

Should the Australian Government use former NBA player Shaq O'Neal to promote the Indigenous Voice to Parliament?

What they said...

'I make no apologies for saying I'll engage with anyone, anywhere, anytime about these issues and anything we can do to raise the profile of this issue is a good thing'

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese

'Mr O'Neal, aka Shaq, knows as much about Australian current affairs and its body politic as my pet budgie'

Courier Mail columnist Mike O'Connor

The Issue at a Glance

On August 27, 2022, the Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, and the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Linda Burney, held a press conference also attended by former NBA champion Shaquille O'Neal.

Before O'Neal's arrival, the Prime Minister explained that O'Neal had offered his services to help promote the Indigenous Voice to Parliament. After O'Neal's brief appearance, the Prime Minister explained the importance of raising awareness of the Voice among the Australian electorate before a referendum could be held.

O'Neal's involvement in the issue has met with a varied response. Some commentators, especially critics of the Voice proposal, have condemned the United States celebrity's planned promotions as trivialising and insulting. Others have seen it as a valuable way of increasing public connection with the issue. [↗](#)

Background

On July 29, 2022, the Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, released a draft new provision to be included in the Australian Constitution which would allow for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

The Prime Minister is suggesting that the Constitution would be changed to include the following three-part provision.

1. There shall be a body, to be called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice
2. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice may make representations to Parliament and the Executive government on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples
3. The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws with respect to the composition, functions, powers, and procedures of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. [↗](#)

Any change to the Australian Constitution must be approved by a referendum. A referendum is a vote that allows the Australian electorate to either approve or reject a proposed constitutional change. To be passed, a referendum proposal needs to win both an overall majority of votes as well as majorities in a majority of states. This is a very high level of approval to attempt to gain.

Since Federation in 1901, there have been 44 proposals for constitutional change put in 19 referendums with only eight changes passing.

The draft referendum proposal that the Prime Minister has released states, 'Do you support an alteration to the Constitution that establishes an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice?' [↗](#)

Those who support an Indigenous Voice to Parliament argue:

1. Australia has a long history of inadequate provision for Indigenous Australians who continue to have dramatically poorer living conditions than non-Indigenous Australians. The Prime Minister has highlighted 'the gap that is there between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in life expectancy, in health outcomes, in education, in housing, in infant mortality.' [↗](#)
2. Indigenous Australians form a small percentage of the Australian population, and their interests can be easily overlooked. In the 2021 Census of Population and Housing, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represented 3.2 percent of the population. This is 812,000 people. [↗](#)
3. As the first and traditional owners of Australia with whom no official treaty has ever been made, Indigenous Australians have a special claim to be recognised and heard within Australia's Parliament. [↗](#)
4. Australia's Constitution currently makes no reference to Indigenous Australians. [↗](#)

Those who oppose an Indigenous Voice to Parliament argue:

1. An Indigenous Voice to Parliament is not necessary.
-Australia's current system of representative, parliamentary democracy (referred to as the Westminster system from the British model on which it is based) ensures that the interests of all citizens are protected. [↗](#)
2. The Voice could set up a parallel system which would distort the operation of Australia's democracy. [↗](#)
3. Some Indigenous advocates and others argue that the Voice is a purely symbolic gesture which would do nothing to improve living conditions for Indigenous Australians. [↗](#)
4. Debating an Indigenous Voice to Parliament will create race-based divisions among Australian people. [↗](#)

Internet information

On September 15, 2022, Orlando.Click.com published a news report titled 'Shaq gives more than 30 new laptops to Orlando Boys and Girls Club' after a student won a mid-court shot challenge that O'Neal had issued.

The full text can be accessed at [↗](#)

On September 4, 2022, The Centre for Independent Studies republished a comment by Nyunggai Warren Mundine titled 'Do we really need an Indigenous "voice" to Parliament?' Mundine opposes the 'voice', arguing it is unnecessary and divisive.

The full text of the comment can be accessed at [↗](#)

On August 31, 2022, The Australian published a comment by Hannah McGlade, from the Kurin Minang people, an associate professor at Curtin law school and a member of the UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues. McGlade argues in support of the Indigenous Voice in Parliament and supports the use of Shaq O'Neal to promote it.

