

# Aboriginal split will ruin our vote: Lowitja O'Donoghue

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**Respected Aboriginal elder Lowitja O'Donoghue is “scared” a referendum to recognise indigenous Australians in the Constitution will fail because of disunity within Aboriginal ranks.**

Dr O'Donoghue and Aboriginal academic Marcia Langton were jostled by protesters in Adelaide on Tuesday night after an address by Professor Langton to the Don Dunstan Foundation, in which she argued there should be no publicly funded no case.

The protesters, who kicked and attempted to damage the women's vehicles, are believed to be from the Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance, a group that rejects the Recognise campaign and has described constitutional recognition as a dead end.

Dr O'Donoghue, the inaugural chairwoman of the dissolved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and former Australian of the Year, said she feared the referendum was doomed to failure because of disunity and impatience by many to rush a vote, along with her distrust of Tony Abbott's stated support for change.

Dr O'Donoghue was an active participant behind the 1967 referendum that improved indigenous rights in the Constitution but has stepped back from the current campaign because of poor health.

The 83-year-old said the landscape was different leading up to a 2017 vote. “There was a different movement to what it is now,” Dr O'Donoghue told *The Australian* yesterday. “The only way I can explain it is that black and white were together, walking towards the path to referendum.

“I think there's another element to it now because I think there are activists out there who want things to happen before the referendum. They're really more keen about getting action now and not waiting until what, hopefully, is a successful referendum. At the beginning I had confidence ... but we don't have the unity and we have to get the unity.”

Dr O'Donoghue did not give her preferred constitutional model but said Cape York leader Noel Pearson, and his idea to maintain parliamentary sovereignty by establishing a body of indigenous people empowered to review specific legislation in parliament, did not speak for all indigenous Australians. The nation should look to New Zealand, which has encapsulated the rights of Maori people within the Treaty of Waitangi and its constitution.

While the Prime Minister wants a referendum in 2017 to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1967 vote, momentum towards a draft referendum was slow and the views of his Indigenous Advisory Council chairman Warren Mundine were unclear, she said.

“Tony Abbott is buggerising around. I don't think the things he says links with the actions,” Dr O'Donoghue said. “But it looks good to have a black fellow on your shoulder. The other thing I question is ... Mundine. I don't know what his (real) position is.”

Conservative commentators said Professor Langton's view that government funding for a no case would doom the recognition campaign showed the yes case was weak. Under the referendum act, public funding for campaigns is not permitted, but the government has previously suspended the legislation and financed arguments for and against change.