 51(xiii) power; Rosalind Dixon and George Williams, ‘Drafting a Replacement to the Races Power in the Australian Constitution’ (2014) 25 Public Law Review 83, 87–8. As Dixon and Williams note, there is also contention about what an ‘express qualification’ is. See also NSW v Commonwealth (2006) 229 CLR 1 (Workchoices Case).  
Court would likely interpret this type of express limitation in a broad way, it can never be a certain outcome because it relies on the Court to read into the power more than is explicitly stated. The only certain way to constrain Commonwealth powers generally would be to implement a racial non-discrimination clause along the lines suggested by the Expert Panel.

While the word ‘discriminate’ in this context would be useful in that it would import racial non-discrimination law in interpreting the new power, the Joint Select Committee has noted that the meaning of the term ‘discriminate’ in the context of a constitutional legislative power could remain somewhat uncertain. In addition to the legal uncertainty, there is the potential for political or public uncertainty that this type of qualification may create. There is perhaps something paradoxical about having a non-discrimination limitation on a power that applies only to Indigenous people and not to other Australians. While the solution may make legal sense as a way of ensuring the power cannot be used for adverse discrimination against Indigenous people, we should ask whether non-discrimination is the right concept to apply to a power intended for one group of the population. Or, is this going to be unnecessarily confusing for referendum voters, because an Indigenous-specific power could be described as discriminatory in itself? That said, the solution does address concerns that a broader racial non-discrimination clause is too general, and that it would constitute a ‘one clause bills of rights’.

In my view, a racial non-discrimination clause, carefully and narrowly drafted, would overall involve less uncertainty than qualifying a new head of power. Courts are accustomed to applying broad racial non-discrimination principles under the RDA, and there is a large body of case law to draw upon. It would be fairly predictable as to how courts would be likely to interpret such a clause. For example, it is likely that, since the Maloney decision, Alcohol Management Plans in alcohol-affected Indigenous communities will be held to be valid special measures under racial non-discrimination law principles. Native Title and land rights laws would most likely be held to be valid special measures, as Gerhardy v Brown demonstrated. Measures like ABSTUDY have also been held to be valid special measures under the RDA. However, laws mandating lower wages for Indigenous people would likely be in breach of a racial non-discrimination clause, and would not be a valid special measure, as was demonstrated in the Palm Island Wages Case.

155 Maloney v The Queen (2013) 298 ALR 308 (‘Maloney’).
156 (1985) 159 CLR 70.
Responding to Twomey’s concern, it may help if the clause was drafted in a way that mimics the _RDA_ to further enhance predictability. It may also help to make its operation narrower, by framing the provision as a restraint on lawmaking, more in line with the ‘equality before the law’ approach taken by the _RDA_ in s 10.\(^{159}\) The Expert Panel’s proposed provision says that ‘The Commonwealth, a State or a Territory shall not discriminate on the grounds of race, colour or ethnic or national origin’.\(^{160}\) This is broad enough to potentially include administrative as well as legislative action.\(^{161}\) A better approach may be to say ‘no law shall discriminate on grounds of race’ or to talk about ‘equality before the law with respect to race’.

**C Responding to the Political Unviability Objection**

The political unviability criticisms are difficult to respond to because they involve political predictions rather than substantive legal or political arguments in favour of or against the racial non-discrimination proposal. With respect, such contributions are unhelpful to the debate, because the people predicting a virulent ‘no’ case, divisive sentiment and subsequent failure, are sometimes the same people making and leading that ‘no’ case and divisive sentiment.

The political unviability objections are also somewhat odd, because they ignore polling which demonstrated the public popularity of the racial non-discrimination idea.\(^{162}\)

**1 A Politically Viable Argument on the Basis of National Unity and Social Cohesion**

While admittedly the Expert Panel’s polls were conducted absent a ‘no’ campaign, in my view, the instinctive public popularity of the racial non-discrimination ideal arises from a fundamental belief in the importance of individualised, even-handed and colour blind justice, the strong sense of the Aussie ‘fair go’ for each person, and the arbitrariness and unfairness of treating Australian citizens differently on the basis of an outdated classification like ‘race’. The strong underpinning values driving these sentiments are the ideals of individual equality and equality before the law, as well as the importance of national unity and social cohesion. Treating everyone equally, rising above racial divisions and creating a more unified

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\(^{159}\) _RDA_ s 10(1) states:
If, by reason of, or of a provision of, a law of the Commonwealth or of a State or Territory, persons of a particular race, colour or national or ethnic origin do not enjoy a right that is enjoyed by persons of another race, colour or national or ethnic origin, or enjoy a right to a more limited extent than persons of another race, colour or national or ethnic origin, then, notwithstanding anything in that law, persons of the first-mentioned race, colour or national or ethnic origin shall, by force of this section, enjoy that right to the same extent as persons of that other race, colour or national or ethnic origin.