The full text can be accessed at [↗](#)

On August 31, 2028, The Australian published a comment by columnist Janet Albrechtsen titled 'Questioning Albanese's voice isn't idiotic, racist or ideological' which argues against the inclusion of the Indigenous Voice to Parliament in the Australian Constitution.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On August 31, 2022, Sky News published a report by Miriah Davis in which she quotes Indigenous academic and co-author of the Voice proposal supporting the use of Shaq O'Neal to raise public awareness of the issue.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On August 30, 2022, the International Policy Digest published a comment by Binoy Kampmark titled 'Shaquille O'Neal Stumps for Australia's First Nations Peoples'. Kampmark argues that Labor's use O'Neal to promote the Indigenous Voice to Parliament may harm the cause.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On August 29, 2022, The Sydney Morning Herald published a comment by Osman Faruqi titled 'Shaq or sham? Voice needs a real campaign, not celebrity photo ops' Faruqi argues against the use of Shaquille O'Neal to promote the 'Voice', claiming that what is needed is informed discussion not celebrity endorsement.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On August 29, 2022, The Courier Mail published a comment by Mike O'Connor titled 'Shaquille O'Neal press conference with Anthony Albanese a cynical political exercise'. O'Connor argues that the involvement of O'Neal is a valueless piece of promotion.

The full text of the comment can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On August 29, 2022, the lobby group Advance Australia published a comment titled 'Albo takes advice from Shaquille O'Neal on how to vandalise our Constitution with a "Voice:' The full text criticising the Voice proposal and condemning the involvement of O'Neal can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On August 29, 2022, The West Australian published a report in which it quoted senior National's MP Barnaby Joyce criticising Anthony Albanese for using O'Neal to endorse the Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#) target="_blank">http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:ZZ75d88kNuQJ:

On August 29, 2022, The Conversation published a comment by Keith Rathbone and Averill Gordon, senior lecturers at the Auckland University of Technology titled 'What does American basketballer Shaquille O'Neal have to do with the Indigenous Voice to Parliament?' The article considers why O'Neal may not have been the most suitable choice as a promoter.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On August 28, 2022, Sky News published a comment by contributor James Macpherson titled 'Shaquille O'Neal appearance at PM's press conference only served to make Anthony Albanese look very, very small' which argues that O'Neal's involvement served to diminish the

significance of the Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On August 24, 2022, Sky News published a comment by former Prime Minister John Howard titled ; 'Voice to Parliament should not be "a test of whether you care for the indigenous people of this country"'

the comment details Howard's view as to why the Voice is not necessary being potentially either damaging to Australian democracy or purely symbolic.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On August 4, 2022, The Conversation published a comment by Daryle Rigney, Director, Indigenous Nations Collaborative Futures Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney, et al titled 'Establishing a Voice to Parliament could be an opportunity for Indigenous Nation Building. Here's what that means'. The comment argues that the establishment of the 'Voice' may advance Indigenous people's capacity to speak on their own behalf.

The full text of the document can be found at [🔗](#)

On July 29, 2022, The Conversation published a report by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra, titled 'Albanese releases draft wording for Indigenous 'Voice to parliament' referendum'. The article supplies the precise wording of the proposed new provision to the Australian Constitution and the wording of the proposal that could be put to the electorate in a referendum.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

Arguments in favour of using Shaq O'Neal to promote the Indigenous Voice to Parliament

1. O'Neal's high public profile will draw Australians' attention to the issue of the Indigenous Voice to Parliament

Supporters of Shaquille O'Neal's involvement in promoting the Indigenous Voice to Parliament argue that the former NBA champion's high public profile will help to draw attention within Australia to the debate surrounding the Voice.

O'Neal is a highly popular and widely known sports figure who has also moved into rap and DJing. O'Neal came to Australia in August for a series of performances as a speaker, a DJ and in-store appearances in Melbourne and Sydney. Finally, he took part in a shooting contest at Star Sydney's 24/7 Sports Bar. All events were sold out with fans queuing for blocks to see him at in-store appearances. [🔗](#)

Averill Gordon, Lecturer in Public Relations at Auckland University of Technology, believes that drawing on O'Neal's popularity will generate widespread national and international awareness and support for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. Gordon has stated, 'Athletes are a great way to internationalize an issue as sports and music are key themes used to drive most global PR campaigns.' She further argues, 'The biggest challenge in a public relations campaign is getting people who aren't aware of an issue to be aware of it. Shaquille's engagement and subsequent communication means that people are becoming aware of this issue and may even be taking action. It also creates global traction that flows back to Australia and spreads the message further, creating global interest that ironically increases Australian

awareness.' [↗](#)

It has been claimed that O'Neal has appeal for young Australians who are likely to be curious about any issue to which his name is connected. Some promoters of the Voice have seen O'Neal's involvement as a good way of sparking initial interest in the issue. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has explained, 'The fact is that Shaq's appearance means that people are talking about it. Shaq appeals to a whole bunch of people, many of whom would have been hearing about the Voice to Parliament for the very first time...I make no apologies for saying I'll engage with anyone, anywhere, anytime about these issues and anything we can do to raise the profile of this issue is a good thing.' [↗](#)

