ABC Listen. Podcasts, radio, news, music and more.
Our political leaders need to tell us stories all the time about who we are as Australians and where we're going as a nation. But to do so, they often need to overlook a few stubborn facts that get in the way of that narrative.
Author and journalist George Megalogenus is back on Conversations today and George is one of the very best explainers of our national story because George likes those stubborn, inconvenient facts.
George likes nothing more than to pour over the economic and social and electoral statistics.
He likes to talk to the players in front of the cameras and those who work behind the scenes.
And he looks at the broader changes in the culture and distills them into a compelling story of Australia's past and future.
George is here today to talk about the upcoming referendum on the Indigenous voice to Parliament.
And George thinks that on the night of October 14, regardless of how it turns out, we are going to find out things about our nation that we didn't really know before because referendums have always revealed things that we don't normally see in a federal election.
And just to be super clear about this, this is not a discussion about the arguments for and against the voice. It's about what these national votes can tell us about the nation as a whole.
And George has written about this in the most recent edition of the Monthly. Welcome back, George.
How are you, Richard?
Extremely well, sir. Now, recently I spoke on the show with Professor Kim Rubenstein about the origins of the Australian Constitution that a lot of us are barely aware of.
What do you see, George, when you look back at the framing of our Constitution and the ideals that pulled this nation together way back in 1901?
When I think about the Constitution today, I have a slightly different frame of reference to what I had the previous 20 or 30 years, and that's COVID. What COVID reminded us when we retreated almost immediately, the borders went up to our colonial identities, was that the six states of the Commonwealth of Australia, when they were previously colonies of the British Empire, didn't get along. And the Constitution and the Federation stitched together six rival settlements into a nation, but some of the bargains that were struck to keep those six colonies together in the nation are very uncomfortable looking back.
One of them was the idea that Australia be a settlement for white people only, and they were very explicit in the Constitution because they gave themselves a race power, a power to enact legislation probably to the detriment of races other than the Anglo-Saxon race, which was the dominant race at Federation in 1901. But there was also an idea between the six colonies that it'd be very difficult to budge the Constitution without overwhelming support for change. So that mechanism to change the Constitution by referendum involved not just a majority national vote, but a majority of states, four out of six. And it's funny to remind us of when you go back to those constitutional conventions in the 1890s, when they're trying to build the idea of a Commonwealth of Australia, the first votes that were put at a referendum to get the colonies to agree to a Commonwealth. New South Wales didn't actually reach the trigger, which is about 60%. They didn't reach the super majority that would have got them in, that would have got the Commonwealth formed. Queensland wasn't even involved in the first vote, nor was WA. They flipped the question again. They had another go, and New South Wales came over

the line the second time. There was unanimous vote in the other states, and then WA came in afterwards. So it's a pretty messy, when you think about it, it's a pretty messy amalgamation of six competing interests. But that's to say, when I look back through the COVID linker, which is the thing that sort of magically transported us back to the 1890s, where Victorians looked to the west and South Australian thought no one would want to go there according to the Premier. Victorians looked north to New South Wales. No one would want to take advice from that Premier. Queenslanders looked south to New South Wales and said, I'm happy to leave you guys out of my state. Western Australians felt that they could be separated entirely from the continent, that there are a nation unto themselves. And Borough Tasmania were looking at the separation thinking it's probably a good thing, but I think I'll miss the rest of the country after about six months. So as I say, when you could put your COVID blinkers back on, you get a sense that the stitching together the Commonwealth was really a magical thing, but there were also barriers to the expansion of that idea of the Commonwealth. So the Constitution is tripped up. It's very difficult to change. But again, there's a founding idea in the Constitution, which is White Australia, which leaves a couple of people out. So Indigenous Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the Foundation document, were not counted for the purposes of representation. But the other part to White Australia was, as I say, there was this idea that you could make laws to the detriment of other races. Look, I've got an ancestor, I've got a great grandfather, because he's Greek, would have been on the hit list of people to be suspected of being, we know, they've called aliens, but we've potentially hostile views to the British Empire. So they're the bits that missing. I know we filled in the accounting of Indigenous Australians in 1967. And I know that now that the Commonwealth can make laws for them. But it's not entirely clear that the Commonwealth has powers to just make laws for the benefit of Indigenous Australians.

This is one of the things, obviously, that the question of the voice to Parliament is going to be put in the referendum, whether there's a representative body that can advise government and the Parliament on all the laws that affect Indigenous Australians.

As you say, the Constitution has changed very little since it was framed and put up and got up and running in 1901, which gave us federal governments. And by and large, it seems that and our democratic temperament has kept the democratic show on the road quite successfully with a little blip in 1975. But nonetheless, it's kept us a very stable democracy all that time.

I wonder if you think that speaks of an ongoing relevance. The Constitution is continually sort of eternally relevant or of a growing irrelevance. What do you think?