\(^{160}\) _Expert Panel Report_, above n 1, xviii.


and cohesive nation and society are ideas that, if argued in a positive way, are politically viable and compatible with Australian democratic and liberal values.

This is probably why the national unity and national loyalty political angle featured strongly in the conservative push for constitutional reform for Indigenous recognition. Prime Minister Tony Abbott, at the time Leader of the Opposition, began his Second Reading Speech to the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Recognition Bill 2013* declaring: ‘Australia is a blessed country. Our climate, our land, our people, our institutions rightly make us the envy of the earth, except for one thing — we have never fully made peace with the First Australians’.

Our failure to make peace with Indigenous Australians, Abbott argued, was one of our only national blemishes. Abbott linked the constitutional recognition of Indigenous people to a potential achievement of national unity: a way to stop being an ‘incomplete’ and ‘torn people’, and to become ‘one nation’.

In an uncharacteristic critique of our forefathers’ collective wisdom, Abbott called upon the nation ‘to atone for the omissions and for the hardness of heart of our forbears to enable us all to embrace the future as a united people’.

But the basic reasons he gives for the need for Indigenous constitutional recognition are based in national loyalty, national pride, and national unity. Abbott’s thinking fits within the idea of national loyalty as a good basis for aiding reconciliation between religions, classes and backgrounds, with common citizenship as a uniting and equalising influence grounded in consensus, rather than force.

However, because the idea of national loyalty often entails great reverence for the *Constitution* itself as a symbol of national pride and history, and also pride in the nation’s British institutional history specifically, it can also entail resistance to proposals towards constitutional change. Calls for change, particularly to entrench rights, can be seen as a moral critique of our British constitutional history and heritage. Similarly, national loyalty and pride can entail denial that the race clauses in the *Constitution* pose a significant problem — essentially a denial that there was a discriminatory history with real, lived ramifications for Indigenous people.

Amplification of the significance of the race clauses or

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163 This was an Act which set out parliamentary commitment to Indigenous constitutional recognition.


165 Ibid.

166 Ibid.


168 Note for example, Sheridan, above n 33. On one hand Sheridan admits:

There is no doubt that throughout Australian history Aborigines suffered terrible injustice. Australian history, like that of all nations, contains plenty of good and plenty of bad. John Howard is right to hail the grandeur of the Australian achievement in nation building. Noel Pearson is right to draw our attention once more to the capricious cruelty and killings that occurred often in colonial times. I am not someone who denies historical injustice done to Aborigines.

Yet, Sheridan also argues that in removing ‘the anachronistic clause that allows Canberra to make laws that help Aborigines … we are remedying a problem that does not exist. The commonwealth parliament does not make laws designed to hurt Aborigines, just as it doesn’t make laws designed to hurt Parsis or Irish Australians or the disabled or scientists.’
Indigenous non-recognition as a ‘blemish on our nationhood’ or a ‘stain on our soul’ can be seen as a threat to national pride and a criticism of national history. This can exacerbate resistance to the racial non-discrimination proposals. Because there is sometimes underlying denial that the allowances of race-based differential treatment in the Constitution had any real adverse practical effects, there is therefore denial that the clauses warrant any substantive constitutional reform.

Despite these factors, in my view, an argument on the basis of social cohesion, national unity and the importance of individualised justice and individual equality before the law perhaps provides the strongest justification for removal of race as a means of treating citizens differently. The political unviability objections tend to ignore or downplay the fact that those who might ordinarily oppose ideas of Indigenous constitutional recognition on the basis that recognising one group within Australian society is too separatist or divisive, and that it might entail different rules for different so-called races, may be persuaded to support the proposals on the basis that we also enshrine the principle of equality before the law with respect to race, confirming that the same laws are to apply to all Australians. Thus, a racial non-discrimination clause that applies equally to all Australian citizens, rather than a qualification of an Indigenous-specific power, could potentially be an easier political sell.