Mr Albanese said in their brief meeting the basketballer turned DJ had agreed to highlight the campaign for a Voice to parliament through his social media channels. He has also agreed to record a promotion. The Prime Minister stated, 'Shaq has that record of...bringing people together of different backgrounds which is consistent with our approach to a constitutionally recognised voice to parliament.' [↗](#)

The Prime Minister further stated, 'Shaq is someone who is well known to younger people, and one of the things that we have been doing is trying to mobilize support for the Voice to Parliament by talking with sporting figures.' Stressing O'Neal's suitability for the role, the Prime Minister also claimed, 'Mr. O'Neal does a lot of work in the U.S. about social justice and lifting people up who are marginalized, including through sporting organizations.' [↗](#)

Co-author for the Indigenous Voice to Parliament proposal, First Nations academic, Marcia Langton, has stated, 'Thinking practically, the advantage for us in him coming to our aid is that young Australians will ask themselves "What is Shaq on about now?" (then) they'll take a look and find out about it.' Langton has further argued that O'Neal's appeal is particularly strong among Indigenous youth. She observed, 'He is a global hero to young black men and women because of his sporting prowess and his great personality.' [↗](#)

Several commentators have referred to O'Neal's appeal among young black Australians. Hannah McGlade, from the Kurin Minang people, is an associate professor at Curtin law school and a member of the UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues. Professor McGlade has stated, 'Not a follower of basketball, I had only an inkling of his star power. But Shaq, I've come to learn, is no mere celebrity; his basketball history is practically unparalleled. This man also is loved by a great many Aboriginal youths for whom basketball has long been embraced.' [↗](#)

2. O'Neal's involvement will heighten Australia's awareness that Indigenous recognition is a global issue

Supporters of Shaq O'Neal lending his presence and support to the Indigenous Voice to Parliament argue that O'Neal's involvement will help Australians recognise that Indigenous rights are an issue being addressed all around the world and that Australia must not fall further behind in acknowledging the country's obligations to First Nations people.

Many Indigenous rights activists stress the importance of Australia recognising that its progression toward equity for Indigenous people is part of an international struggle. Hannah McGlade, from the Kurin Minang people, is an associate professor at Curtin law school and a member of the UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues. Professor McGlade has stated, 'Ambassadors for the voice are sensible. Of course, they should largely be Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people from this country, but to rule out international figures is parochial and shortsighted. Australia lags the world in terms of recognition of Indigenous rights and treatment of Indigenous peoples, and racism is a global issue that Black Lives Matter highlighted so powerfully.' [↗](#)

The Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has emphasised that Australia's international standing will grow when we fully meet our national responsibilities toward our Indigenous citizens. Mr Albanese stated, 'this will improve the nation, it will improve our self-confidence in the way we see ourselves, but it will also improve the way we are seen by the world...Australia will be seen more positively when we demonstrate our maturity as a nation, recognising our full history.' [🔗](#)

Mr Albanese suggested Australia needed to make itself accountable before the world for the wellbeing of Australia's First Nation's peoples. Referring to what Shaq O'Neal would already know about Indigenous conditions in Australia, the Prime Minister stated, 'What he does know and what the world knows is about the gap that is there between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in life expectancy, in health outcomes, in education, in housing, in infant mortality. The world knows about these issues.' [🔗](#)

United States reports of O'Neal supporting the Indigenous Voice to Parliament during his trip to Australia highlight O'Neal's interest in the issue and present Australia's efforts in a positive light. An article published in Essentially Sports on August 28, 2022, stated, 'Shaq loves Australia and its people. He approached Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese to take part in a press conference. The presser was in place to discuss the government's Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum. Moreover, O'Neal felt that he believed in the cause and wanted to offer his support.' The Prime Minister was quoted as saying, '[Shaq] knows that we are a warm and generous people, and he wanted to inform himself about what this debate was about by engaging directly with the Minister for Indigenous Affairs and myself as the Prime Minister.' [🔗](#)

The Australian government has already begun to act to encourage Indigenous Australians to find support from the international Indigenous movement. The Australian Government is committing \$150,000 to the Indigenous Peoples' Organisation to provide more avenues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives to reach the international stage. The Indigenous Peoples' Organisation brings together more than 300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations, community organisations and individual members to promote and advocate for First Nations' rights and participation at the United Nations. [🔗](#)

The Minister for Indigenous Australians, Linda Burney, has stated, 'Supporting First Nations people to engage internationally is vital for our people to be heard and recognised.' This funding will help share Australia's experience, by amplifying the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and increase the potential to influence UN committee decision-making.' [🔗](#)

3. Indigenous Australians have a long history of collaboration with African Americans

Those who support using former NBA champion Shaq O'Neal's high profile to promote the Indigenous Voice to Parliament argue that Indigenous Australians have a long history of positive associations with African Americans.