Yeah, that's such a good question, isn't it? There were many attempts in the first couple of decades to change it and certainly through again in the 40s. Most of those attempts came up short. But the idea of Australia, especially by the time you get to the Second World War with the Commonwealth government, assuming powers that the states used to have over income tax for the purposes of prosecuting the Second World War, the idea of what Australia was, which is, you know, safety net egalitarian for those who are in the racial club, white Australians up until the Second World War, non-English speakers from Europe and then later Asia, those ideas are not spelt out in the Constitution, but there are ideas that had formed around the same time in Federation.

And we've adapted, we've adapted the idea of who gets included without having to necessarily change any particular line of the Constitution. So in that sense, our system is flexible and we have

obviously a very welcoming culture. We've had some bad times as a political system, but we are generally a very welcoming culture. Plus, and this is a very important plus, even though you can't change the Constitution much, the citizens themselves are very obedient. We were just talking about COVID before, you know, the button was pressed on lockdown and we all retreated to our homes and then all obeyed the five kilometer radius for one hour of exercise and then got our takeaway meals. So I think that goes to something that's literally in our political democratic DNA. You know, we sort of are on the side of cohesion as a society and our citizens are obedient. So they like to be led. Waleed Ali has drawn a line to that habit of us sort of being not quite larric initially at all, but really quite willing to obey and behave collectively. He draws a line all the way back to the first fleet and he says he suspects this comes from the fact that modern Australia had a government before it had a society. I think that Waleed's correct. Philip, in a sense, laid down an idea which we've repurposed subsequently that the governor, the government, is a single individual that holds all this power over us and we trust this person to hold this disparate society together. So the idea that you could, I mean, if you think about the first fleet, the idea that you could hold prisoners and their guards together in a cohesive unit that didn't die of starvation or didn't murder each other, it's not a bad, not a bad start for what is clearly a major disruption for the one million people who'd been here, whose timeline extended back 60, 65,000 years before contact with European settlement. But it's still not a bad start in the governance sense, if you think about it, in terms of the 97% of us who are non-Indigenous.
So the Constitution was put together with the mind of setting up a very specific kind of society in Australia, a white Australia policy was right at the heart. Everyone said so at the time it was the first legislation passed by the first parliament, but obviously Australia has very obviously changed enormously. Now you've come up with a model of modern Australia where you compare it to
a tree. Tell me how this model works. So I've been wrestling with the idea of how to describe Australia as it is that leaves nobody out, but describes it with as few categories as possible. I'm not trying to compartmentalise human beings because there'll be people who'll be slipping between the categories. You'll be a bit of this and a bit of that. But I've come up with a metaphor of the family tree and there are three parts of the family tree. The Australian family tree has first Australian roots, which is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It has an old Australian trunk, non-Indigenous Australians who have been here for at least three generations. That is, you were born here as were your parents, as were your grandparents, and new Australian branches, which are the migrants and their local-born children. Now using that framework, and I did get the Australian Bureau of Statistics to help me out on this. I had this conceptual idea and then I got them to mine the data for me to be able to represent the family tree pretty much across every location, national, state, a capital city versus rest of state, and then individual all the way down to postcode area. So once I was able to draw that up, there's some very fascinating details in the change in our maker expressed through the family tree. So with that family tree model in mind, when you look back to 1999, 24 years ago, to the 1999 Republic referendum, the last referendum we had in this country, what did that family tree look like back then?
A bit over half the population is contained in the trunk. So old Australia has a majority. It's about 55% of the population are in that trunk. So we're looking at a gum tree. We're not looking at a Christmas tree. The indigenous roots, the first Australian roots, are about 2-3% of the population and the balance, around 42-43% are the new Australian branches, which are migrants

and their children. And how has that tree changed in the last 24 years? So the roots are much deeper
now and the Bureau of Statistics will tell you this. The growth in indigenous identification
at each of the census exceeds what you would impute to be the birth rate.
So in a sense, what's happened in the 21st century, especially in the last 10 years,
as I think that happened to Australia, sort of in the second half of the 20th century,
where the convict ancestor became cool, the idea of I think an indigenous heritage is now
whatever reserve or whatever stigma, stigma, stigma, it is passing. And in fact, now it's
passed the point where those roots are about 4% of the population, just under a million people.
Those one million people now outnumber migrants from England. So for the first time since the
1820s, first Australians outnumber settlers in terms of the English, not all the settlers,
but settlers in terms of the English. So that was the first thing that struck me when I was looking
at that family tree in terms of how much has changed in the last 20 years. The first Australian roots
are deeper, much deeper. Now the second part, that trunk has shrunk. It shrunk because it's not
growing as fast as the roots or the branches. So two thirds of the population growth and the
Treasury have made this point a number of times. And it was reiterated most recently in the inter-
generation report. Since about the beginning of the last decade, the majority of our population
growth has come from the overseas migration program. When I use my family tree model to
describe population growth, two thirds of the population growth is coming from migrants and
their local born children. So the branches are really blooming now. So the new Australian branches
now 51% of the population. First Australians around 4%. That means the trunk has gone from about
55
to 45. So the cohort of voters that's going to be voting in October for this referendum
will look distinctly different from the cohort of voters that voted in the last referendum
24 years ago. Absolutely. Absolutely. So that's the national vote. But the other part of it is
when you then line up the family tree at a state by state level, you find most of the migrants
are concentrated in Melbourne and Sydney. Intuitively. Intuitively makes sense, doesn't it?
Something like two thirds of all the Indian born in Australia are in Melbourne and Sydney.
And three quarters of all the Chinese born. And they're the dominant new arrivals in the 21st
century. The Indians and then the Chinese. The Indians will overtop the English I think by the
end of this decade on present trends. The Chinese are already the largest overseas born group in
Sydney. The Indians are the largest overseas born group in Melbourne and each are number two
in the respective cities. So what are the ramifications for that George when you want to
look at who might be voting yes in the forthcoming referendum in October and who might be voting
no?
So you can now see a situation where that family tree gives you a clue that the national vote and
possibly New South Wales and Victoria are yes. But then you start to struggle after that. You
start to struggle to get you certainly can't get forced states on that because both Queensland,
South Australia and Tasmania, the old Australian trunk is still the dominant is still the dominant
cohort. And in WA, even though it's a very diverse settlement, there's a big, you know,
almost overrepresentation of English, overrepresentation of South Africans,
the whiter migrant. And we know from the referendum in 1999, different question obviously,
Perth was the only capital city that voted no to Republic in 1999. So most of the most of the
campaigners in both the yes and the no camp look at Queensland and WA, the two frontier states,