Creating an ‘equality before the law with respect to race’ style clause alongside symbolic Indigenous recognition could confirm or establish that all citizens are to be treated equally before the law, even though we would also formally recognise the nation’s Indigenous heritage and history. While a new Indigenous affairs power would be needed to enable the Commonwealth to deal with specific Indigenous

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169 Expert Panel Report, above n 1, xii.
171 See Gary Johns, ‘Equality at Risk on Recognition’, The Australian (Sydney), 25 March 2014, 10; Gary Johns, ‘History Yes, Culture No’, The Australian (Sydney), 8 October 2013, 12, in which Johns argues: ‘The Constitution is not a storybook, it is a rule book, and every Australian should play by the same rules.’ Note also Andrew Bolt’s comments against Indigenous constitutional recognition on the basis of wanting to maintain equality before the law and unity in national citizenship:
when I go before the courts I want to be judged as an individual. I do not want different rights according to my class, faith, ancestry, country of birth ... or ‘race’. I’m sure most Australians feel the same. We are Australians together, equal under the law and equal in our right as citizens to be here. That’s how we’ve been for generations.
See also Sheridan, above n 33: ‘I don’t want the Constitution, or its preamble, to mention one group of Australians. In itself, this creates categories of Australians.’
172 Greg Sheridan for example opposes Indigenous recognition, but supports the idea of an equality before the law clause:
Of course the US had terrible racism in its history. In the institution of slavery it had denied absolutely the humanity of African Americans. When it came to giving justice to African Americans, it didn’t make a special constitutional provision. It did the most important and effective thing it could. It made clear that all the provisions of the constitution, and all the rights, privileges and obligations of citizenship, applied equally to blacks as well as to everybody else. The mechanism of integration was common citizenship.
Sheridan, above n 33.
matters, a racial non-discrimination clause could establish that Indigenous people are, at the same time, confirmed as equal individuals and equal Australian citizens, and that no minority group should be subject to adverse differential treatment on racial grounds. Such an amendment would affirm that we are all equal citizens, all subject to the same law, with the special measures sub-clause being the only allowable exception, also equally applicable to all. As Noel Pearson argued in his 2013 Whitlam Oration, the racial non-discrimination clause would confirm that Indigenous recognition does not mean ‘special treatment’ or ‘cultural relativism’: it would confirm that ‘the same rules should apply to all Australians’.

For those who would ordinarily oppose such a proposal, the racial non-discrimination clause could operate as the unifying and justifying principle, balancing out any Indigenous recognition clauses, which alone may risk being looked upon as simple separatism. The racial non-discrimination clause could provide the ‘equality before the law’ rule, applicable to all Australians, that makes symbolic recognition of Indigenous history and heritage, and the practical necessity of an Indigenous affairs power, more widely acceptable.

V CONCLUSION

It is true that on the one hand we have an overwhelmingly successful Constitution. Australia is known for being a successful, stable and prosperous liberal democracy. On the other hand, the Constitution has failed, excluded and allowed discrimination against Indigenous people. So is Australia an inclusive, successful democracy, or not? Does Australia have a good human rights record, and a successful Constitution, or not? Depending on your politics and perspective, you will have different answers to these questions.

Goldsworthy has explained that the rule of law is primarily a political principle which may or may not be guaranteed by the law, and is often understood as being implicit within written constitutions. If the rule of law is political, as those in favour of parliamentary sovereignty as the best way to ensure that laws reflect the evolving values and morals of the people should agree, then the content of the rule of law must be somewhat fluid and changing, like politics itself. As politics and values evolve, the content of the rule of law should evolve too. Indeed, our Constitution, through s 128, has a mechanism to evolve.

It is only through slow social and cultural evolution that the Australian population has moved on from the concept of race as a legitimate category justifying differential legal treatment and democratic exclusion. The race provisions in the Constitution are remnants of the racial divisions in Australia’s history. They are


174 Goldsworthy, Parliamentary Sovereignty, above n 81, 58.
the most undemocratic part of Australia’s otherwise successful and democratic Constitution.

This paper has questioned, therefore, whether the undemocratic and uncertainty objections to a racial non-discrimination clause are sufficient in the Australian context, given that Australia’s Constitution currently contains two explicitly racially discriminatory provisions. Arguably, with respect to race, our Constitution cannot be said to be democratically neutral. This is the problem to which constitutional experts should try to find the most certain and democratic solution.