Several Australian commentators and academics have noted the shared experiences of exploitation, racism and discrimination shared by Indigenous Australians and African Americans. Hannah McGlade, from the Kurin Minang people, is an associate professor at Curtin law school and a member of the UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues. Professor McGlade has stated, 'Why should we be offended by any African-American people supporting our cause? Their history includes slavery, not unlike ours where people were indentured and forced to work on pastoral stations and in the homes of whites even as child servants. African-Americans were taken from their homeland of Africa and to this day are denied reparations, though they continue to fight for justice and racial equality.' [🔗](#)

African American popular music, influenced by the experience of slavery, is claimed to have had a significant impact on Indigenous Australians and the music they produce. An article published by ABC News on July 21, 2018, discusses the effect of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. The Fisk Jubilee Singers were a choir from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee - one of the newly formed black colleges and universities established to educate freed slaves. They toured Australia in the 1880s and visited Maloga Aboriginal Mission Station. Frederick J. Loudin, the group's choirmaster at the time and their first African American manager noted, 'The music of the plantations stirred their souls as no other music could have done, and they seemed to recognise us as brethren from a far distant tribe.' Musicologists have argued that black American music has had an ongoing impact on the development of modern popular Indigenous music and its use as a protest. [↗](#)

The United States civil rights movement of the 1960s had a major impact on the struggle for Indigenous rights in Australia. A primary example of this is the Freedom Ride conducted in rural New South Wales. A group of students from the University of Sydney, inspired by the United States 1961 Freedom Rides, got on a bus on 12 February 1965 and toured through regional towns such as Walgett, Gulargambone, Kempsey, Bowraville and Moree to show wider Australia the experience of Aboriginal Australians. These students - who were known as the Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA) and led by Arrernte man Charles Perkins from Alice Springs - recorded acts of racism against Aboriginal people and broadcast them to media around the country. [↗](#)

The primary organiser of the Australian Freedom Ride, Charles Perkins, subsequently acknowledged the important influence of the United States Freedom Rides on the young Australian students who took action. Perkins has stated, 'It was also a reaction to what was being done in America at that time. A number of students gathered together at Sydney University and thought that they might like to see a Freedom Ride eventuate here in Australia.'

[↗](#) Professor Hannah McGlade has further noted, 'Aboriginal people also were influenced by the Black Power movement, shown in the documentary Black Panther Woman told by Marlene Cummins, which included her brave disclosure of sexual assault. Noticeably, the Greens senators have adopted symbolism from the Panthers with their hand fists and chest salutes in the Senate seemingly for impact. And we have a proud history of solidarity with Native Americans and aboriginal people from Canada whose treaty rights were violated and whose children were stolen in a similar history to our own genocidal past.' [↗](#)

It has been argued that contemporary African American protest movements, such as Black Lives Matter, have also influenced the Indigenous protest movement in Australia. An article published by the United Nations Association of Australia on November 3, 2021, titled 'Why does the BLM movement matter in Australia?' opens with the observation, 'The Black Lives Matter movement has raised important questions about the prevalence and pervasiveness of racism in the criminal justice system. Its message found resonance around the world, with populations in countries including Canada, France, the United Kingdom, and Australia identifying with the same issues presented by the United States supporters of the BLM movement - they argue that criminal justice systems in their respective states display systemic bias in police response.' [↗](#)

4. O'Neal has been involved in numerous community service programs in the United States and has supported black causes

Those who support Shaquille O'Neal acting as a spokesperson for the Indigenous Voice to Parliament argue that the former NBA player has a history of supporting those who suffer

from discrimination or who are otherwise disadvantaged. Australian prime minister, Anthony Albanese, has praised O'Neal for his work 'in the United States about social justice and lifting people up who are marginalized.' [🔗](#) O'Neal's contribution to several causes has been noted. In October 2011, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), America's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) media advocacy and anti-defamation organization, revealed a new public service announcement (PSA) featuring NBA superstar Shaquille O'Neal speaking out against anti-LGBT bullying. As part of the announcement, O'Neal stated, 'Millions of gay and transgender youth are made to feel like they don't fit in every day.' [🔗](#)

Volunteer Match (a U.S.-based nonprofit organisation which provides a national digital database of volunteers and nonprofit organisations) has outlined the work done by the Shaquille O'Neal Foundation. Volunteer Match's website states, 'The Shaquille O'Neal Foundation was established in 2019 by one of the most dominant basketball players in NBA history, Shaquille O'Neal. Shaquille has always been a philanthropist and advocate for underserved youth and has teamed with Communities in Schools and Boys and Girls Clubs to give these children a brighter future.