very, very strong localised identities now reinforced by their success during COVID lockdown. Those two states are not looked at by either side as being contestable. All the polls, even when it was running at 60% yes nationally, had Queenslanders probably no go for the yes camp. And then WA was
always drifting into the no camp as well. If you assume the New South Wales and Victoria that now this is based on this family tree idea, when you look at those two states and you think they might get up, then the entire exercise gets decided in South Australia and Tasmania, South Australia, which has on the mainland, the next to Victoria, the smallest indigenous population. So the shallowest
roots Tasmania, which has some of the deepest roots. But it's always a stat that fascinates people when I share it with them. Indigenous Australians outnumber the English in Hobart. They are the dominant non-old Australian group, if you call it that. And they outnumber the English pretty much everywhere else in the regions, but they don't in any other capital city,
apart from Darwin, of course, quite a fascinating little details. Between South
Australia and Tasmania, you've got two states with very, very different demographies, very, very different political cultures, different senses of where they fit in the Federation.
They'll be the decisive states. We know that Warren Mundine, when the no campaign was launched, he said that they're the two states they're tackling. And we know that Anthony Albanese launched the S-Case in Adelaide as well. So George, right now in your study, you have a super large map on the floor of that study. And it's a map of Australia that represents the results
of the 1998 election, the election when John Howard just beat Kim Beasley, the election that took place just a year before the Republic referendum. So it's roughly the same time as the last referendum. What can you tell me about this map and what you've done with it?
So this is probably where I'm a data nerd, but numbers are really means to tell a story. Without the shortcuts of anecdotes, you sort of force yourself to look first at what the data tells you and then figure out what the story is. Otherwise, you end up more in the fiction space. So the Australian Electoral Commission, the days before the internet, used to issue this little foldout map that gave you a visualization of a federal election result. But when it folds out and you put it on your floor, it's essentially two A3-sized pages up against each other.
And you see all the fault lines between capital cities and the rest of state,
between regions' overstate borders and within the cities themselves. And the 1998 election result was the GST election, was the second GST election. It was that election when Paul Enhance and pulled
a million primary votes in the Senate for one nation at her debut at a federal election.
I decided I'd pull out a couple of chess sets and all these chess pieces line up all the yes seats in the Republic referendum. So Labor had 25 yes seats and most of them were concentrated in Melbourne and Sydney. The Liberals had 17 yes seats. Now, those chess pieces give you pretty much every fault line within the capital cities. So if you can imagine looking at the map of Melbourne,
Melbourne's pretty cohesive yes city. And the Labor Western suburbs and the
leafy east, the liberal leafy east in Melbourne in the old Menzies, forgotten people, leafy east, they're all voting yes. And there are a couple of seats in the deep south,
out on the peninsula near Frankston and the two outer suburban seats that vote no.
In Sydney, and this always fascinates me when I look at this, in Sydney you've got basically

three divides going in that city. The Western suburbs, which is Labor Red, Barr, Paramatta, which in those days was held by the Liberals, all but one seat voted no to the Republic in 99. So the Labor seats vote no. Multicultural, Melbourne votes yes. Multicultural, Sydney votes no.