Those who agree that a liberal democracy requires free and equal citizenship and a free and equal participation in the democratic system, and who see the Constitution as a structural document which sets up the procedures of government and democracy, without supporting a broader bill of rights, should nonetheless support correcting the undemocratic ‘race error’ in our Constitution. This can be achieved by removing the race clauses, and by limiting Parliament’s power to racially discriminate, by inserting a racial non-discrimination clause, or as a lesser option, by qualifying a new Indigenous head of power. Of these two options, a racial non-discrimination clause may be the most legally certain solution. It may also be the more politically viable and logically congruent constitutional expression of the ‘equality before the law’ democratic principle.

If, however, a racial non-discrimination clause is not considered an acceptable solution and cannot win bipartisan support, then constitutional experts should grapple wholeheartedly with the challenge at hand: how else might we ensure that the racial discrimination of the past, inflicted unfairly upon Indigenous people, does not occur again? This, after all, is why a racial non-discrimination clause is considered an important part of the reform by many Indigenous leaders. It represents the promise that past wrongs will not be repeated.175 The Expert Panel responded to Indigenous leaders calling for racial discrimination to truly be a thing of the past, and to an overwhelming public view that race should no longer be a basis for differential treatment amongst Australian citizens. This popular view is one with which constitutional experts must now contend. As Noel Pearson has challenged, if “a racial non-discrimination clause is not the answer, what is a better solution?”176

There may be other constitutional reform options which could also help prevent future discriminatory laws and policies directed at Indigenous people. This could be achieved through constitutional amendment to ensure better Indigenous participation in the democratic procedures of Parliament, guaranteeing that Indigenous views are better heard before Parliament enacts laws relating to Indigenous peoples. In this vein, some have suggested the establishment of reserved Indigenous senate seats to ensure that Indigenous citizens get more of

176 See Noel Pearson, ‘A Rightful Place: Race, Recognition and a More Complete Commonwealth’ (2014) 55 Quarterly Essay 1, 65; Cape York Institute, Submission to Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, October 2014.
a say in Parliament. Alternatively, Pearson has suggested that the Constitution could be amended to create an Indigenous body that would be guaranteed a say in Parliament’s law and policy making for Indigenous affairs. These types of solutions represent political and procedural, rather than legal and judicial, solutions to the history of racial discrimination against Indigenous people under the Constitution. Such solutions may be attractive because they avoid concerns about judicial activism and uncertain judicial interpretation of standalone rights clauses. In this way, procedural reform options of this nature may avert ‘undemocratic’ and uncertainty objections, as well as being attractive to Indigenous people, who for decades have advocated for better representation in the democratic process. As the Cape York Institute submission to the Joint Select Committee argued:

Today there is a moral imperative to ensure that the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Australian government, under the Constitution, is just and fair, rather than characterised by racial discrimination and exclusion as has historically been the case. If we accept that the Constitution is a practical rule book governing national power relationships, then we should also accept that there is one very important, national power relationship that is clearly not addressed in the Constitution.

Arguably, the rule book should be amended to make provision for Indigenous people to be heard in Indigenous affairs. After all, if unelected judges should not decide what is in the interests of Indigenous people, then who should decide? Surely Indigenous people themselves should get a say.

In assessing the merits of the various reform options, it is hoped that constitutional experts and political leaders will approach this conversation with Indigenous perspectives in mind. It is, after all, easy to minimise the significance of the racial discrimination present in our Constitution when such powers and references to ‘race’ will probably never be, and have never been, directed at you or your


178 See Pearson, ‘A Rightful Place’, above n 176, 65; Cape York Institute, Submission to Joint Select Committee, above n 176.

179 Cape York Institute, Supplementary Submission to Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: Establishing an Indigenous Body in the Constitution, January 2015.


181 Cape York Institute, Submission to Joint Select Committee, above n 176, 13.
Undemocratic, Uncertain and Politically Unviable? An Analysis of and Response to Objections to a Proposed Racial Non-Discrimination Clause as Part of Constitutional Reforms for Indigenous Recognition

ancestors. For Indigenous Australians, the problem cannot be so minimised. This conversation is one that therefore requires us all to ask, as Paul Keating urged in his Redfern speech: ‘how would I feel if this were done to me?’ If we can approach the challenge in this spirit, we will better be able to find a just solution.

182 Keating, above n 170, referring to the discriminatory practices of the past.