One of the Foundation's largest projects to date is the refurbishment of a Boys & Girls Club just outside of Atlanta, scheduled to open this fall. We're also working on resurfacing outdoor basketball courts in Las Vegas and other communities.' [🔗](#)

In September 2020, O'Neal announced his Foundation's involvement with a campaign to support black businesses recover from the impact of COVID. O'Neal stated, 'Small businesses need our support now more than ever. Black businesses have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic... Not only are we giving money, but we give mentorship to help get their businesses to the next level.' The Coalition to Back Black Businesses launched with a \$10 million commitment to fund a grant program over the next four years. [🔗](#)

On April 16, 2021, Forbes Magazine published a report on some of the activities of the Shaquille O'Neal Foundation. The article stated, 'O'Neal will...continue to partner with local organizations including Boys & Girls Clubs and Communities in Schools. With the latter, it teamed up on Shaq-To-School, an initiative that has donated \$10 million worth of school supplies across the country.

Last year, the Foundation collaborated with Icy Hot to commit \$320,000 in grants to Title 1 high schools whose sports programs were impacted by Covid-19.' [🔗](#)

O'Neal is also known for his personal philanthropy. For two decades O'Neal has been donating Christmas presents to children in difficult circumstances. December 2021 was the 20th annual Shaq-a-Claus which took place at West Lake Elementary School in Henry County. More than 500 school students in the Atlanta area received a gift from NBA Hall of Famer Shaquille O'Neal .O'Neal attributes the idea to begin Shaq-a-Claus to his mother. [🔗](#) O'Neal has stated, '[My family] didn't have a lot, but they taught me the value of giving back to those in need...15 to 20 million kids wake up on Christmas Day and not receive one gift. I felt that one time. I don't ever want a kid to feel like that.' [🔗](#)

5. Critics of Shaquille O'Neal's involvement are often using this secondary issue to create opposition to the Indigenous Voice to Parliament

It has been claimed that many of those who have expressed opposition to O'Neal's involvement with the Indigenous Voice to Parliament are against the proposal itself and are using opposition to O'Neal as a way of discrediting an Indigenous parliamentary Voice. Hannah McGlade, from the Kurin Minang people, is an associate professor at Curtin law school and a member of the UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues. Professor McGlade

has stated that two prominent opponents of O'Neal's advocacy are really expressing their opposition to the Voice proposal, and anything associated with it.

Professor McGlade has stated, 'The outrage of senators Jacinta Nampijinpa Price and Lidia Thorpe...to the Shaq endorsement reflects their own opposition to the voice and constitutional recognition of Indigenous rights.

They will make complaint and generate opposition about anything the government does to progress the historic constitutional referendum, which is a great shame because their fight is not only ideological and misplaced but also damaging to Indigenous people's rights to political voice and self-determination. That Aboriginal women from opposite sides of politics have become a driving force against progressive rights-based reform is especially saddening.' [🔗](#)

There are numerous other commentators who in addition to opposing the involvement of Shaquille O'Neal are fundamentally opposed to the Indigenous Voice to Parliament. On August 28, 2022, Sky News contributor James Macpherson expressed his opposition to the use of O'Neal as an advocate for the Voice, describing Prime Minister Albanese as 'starstruck' and unwilling to adequately debate the issue. [🔗](#) Some three weeks earlier, Macpherson had expressed his opposition to the Voice proposal itself. On August 5, 2022, as part of The Macpherson Report, Macpherson stated, 'I agree that disadvantage in Indigenous communities needs to be addressed. But creating an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice in the Constitution is not the way to do it...How about all Australians just be Australians? No discrimination and no race-based organisations - feeding off the government teat - whose sole purpose is to entrench division.' [🔗](#)

Similarly, columnist for The Australian, Janet Albrechtsen, expressed her disapproval of the use of Shaquille O'Neal to promote the Voice in an opinion piece published on August 31, 2022, stating, 'Albanese has bigger problems than looking like a dope for wasting time by wheeling out Shaquille O'Neal. The American former basketball player won't have a clue about our governance rule book, otherwise known as our Constitution.' However, the overall purpose of the article was to demonstrate that Albanese's proposals to incorporate an Indigenous Voice into the Constitution would undermine Australian democracy. [🔗](#) On September 21, 2022, Albrechtsen wrote another article, this time highlighting cracks in support for the Albanese plan and again concluding that the Voice is 'an overreaching proposal that would divide Australia and severely hamper our parliamentary democracy.' [🔗](#)

Instances such as these have been used to suggest that O'Neal was never the central issue. Opposing his involvement was merely an additional stick with which to beat the Indigenous Voice proposition.