In the south, the Elector to Cook, which is sort of awaiting Scott Morrison's arrival as a local member and a couple of seats towards the north. The outer north are also voting no. But within the inner south, Labor in the south, South of the Sydney Harbour, and the inner north and along the northern beaches, liberal, all voting yes. Now the reason why this detail matters to me today, looking at the 2023 referendum on the voice, you pretty much expect these seats to repeat, yes votes, move maybe a couple of others, even if the voice, as the polls suggest, doesn't get up. It's, you know, in 99, 42 seats vote yes. You'd think about a third of the parliament again would vote yes. Now where are these seats today? Of the 25 Labor seats, only four have changed hands since 1999, and they've gone to the left. So Andrew Wilkins picked up one of them. That's the now seat of Clark. Adam Banscott, seat of Melbourne. Brisbane has gone to the Greens via, via the Liberals, because the Liberals picked it up subsequently after the referendum. So they've gone to the left. There's a single seat in the west, which is Fowler, which went independent, Dalize. He'd probably save one of them, went to the right. The Liberals, and this is really the sort of sharp edge of the calculation that Peter Dutton must have been making when he decides to come out for a no. Of those 17 seats that vote yes in 1999, and remember they were sort of the pejorative of doctors' wives has been thrown around by some liberals explaining why they were pro-Republic, but would still vote liberal at a general election. Of those 17, only five are left in liberal hands, and four of those are marginal. So they're all the teal seats, a green seat in Brisbane that went from liberal to green. There's some seats that Labor have picked up. So remember

at the last federal election, you had this explosion in the sort of middle and upper class electorates where the liberals were essentially evicted out of all the capital cities. It was written in stone in 1999 that these seats were contestable if the Liberal Party drifted too far to the right. So these are seats like Cuyong, which was famously the seat of Bob Menzies and of Andrew Peacock. It was considered absolutely the heartland of the Liberal Party, which is now a teal-held seat. And next to it is the seat of Higgins, held by Peter Costello, Harold Holt, John Gorton in the past. Again, wealthy or notionally wealthy inner eastern Melbourne suburbs that have been seen as the jewels in the Liberal Crown. Higgins is now held by the Labor Party, but there's something's happened here, George, isn't there? There's been a major earthquake you would think, or is this just a one-off? Oh, there has been an earthquake. I think the Liberal Party are well aware of it. So in their sort of post-election analysis, the bits that they share with the public, the report that Brian Lachlan and Jane Hume co-authored, they talked about the problem they had with younger voters, renters. A lot of renters moving in these seats. So this is very simple demographic equation that renters lean Labor, even higher income renters lean Labor or

more Labor or green than Liberal. But the other part to it is educated women, professional women. And remember, all those teal seats, and also the one in Higgins, went to not doctors' wives, doctors. And while Scott Morrison is blamed in the Liberal exit polling for having turned these seats into teal seats, and there are some strategic reasons why he possibly accelerated this trend, this has been, I hate to phrase hiding in plain sight, but if you'd looked at that map

in 1998, 1999, you'd be saying that those seats potentially are gettable. If the main takeout from say, you know, the cultural divide of the late 90s, early 90s is there are bigger numbers in Old Australia than there are in New Australia. There are bigger numbers in the Regents than there are in the inner and middle suburbs of the capital cities. If you want to go outside as opposed to a lead, you'd be thinking that's a winning strategy for a few years. But that does come a tipping point where a major party is no longer viable. You know, we've earned about 20 or 30 Ks from the CBD of each of the capitals. And that's the position the Liberal party reached at the last federal election. They are well aware of it. When Peter Dutton decides to be a hard no, he went from a soft note of asking a lot of questions, remember at the beginning of the year to going to a hard no. Remember when he did it, he did it straight after the Liberals lost the by-election in Aston. And Aston is another one of those yes seats that are now in Labor hands, but that's an outer eastern suburb seat of Melbourne. So what are you saying, George, then, is that this political earthquake that came about in the 2022 election, where a whole lot of those heartland Liberal party seats either went to the Teals, to the Greens, or even to Labor, that's something you can see its origins from in the 1999 Republic referendum. Is that what you're saying here? That is what I'm saying. And this is about the makeup of these electorates as much as anything else on the Liberal side. Higher income, greater proportion of the electorate has tertiary degrees, we're high ownership electorates, but now great abortion of renters moving in. That's the switch on 1999. But the trend, which is education and majority female, both those things have been bubbling along for a while. John Howard was able to negotiate with that core constituency by sort of giving him economic security and always painting Labor as a bit of a risk. And remember when Kevin Rudd wins in 2007, none of these seats have shifted. They are still in the Liberal column. And they sort of welcomed Tony Abbott as their Prime Minister in 2013, whilst secretly hoping that Malcolm Turnbull knocks him off, Malcolm Turnbull locks him off. They stick in 2016. But then they start to wobble in 2019 and Tony Abbott loses his seat in 2019. And a couple of others have already drifted. Then the dam wall breaks in 2022. But there are demographic reasons for this. It isn't just that suddenly a whole lot of lifetime Liberal voters decided that Scott Morrison wasn't the man for them and they suddenly embraced
Anthony Albanese, you all took a local Teal candidate instead. There's been a buildup over a number of years and the difficulty for the coalition maintaining this constituency could remember the regions of their dominant area. They only lost a single seat in the regions of the last federal election and they lost 17 in the capital cities. And as flag, most of the seats they lost in the capital cities were yes, electorates in 1999.
Podcast. Broadcast. You're listening to Conversations with Richard Fidler.
Now, you were talking before George about Peter Dutton's decision to go from a soft no to a hard no. You've reported in the monthly that there have been private conversations as you'd expect between Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Opposition Leader Peter Dutton about this. Tell me some of the arguments that Anthony Albanese was putting to Peter Dutton as to why he thought Dutton should support a yes vote.
This is an interesting question. The way a referendum works, there's a lot of passion attached to the yes vote, but very little attached to the no vote. So if the voice doesn't get up, which Peter Dutton might take as a win, the people who voted yes are still not going to forgive him. And the people who voted yes, who we expect will vote yes, probably live in electorates

