

Year 5 General Studies

1967 Referendum

In May 1967, after 10 years of campaigning, a referendum on Indigenous recognition in the Australian constitution was held. The lead-up to the poll focused public attention on the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were treated as second-class citizens. Nearly 91 per cent of the electorate voted to amend the constitution. This change meant that Aboriginal people would be counted as part of the population and acknowledged as equal citizens, and that the Commonwealth would be able to make laws on their behalf. This was seen to reflect public recognition of Aboriginal people as full Australian citizens.

The Question

The referendum put the following question to the Australian people:

Do you approve the proposed law for the alteration of the Constitution entitled 'An Act to alter the Constitution so as to omit certain words relating to the people of the Aboriginal race in any state so that Aboriginals are to be counted in reckoning the population'?

The proposed law (Constitution Alteration (Aboriginals) 1967) sought to give the Commonwealth Parliament power to make laws with respect to Aboriginal people wherever they lived in Australia. It also sought to make it possible to include Aboriginal people in national censuses. The amendment deleted part of section 51 (xxvi) of the Constitution and repealed section 127.

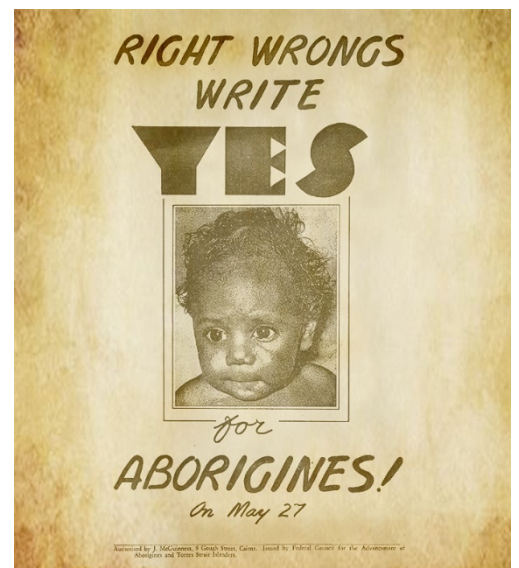
Victory and the aftermath

On 27 May 1967 nearly 91 per cent of Australians voted 'yes' to change the constitution. The huge majority was a validation of 10 years of hard work by Aboriginal activists. The constitution was formally changed on 10 August that year.

Five months after the referendum, Prime Minister Harold Holt announced the formation of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs. In 1968 the government passed the States Grants (Aboriginal Advancement) Act, which provided federal funds to state governments to support Indigenous communities. With the election of the Whitlam Labor government in 1972, Gordon Bryant became the first Minister for Aboriginal Affairs supported by an independent department.

The referendum has iconic status in Australian history. It was the first time the nation came together to show overwhelming support for Indigenous people, and the first time Aboriginal people were able to mobilise the non-Indigenous population to make that happen. For non-Aboriginal people, it has become a benchmark event in imagining how Australia can overcome discrimination against Indigenous people.

However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders continue to struggle for their position in Australian society. As Joe McGinness cautioned supporters in 1967, 'Winning the referendum is an important step forwards – but it is only a first step.'



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Questions

1. How many years of campaigning led to the successful referendum?

2. What percentage voted 'yes' for the 1967 referendum?

3. The referendum sought to make it possible to include Aboriginal people in national censuses.

True / False

4. Why does the 1967 referendum have iconic status in Australian history?

5. The 1967 referendum gave Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders the right to vote. True / False

6. Sequence the following events in order. (1 to 4)

- Aboriginal people started a campaign to change the constitution.
- Gordon Bryant became the first Minister for Aboriginal Affairs.
- 91% of Australians voted 'yes' to change the constitution
- The government passed the States Grants (Aboriginal Advancement) Act.