Arguments against using Shaq O'Neal to promote the Indigenous Voice to Parliament

1. O'Neal has no knowledge of Indigenous Australia or the Voice to Parliament

Critics of the Albanese government using former NBA player Shaquille O'Neal to promote the Indigenous Voice to Parliament argue that the celebrity has no knowledge of the issue and no genuine connection with it.

Commentators have noted O'Neal's lack of former involvement with the issue. On August 29, 2022, Osman Faruqi, the culture news editor for The Age and Sydney Morning Herald, commented on Shaq's brief TV appearance and his failure to show any awareness of the issue he was supposedly promoting. Faruqi writes, 'The fact [O'Neal] didn't mention the Voice, a referendum, or anything specific in public left many wondering the extent to which he was committed to the cause.' Indigenous Greens senator Lidia Thorpe similarly noted of O'Neal,

'He's come in and commenting on our politics in our own country which he knows nothing about except for a meeting with the Labor Party.' [🔗](#) On the same day, The Courier Mail published an irate comment from one of its regular columnists, Mike O'Connor. O'Connor ironically observed, 'How fortunate are we as a nation to have been treated to the wisdom of an American basketball player as it relates to matters affecting our Constitution.' O'Connor then, with equal irony, asked, 'When in need of sage advice on one of the most far reaching and significant issues to be considered by this country, one with the potential to impact the lives of all Australians, who better to turn to but a man who was paid millions of dollars to run up and down a basketball court and throw a ball through a hoop in a country 12,000km away?' Stressing O'Neal's lack of connection and expertise, O'Connor further wrote, 'I would contend that Mr O'Neal, aka Shaq, knows as much about Australian current affairs and its body politic as my pet budgie.' [🔗](#)

In a piece published in The West Australian on August 29, 2022, Hamish Spence noted O'Neal's rapid departure from the press conference where he appeared with the Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. Spence writes, 'O'Neal quickly left the press conference at its conclusion and did not take questions from media.

O'Neal only gave brief and vague comments at the start of the press conference and did not explicitly address the Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

'I'm here in your country, whatever you need from me, just let me know," he said.'

O'Neal's lack of knowledge or connection with Indigenous Australia has been stressed by Sky News host Chris Smith. On August 29, 2022, Smith stated, 'Shaq is not a First Nations Australian, he is not even a First Nations American. What would he know about the unique challenges facing Indigenous Australians, the failed history of well-funded Indigenous agencies and Commissions?' Smith further challenged, 'And what would he know about what's going on in rural and remote communities? Not much at all.' [🔗](#) Another Sky News contributor, James Macpherson, made a related point the day before, arguing that O'Neal's background was so dissimilar to that of Indigenous and most other Australians that he was an unsuitable advocate. Macpherson stated, 'A multi-millionaire African American celebrity from downtown LA - best known in Australia for peddling gambling apps - can't effectively communicate to ordinary Australians about oppression, equality, and the need to change the legal framework by which Australia is governed.' [🔗](#) A columnist for the Australian, Janet Albrechtsen, has similarly condemned Anthony Albanese for 'wasting time by wheeling out Shaquille O'Neal. The American former basketball player won't have a clue about our governance rule book, otherwise known as our Constitution, let alone the extent of disadvantage in Indigenous communities.' [🔗](#)

2. O'Neal is currently promoting gambling

Those who oppose O'Neal being used to promote the Indigenous Voice to Parliament argue that some of his public actions have been ill-judged and make him an unsuitable person to endorse the cause.

One of the principal reasons offered for O'Neal's unsuitability is that he has been a promoter of gambling. Indigenous Greens senator, Lidia Thorpe, has highlighted O'Neal's association with gambling and the harm that gambling addiction causes large numbers of Indigenous people. Thorpe has stated, 'He's here for a speaking tour, good on him, and he's also here for PointsBet which is about gambling, which is about destroying families.' [🔗](#)

O'Neal became an ambassador for the Australian gambling company Pointsbet in January 2021, taking a stake in the businesses as part of this arrangement. He has featured in several Pointsbet TV advertisements in Australia, including one where he bets online while having a

massage, fixing a car, and playing golf. He also represents US betting firm WynnBet. PointsBet's chief marketing officer and co-founder Andrew Fahey has stated, 'Shaq is an iconic figure in the worlds of sports and entertainment and was our clear number one pick to represent the PointsBet brand in Australia... US sports, particularly professional basketball, continue to be the fastest-growing betting sport in Australia, and we are very excited to align with such a transcendent athlete.' [↗](#)

