

Statement from Marketing Strategist Toby Ralph:

1. Why is the NO campaign succeeding over YES?

It is not. Both campaigns are losing, the Yes campaign is simply losing on a grander scale so No is edging ahead.

2. What is needed for the YES campaign to turn around the national polling which shows the YES vote in decline?

It may be too late to have the sensible open discussion that Australians have wanted, so their best hope now is probably to stop selling emotively to their base and let the No case lose.

3. Who do you believe is running a smarter campaign and why?

Neither campaign is smart. Both are dreadful. I explain why below.

4. Are there any other points you would like to make about the campaigns?

I've now run three research studies with thousands of Australians probing their attitudes in depth. What is clear is that neither side is winning the debate, but that the Yes case is losing. They have fallen from two thirds support to well less than half, and it has been due to two strategic errors up front, then a series of tactical blunders.

A Referendum is a proposal to change The Constitution, the community expects a balanced discussion about the good and bad reasons for doing so and they expect Government to be candid. It's not happened.

The first error Government made was to treat the referendum as a sales pitch, not a discussion. The Prime Minister announced that he would not share detail that might confuse and worry people – and respondents said *“Surely he should fix the detail rather than hide it?”*

The second mistake was to assume a monopoly on decency, implying that a Yes vote was 'nice' and that a No vote was reactionary and possibly racist. This worked at first, particularly with young people, but as time passed and the Yes campaign became more sanctimonious and censorious, people began to feel uneasy about being unable to ask questions.

The Yes campaign has some very smart campaigners who are treating other Australians as idiots, and that's not working.

The No campaign has made big mistakes too, but been less visible. These campaigns are won and lost with soft and unsure voters, not hardline supporters, but both sides are preaching to the choir and failing to shift swingers to them – they both tend to shift them to the other side.

When Pauline Hanson speaks against the Voice, irrespective of her comments the hard base agree, but the soft and unsure voters move away saying *“If she's against it, I'm for it.”*

Equally when Noel Pearson called No voters 'bedwetters' swinging voters moved away from Yes toward a No vote. Both sides are their own worst enemy.

The TV ads of the Yes case show exactly how they are reaching their base but not the soft voters. The first commercial emotive showing an Elder sitting at a bonfire explaining that indigenous Australians have no voice was loved by Yes voters, but quickly wore out it's welcome with the uncommitted. In my research they'd say "*Hang on... they are the only ethnic group with their own Department, billions of dollars and two Ministers in Cabinet... if that's not a Voice to Parliament what is?*" Once a claim is judged inflated it backfires, and both campaigns are riddled with hyperbole.

The Farnham commercial was fascinating, and seems to have produced a short-term impact, but little enduring affect. Celebrity endorsement has been a lousy idea for a couple of reasons. First The Voice is already regarded as a Canberracentric body for elites, so using elite celebrities reinforces this perception. It's a dumb idea. Secondly in advertising if you have something to say, you say it, if you don't you sing it – so use of a Farnham pop song gets an emotive sugar hit, but ultimately implies triviality and lack of substance.

This isn't a pack of cornflakes, it's The Constitution, the operating system of our Country.

The No campaign has been ghastly too, but because there's less of it than the Yes case it's done less damage. The Financial Review full page cartoon of Michael Chaney with Kate on his knee giving a \$2m shareholder cheque to The Voice campaign was executed in such a puerile, juvenile and offensive manner that soft voters ignore the proposition and moved away from voting No because it was so unpleasant. Their recent decision to have supporters fail to identify themselves and sow fear and uncertainty is silly, unnecessary and will backfire. Similarly their crude right wing messaging has been making soft voters cringe. Ironically the best hope for the Yes case is that the No campaigners will overplay their hand.

The Voice is a potentially popular idea but the Yes campaign is snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. If they keep doing the same, and if the No case can stop itself getting too loud and ugly, the referendum will almost certainly fail.

5. In regards to the clip of Marcia Langton using the terms 'racist' and 'stupid' that's been getting a good run in parts of the media, how damaging is this likely to be for the YES campaign and why?

Marcia's comments are unhelpful, even if they are taken out of context, because they reinforce voter perceptions that unfounded accusations of racism have been used to suppress free and fair discussion. They will move soft yes and unsure voters toward a No vote. Attempting to untangle context will probably cause more damage than repair.

Correspondingly the shrill nature of many No campaign elements annoys soft No and unsure voters and shifts them toward a Yes vote.

Each side is its own worst enemy.

Australians want a respectful discussion from both sides, not a sales pitch and certainly not abuse.