that voted yes to the Republic of 1999. They're the seats, they're the seats that having gone to the Teals, the Greens and the Labor Party, they're the seats that the coalition can't win back if Peter Dutton's presentation to them is Scott Morrison Plus, which is on and trying when the electorate and the outer suburbs and the regions, those inner city elites, we're probably not that interested in them. And by the way, a whole lot of women running and I don't get along with women, which was the vibe, I wouldn't say that that was the actual man, but that was obviously the vibe that Scott Morrison gave off last year and the year before. So the argument that's been put to Dutton, my understanding, and this is not just what Anthony Albanese has been saying privately to Peter Dutton, it's also things that other liberals have been saying to Peter Dutton.
There is really no way to win if you're running the no case because yes voters will never forget. No voters will move on or be thinking about other things and the next election he may will be viable on other issues, but the barrier to majority government are those seats that they lost at the last election, those yes seats of the Republic of 1999. At the moment the coalition needs a net gain of 20 seats to form a majority government. If you've seeded the seats that are likely to vote yes for the voice and the voters in those electorates are not going to forgive you for not just the defeat of the voice, but what the aftershocks involve, how do you get those seats back? Now there's a liberal version of that story that was put to him quite specifically by somebody who's familiar with all the polls and this person said to Peter Dutton, if yes wins, you lose. If no wins, you probably lose anyway. Now Peter Dutton's electorate is Dixon. It's in the outer, outer northern burbs of Brisbane. I should know it reasonably well. That seems to be where he feels very at home in that part of the world, the outer suburban areas which aren't particularly high income. It's never been a safe liberal seat by any means, but it used to be a Labor Party seat years and years ago before he took it. So perhaps it's his instincts. He feels like that's his people. They are the electorates in Australia he wants to reach out to and win from the Labor Party, but are there enough of them for him to win government with?
There were enough for John Howard. It's probably the better way to frame the question is how did John Howard and Tony Abbott win elections and even Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison the first time
around because they maintain their base, their high income base in the capital cities. So they can dominate the regions. They don't win a majority of seats. In fact, John Howard didn't win a majority
seats at Sydney in any of the four federal elections he won. So he didn't need them? He didn't need them. He only needed a third to 40% of them because they had super majorities in the regions. Dutton begins with a, he still got super majorities in the regions to play with. Queensland is still a majority liberal national party state for the purposes of the federal parliament. So when Peter Dutton looks out from Queensland, I can understand why he'd look out and then think those outer suburbs are also gettable. But the outer suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney are not the outer suburbs of Brisbane. When you look at the family in Trin Dixon, the old Australian trunk is predominant. When you get to the outer suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney, you got close to 70% are in the branches,
first and second generation migrant with the dominant group in those areas, Indian born.
So looking from Queensland to Melbourne and Sydney and you're thinking, well, okay, so I'll let Ben along go and I'll let Cuyong go and I'll let Higgins go and I'll let Goldstein go and McKellar and a couple of others. But you know what? I'm going to hold the western suburbs of

Sydney, which by the way also voted no for marriage equality as well as rejecting the Republican 1999,
but at a federal election, the western suburbs of Sydney identify labour because they're multicultural.
And again, bear in mind where our population growth has been coming from for the last 10 years. The majority of our population growth has been coming from the overseas migration programme and that electorate is only going to become more diverse, those outer suburbs. So if you're looking from Dixon to get a Liberal and National Party coalition back in the majority government via the outer suburbs, you pretty much have to change history in some of these areas because they've never had Liberal members. So let me ask you a question here, George. Every political leader has someone working in their office who has to be the Machiavellian figure that gives them naked political advice, regardless of the merits of this or that policy and what have you.
Now, if I'm that guy and I freely confess, George, I'm entirely unsuited for such a role,
but if I am that guy, this is what I think I'd be saying if I was in Peter Dutton's office,
you're a very strong figure in the right of your party. Why don't you support a yes vote for narrow political tactical reasons? Because if you do, you can just wave it on through, you'll be able to keep the right of your party on board. They won't like it, but you'll be able to keep them on board because they know who you are. You wave it on through and you keep focused
on cost of living issues, which really have come through rather than get yourself caught up in this debate and this lose-lose situation for you. The fact that Peter Dutton hasn't done that, does that mean we really do have to assume he really means that his opposition is entirely sincere? So the bit in your analysis that I've been thinking about is would he be able to hold his party if he said this? If you made the captain's call and said, look, for strategic reasons, we're going to need to be a very soft yes, we just sort of stand aside. And if the thing fails, it's on Albanese anyway, and it's probably going to fail anyway because of cost of living, maybe. He could have had that conversation internally, but would he have been able to carry the joint party room, the Liberal and National Party? So think about this. There are three constituent parts in the lower house. Liberal and Liberal National Party, LNP, which is Queensland and National Party. The LNP and the NATs outnumber the Liberals, the Menzies Liberals,
in the lower house of the federal parliament for that, for the coalition. The Queensland Conservatives, essentially. And essentially the Queenslanders plus National Party members in regional New South Wales. Essentially those two groups, plus a couple in Victoria, those two groups outnumber the Libs in the cities and the regions. And they're solid no. And I think that was his problem. I thought in 2022, when he appointed Julian Lisa as Shadow Indigenous Affairs spokesperson, that he was lining up by partisanship because Julian was involved in a lot of the work around what a voice would look like. Very well respected Indigenous communities,
very old school kind of politician, this sort of politician that I covered routinely when I was in the press gallery in the 80s and 90s, where every now and then there'd be a wink in each in the eyes across the chamber saying, we need to get this thing done on the national interest, let's not contest this. I thought that that was going to be Dutton's approach. But I think what happened, the National Party was straight out of the gate at the end of last year. And so they went hard now without actually looking at any paperwork. They just said no, which left Dutton