In 2021, O'Neal boasted of betting \$1 million on a mixed martial arts fight and winning. He did not disclose how much he won through the wager and denied tampering with the fight by speaking to the man he had bet on. The admission to making a million dollar bet was made while O'Neal was a guest on 'Jimmy Kimmel Live' [↗](#) O'Neal also claims to have spent and lost over \$200,000 in just one night at the casino tables. When subsequently interviewed about his losses, O'Neal claimed that he does not worry about his losses and that gambling is fun. [↗](#) Opponents of O'Neal's involvement as an advocate for The Voice have stressed the harm that gambling causes Indigenous Australians and have been critical of the mixed messages being sent if O'Neal is used to promote Indigenous agency while at the same time promoting gambling. The lobby group Advance Australia has stated, 'Shaq is the face of an Australian gambling company. Clearly, Albo [Prime Minister Anthony Albanese] didn't consider the fact that an estimated 20 per cent of Indigenous Australians are problem gamblers compared to only 2 per cent in the wider population.' [↗](#)

In November 2014, The Australian Institute of Family Studies released a paper which noted that problem gambling and gambling-related harms are much more common among Indigenous Australians than in the wider Australian population. The study noted that severe negative consequences may spread from problem and at-risk gambling, rippling through relationships, families and communities. It was found that of those designated as problem gamblers, one-half did not pay or put off urgent bills and argued about gambling within their household. Smaller groups reported incidents of violence, separation, divorce, job losses, or eviction because of gambling. [↗](#)

Critics have cited the apparent alliance between Australian state and federal governments and the gambling industry as an explanation of Prime Minister Albanese's inappropriate use of O'Neal. On September 19, 2022, Tanveer Ahmed, writing for the Financial Review, stated, 'Shaquille O'Neal...with our prime minister, while being sponsored by one of the world's biggest online betting companies, PointsBet, is a sad indictment of our political defeat.' [↗](#)

3. O'Neal's involvement is an insult to Indigenous Australians

Several Indigenous Australians have complained that conferring with an American celebrity and using him to promote advances for Indigenous Australians insults the Indigenous community.

Critics have claimed that Indigenous representatives are likely to feel displaced by external spokespeople. In a comment published in The Conversation on August 29, 2022, Keith Rathbone and Averill Gordon, senior lecturers at the Auckland University of Technology, stated, 'The government must...take care that any Voice spokespeople, including O'Neal, do not replace the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people.... Indigenous politicians from across the political spectrum have illustrated the complexity of this issue in Australia and the unsuitability of O'Neal as a commentator on it.' [↗](#)

Those who object to Mr O'Neal's involvement argue that using him to promote this cause demeans Indigenous Australians who are directly involved in this issue. Indigenous Greens Senator Lidia Thorpe has stated, 'It's an insult to blackfellas in this country...he's come in and commenting on our politics in our own country which he knows nothing about.' [↗](#)

Ms Thorpe has also complained directly to Mr O'Neal, stating, 'Thought a black man coming to our country would be more respectful to First Nations people than interfering in what is a controversial topic, dividing our people...Ill advised, hope you take the time to set it right. We don't come to your country and interfere in your business.' [↗](#)

According to this argument, the government has consulted with someone outside the issue rather than dealing with all the relevant stakeholders in Australia. Indigenous Greens Senator Lidia Thorpe has further claimed that the Labor government had avoided conversations about the Voice with her and other Indigenous Australians. Ms. Thorpe has stated, 'Labor met with an American celebrity before speaking with First Nations politicians from this Country. Not once has Labor reached out to me to discuss the Voice. Still waiting, Labor.' [↗](#)

This point has also been made by Michael Mansell, the head of the Aboriginal Land Council, who has stated, 'We're getting no opportunity from the government to become involved, no one's telling us how or what the process is. Shaq's got greater access to the Prime Minister than the Aboriginal people on an Aboriginal issue. It just goes to show that Albanese has got more interest in the glitz and glamour rather than sitting down with Aboriginal people.' [↗](#)

Country Liberal Party Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, a Warlpiri/Celtic woman, has similarly stated, 'If the PM and the Minister for Indigenous Australians thinks Shaq's experience with "lifting people up who are marginalized" is the answer to winning "yes" votes for the Voice, then it demonstrates just how clueless and out-of-touch they both are with what the needs of Aboriginal Australians are.' [↗](#)

Senator Price has further stated, 'I've no doubt Shaq's a top bloke, but it's a bit insulting to call on a black American to help with black Australians as if this is all about the colour of one's skin.' [↗](#)

4. O'Neal's involvement trivialises the proposed Indigenous Voice to Parliament

There have been numerous commentators, politicians and Indigenous spokespeople who have argued that using O'Neal to promote the Indigenous Voice to Parliament will discourage the Australian electorate from taking the issue seriously and wastes an opportunity to genuinely inform voters and provoke discussion. It has also been argued that those Australians who already recognise the issue's importance will be irritated and disappointed by the government's trivialising approach.