to figure out what to do with the Liberal Party room, with the Liberal position. And he loses Aston and he doubles down on no, because in a sense, think about it. So you've advised him that this is going to bring a problem for you, come what may, let's make it the government's problem if it doesn't get up, you know, we're not to blame. You might have had another advisor in his ear going, mate, we've just lost Aston. We need to change the conversation. You need to go out there on Monday with something that'll make you look decisive, rather than apologising for having lost the mortgage belt in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, go hard on this voice thing. And what the hell does it mean anyway? Your advice may well have been put, but I think that the counter advice would have been, forget it, we're in too much trouble as it is at the moment. We need something to grab on to. We need to poke the Prime Minister in the eye. You know,
his approval rating is where it is. I think that that's what happened in the end. I don't think he's a human being that wants to hurt people. He's been in the parliament for 20 odd years. So I don't think he looked at this equation and thought, how can I hurt one million Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders? I don't think that that was his approach,
but I think the politics of that moment, I think he's thinking,
do I even get to the end of the year as leader? If I'm a yes and Albanese is doing a victory lap and I'm supposed to be standing alongside him with a victory lap, somebody from the right of my party might be coming after me. So again, just putting the merits of foreign against,
the arguments foreign against the voice to one side, referendum night in October, October 14.
If the yes vote gets up, although the polls indicate that's not likely at this point,
if it does, you will see a triumphant Prime Minister and it will probably finish Peter Dutton's career as a political leader, very likely, I would have thought. But if the polls are indicating at the moment, the no vote gets up, we'll see a very downcast Prime Minister,
a defeated Prime Minister, we'll see a victorious Peter Dutton.
And nonetheless, you don't think this is going to work for him in whatever federal election will follow the referendum, George. What does history tell us about the winners and losers of these yes, no votes, referendums and the kind of political dividend they might or might not reap afterwards? Yeah, we can do two things. The history is actually very interesting.
We've seen some of the supreme election winners of our federal history, Menzies,
Hawke, Curtin, even Whitlam, because he won a second election. They've all put up referendums and
got smashed. Menzies in 51 had what he thought was the vote winner. When he moved that referendum
to ban the Communist Party in 1951, there was a Gallup poll taking about a month out from referendum day, had about 70 odd percent intending to vote yes. And that thing crashed within the space of a month because Labor campaigned against it. Menzies was able to repurpose that defeat into
or the Labor Party were on the side of communism sort of general election. It actually made it harder
for Labor to win a general election. So we know Menzies won after that. He kept winning. We know Hawke kept winning after he lost his referender in in 84 and in 88. We know Goff won a second election after he lost his first lot of referenda. We know Curtin, for Labor, achieved a monumental landslide, its greatest victory of all time, even though he got defeated in a referendum.

We don't have an example of an opposition leader having played the short game and then translating that into becoming the Prime Minister. It hasn't happened before. But those seats, the Liberal Party, need to get back in the capital cities to be to be a viable majority party at a federal election. Those seats are not easily transferable back to the Liberal column if the voters in those seats see that the Liberal Party hasn't even taken any lessons from the 2022 election when they switched to Labor or Green. And how would they how would they interpret that the Liberal Party isn't their party because they stopped the voice, which is something that those voters passionately believed in. Again, it goes back to that point of yes, never forgets and no moves on, the no voter moves on. And we know going back to our little history lesson from 51 will, from the 40s onwards, we know that the Prime Minister that fails to get a passion project up at a referendum still wins the next election and wins the next election pretty much in every example with an increased majority except Goff in 74. So the Liberal Party appears to have lost a large part of its voting heartland in the cities. Is Labor similarly losing some of its old heartland? Again, these seats that Peter Dutton might have his eye on in the western suburbs of Sydney, in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, the northern suburbs of Adelaide, southern suburbs of Perth. Do you see that going on, George? Well, we can see it going on at the last federal election. Remember, Labor wins our bare majority with its lowest primary vote since the split of the Great Depression. So its primary vote is under 33%. We haven't had a federal election, a major party win a majority of seats with such a low primary vote. The last, remember the last election, essentially the primary votes were a third Labor, a third Liberal and National Party Coalition and a third other. Do you remember how Anthony Green announced the result on the night? He didn't say
Labor had won. He just said, I can't see how the Liberal Party can, the Coalition can win from this point. It's possibly the most fascinating election we've had in 120 odd years of Federation. So it's a landslide defeat for the incumbent. And the second part of the story is that the new government managed to eke out a majority of its lowest primary vote since the Depression. So the Liberal and National Parties have never lost this big since Men's Disease formed the Modern Liberal Party. Their share of the federal parliament now is historically at a low point. Traditionally, Liberal Parties tend to lose power narrowly. Labor parties tend to lose government and landslides. This is the first Liberal National Party government has been punted out with a landslide. Now, the seat that would terrify me if I was Anthony Albanese and we have me wanting to go to work every day if I was Peter Dunn is Fowler. Fowler went independent.
The large Vietnamese migrant population in that part of Western Sydney, yes. Absolutely a great local candidate from that community who did have links to the Liberal Party, but also local government. Fowler was a yes seat, obviously. As I mentioned earlier, that it was the sole Western suburbs seat in Sydney that voted yes for the Republic of 1999. It goes independent. Now, here's something that he may have already thought of, but would never say out loud. The possibility of a majority coalition government in the next two terms in this particular electoral cycle probably not going to happen because of what's happening in the capital cities, but the possibility of a minority coalition government with a whole lot of these newly formed independence at the next election or the election after in former Labor Heartland. You know, the way Albanese would have been looking at about eight o'clock or nine o'clock

on election night thinking, I'm going to have to put Zoe Daniel and I'm going to have to put Allegra Spender must be Dial. Peter Dunn might be thinking that about another three or four or five dialys at the next federal election or the election after that. So I can see the point of coming at it that way, but your advice to him in your mythical advice, who are in our conversation, mate, let's just put the referendum to one side because it's in terms of our long-term branding. You know, we look like the nasty party or the mean party, your party of no pick your fights, sort of advice. There might have been a simpler way back, which would have picked up a couple of capital city seats and also watched weighted prodded until Labor applauded in the outer suburbs. Look, I think we shouldn't lose sight of a third split in the electorate at the last election. The other thing we shouldn't lose sight of is for younger voters, Labor or Green are the party of choice. And in some areas, Greens over Labor and that the Liberal Party amongst younger voters are in the 20s, not in the 30s, which is the national representation, the national primary vote. They're in the 20s. So you're looking at a very, very fragmented electorate now and into the immediate future. So all the old coalitions that have tended to form over the last century, they're all breaking apart and will reform in different ways in different shapes in the future. That's what you're saying. Yeah. So there's really three or four headlines here, but in terms of, say, the issue of home ownership. So younger renters who would have been homeowners by now in terms of education income profile where they live are still renters. They're not transitioning from, say, Labor to coalition as they get older. That's one point. The second point, and this is more around professional women who used to be fairly solid. Older women used to be fairly solid for coalition regardless of education or class. The older they got, the more likely they were to vote Liberal. That relationship is breaking down and that's based on education. There's also the question, there's a possibility now that Labor is going to be in trouble with the two big non-English speaking cohorts, well English speaking with the Indians, but the Indians and the Chinese in terms of their value set. And remember, these are skilled migrants. So they tend to be higher income earners on arrival. Natural Liberal Party voters you would have thought in many ways. Small business, you think small business family values. So that part of the map is also contestable. So a sort of rational polity would look at this and go, we need to trim up some new coalitions here. We need to go back into the field and figure out what's happening in real Australia. But we're far from that, George. We're far from that by the sound of things. Well, at the moment we're still in this sort of weird turn of the 21st century tribal landscape of battlers versus elites versus this versus that. Trades versus cafe latte sippers, inner city versus the regions, the centre versus the hinterland, all those things. By the way, I don't want to throw you off in a completely different conversation, but you know this is about 2015. The dominant worker in the labor force is a professional woman. She replaced the male technical and trades worker around the time that Tony Abbott was about to lose his job to Malcolm Turnbull. To me, it's almost the in terms of identity. It's the single biggest shift in our identity. Remember, we were talking earlier about foundational documents and constitutions and organising principles of the Commonwealth. Everything was centred on the labour of men in those days and it was all the way through to the early part of the 20th century. You know, you switched from manufacturing worker to trading, construction worker, mining worker. All these guys held the keys to the lodge and

you had to negotiate on their behalf. You had to sort of bow to blue collar eminence.
What Scott Morrison discovered at the last election is that the dominant worker in the economy today,
who is not just a professional but also in the caring sector, is a woman, not a man and probably doesn't want to hear some recitation of old bloke lines with a baseball cap about where the real Australia is. In terms of the ownership class, in terms of the professional class and in terms of the migrant majority, all those things are up for grabs now. George, just finally, when the 99 Republic referendum was put to the people, it went down in every state. So it could be said that people voted for no change and the no voters were wildly disparate. There were the Republicans who
didn't like the model on offer and there were the monarchists who didn't want a republic at all, but effectively we voted for no change in this country. But the country changed anyway, even though the no vote was carried. Paul Kelly from the Australians said, this is what the new model was, post the Republic referendum, was that the vote showed that the monarchy had become largely irrelevant to the people of Australia. So the new model was, he said, an absent monarch,
an irrelevant Governor-General, and a powerful Prime Minister, because the Prime Minister has taken on a lot of the ceremonial roles that a President or a Governor-General would normally have taken on. So we got change anyway, even though we voted for no change. To your mind, will this vote, the referendum we're about to have, bring change to Australia, even if the no vote is upheld? I think it will, but I think the change is almost impossible to foresee. I think it was possible in 1999 to see that Prime Minister adopting a more ceremonial role pretty much usurping the Governor-General. Remember John Howard rang the argument, one of the reasons, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. He said that the Governor-General was effectively the head of state, and when you by the time the Olympics rolled around in 2000, John Howard wanted to launch the Olympics. He wanted to open the Olympics, yes, but the rules said you have to be the head of state to do that, and he wasn't the head of state. Yeah, but by 2001 what's changed? Tampa, and especially
September 11, and then Bali in 2002, if you think about it, he became hugger-in-chief in 2002.
He very quickly moved into the role that I think he was already rehearsing,
and I don't think he did this deliberately. He was responding on a national crisis with Port Arthur in 1996. He seamlessly moved into the role I think that the society
permitted him to move into, where the Prime Minister really was the head of state. Now,
the relationship between first Australians and non-Indigenous Australians is going to be fundamentally altered by the vote if it's no. You've had a generation of leaders,
Marsha Langton, Noel Pearson, you sort of begin to hear of them around the Marbo debate,
the Wick debate, the Apology, and then this long process of constitutional consultation,
which yields the voice in 2017 as the proposal for recognition and empowerment.
That generation of leaders, and I think a few of them have said this, Noel certainly said this,
and Marsha said this the other day, they would view a no vote as not necessarily the end of their time in public life, but it will pretty much change their view of the system.
The next generation will probably then pick up the cause. Now, the next generation of leaders may well take defeat as a sign that the state, and what I mean by state as in the system,
the Commonwealth and the states and territories, aren't serious enough about our interests,
and we are done negotiating with them. If the answer is no, then we're done trying to do it

your way, we might be trying to do it another way. Now, relations will be very, very, very difficult at that point. There's a couple of things I was thinking about just out of loud the other day. If it's no, the next event where there's a welcome to country, can you predict that the person giving the welcome to country won't just say something else that will make the room shift? Next year, when the NRL and the AFL have their Indigenous around, how awkward would that be, for example? Obviously, these are bipartisan affairs, so Peter Dutton would get an invited, still be opposition leader. Would he go for something like this? The relationship will change, and so even though the Constitution hasn't changed, the system is going to have to respond to what may well be a very, very disappointed and disenfranchised Indigenous leadership. Just in a price and Warren Mundine will be triumphant in the short term, but do they represent all Indigenous
Australians? Especially when their argument has been about elites and the like, you know, Canberra elites, academic elites and the like. So you've got a disempowered group that was theoretically united will be broken by this result, but you may radicalise elements of that group, and you may also radicalise elements of non-Indigenous Australia looking at this situation, thinking, well, I'm going to have to get a voice legislated anyway. I know Althony Albanesey said that's it. It's all over Red Rover. I'm not going to do anything about it. At the next election, I still think we'd be contesting models of reconciliation, whether the system wants to or not. You know, people just don't see the field and leave things as they are because, and this is weirdly where there's a consensus that the status quo hasn't worked for Indigenous Australians. In fact, better done now. I wonder whether he's got Wrecker's remorse because the other day he said he'd give you another referendum, which I thought was a very interesting tell from him. I think even he's starting to think about what the consequences of no and there will be no victory laps. David Littleproud, the leader of the National Party, whose seat, by the way, had the highest no vote at the referendum in 1999, likely to have the highest no vote again on the voice, he said they wouldn't be doing a victory lap. I don't think they'd even be turning up for press conferences on the Sunday. So there's still a sense that yes, yes, might resolve one thing, but there need to be the technicalities of what the voice model will look like. And there'd be a big argument in the parliament about that. No definitely doesn't settle the issue because both sides agree that the status quo isn't working on behalf of most disadvantaged members of our society. George, always fantastic speaking with you. Thank you so much, George. I really appreciate your time, Richard. Thank you very much. George Megalogenus is a commentator who's written for the Sydney Morning Herald for the Australian and has written several books on Australian politics and history, and he's written an article for the Monthly on this very issue. Today's conversation with George Megalogenus will be available for you later today as a podcast. You can find us on the ABC Listen app or from wherever you get your podcasts. I'm Richard Fidler. Thanks for listening.
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