It has been claimed that O'Neal's obvious lack of involvement with the issue will lead some Australians to see it as unimportant. Former National Party leader Barnaby Joyce presented this view, asking, 'Are you selling McDonald's or changing the Constitution?' He then asked, 'Why are we having a multi-millionaire American basketball star over here to talk about how we run our Constitution ... how could (Labor) possibly think that would do anything but inspire cynicism?' [↗](#) An editorial published in The West Australian on August 30, 2022, similarly argued, 'The critics are right. What people want is details and a mature debate. The O'Neal play was the kind of stunt that the public came to expect from the "Scotty from Marketing" era of politics.' [↗](#)

Numerous commentators have additionally argued that using an uniformed US sports celebrity to promote the Indigenous Voice to Parliament denies Australians the opportunity to be genuinely informed by a knowledgeable local spokesperson. On August 29, 2022, the ABC's political reporter Dana Morse wrote, 'Those undecided in the broader Australian population are looking to First Nations leaders to guide them on this, and in a sport-obsessed country you can see why securing an ambassador is an attractive option. However, it seems like a missed opportunity not to approach one of the many homegrown First Nations sporting superstars to lend their support to the campaign.' [↗](#) This same point was made in a Sydney Morning Herald

editorial published on August 29, 2022. The editorial states, 'It is inevitable that the views of celebrities get public attention. But O'Neal's intervention, endorsed by the federal government, risks trivialising a crucial national debate. Famous people routinely feature in political campaigns - the push to legalise same-sex marriage is a recent case in point. However, some of the most powerful and moving influences on the same-sex marriage vote came from the grassroots, such as testimonies of support from the fathers of gay men...

Well-known individuals might help promote arguments for the Voice among segments of the electorate not usually engaged much with politics. But this vital national discussion must not become a celebrity-athon.' [🔗](#)

Other commentators have argued that Australians will react negatively to this treatment of the issue, seeing it as patronizing. Concern has been expressed that the electorate will be alienated by the government's use of O'Neal's endorsement and will condemn the government for a lack of seriousness. Radio 2GB Sydney's commentator Ben Fordham has stated, 'everyone was wondering, what on earth does Shaquille O'Neal have to do with a voice to Parliament in Australia?

This is a serious issue. It is also a sensitive issue. And Australians want to consider the proposal properly. But the Prime Minister has failed to present it properly... How patronizing wheeling out an American celebrity to try to win over an Aussie audience.' [🔗](#) A similar point was made by Gemma Tognini writing for Sky News in a piece published on August 30, 2022. Tognini writes, 'Most of us, including some very senior Indigenous leaders have asked for more detail. But instead of engaging and delivering that detail, we got told: Hey everyone, Shaq thinks it's a great idea, oh and by the way, the world is watching...

This is an issue for Australians to wrestle with and ultimately decide. We don't need to be warned that the "world is watching us". We don't need to be guilted into a decision.

In that one day, the Prime Minister cheapened and diminished the conversation. It diminishes the hundreds of people who have and continue to invest their time, heart and skill into this important process and conversation.' [🔗](#)

5. O'Neal's contentious public profile makes him a problematic advocate for the Indigenous Voice to Parliament

Those who oppose Shaquille O'Neal's involvement in promoting the Indigenous Voice to Parliament argue that various aspects of his past public conduct make him unsuitable for this role. In addition to his highly publicized promotion of gambling, O'Neal has been accused of racism and homophobia. Further, some argue that his politically conservative attitudes also make him unsuitable to support the Voice.

Several social commentators have remarked on O'Neal's contentious public profile. In a comment published in The Conversation on August 29, 2022, Keith Rathbone and Averill Gordon, senior lecturers at the Auckland University of Technology, stated, '[O'Neal] has made some foolish decisions...over the years: his feud with Kobe Bryant filled the tabloids for years...and he has made and apologised for a range of racist or possibly homophobic comments.' [🔗](#)

Regarding O'Neal's supposed racism, he was involved in accusations of racism in 2003 and asked to make a public apology. The Organisation of Chinese Americans (OCA) called on O'Neal to apologise after he had verbally abused Houston Rockets rival Yao Ming who is Chinese. O'Neal admitted to having taunted Yao with 'ching-chong-yang-wah-ah-soh.' The OCA claimed that this taunt 'was racially offensive and particularly hurtful to the millions of Asian Americans' in the United States. Subsequently, the OCA considered O'Neal's initial apology inadequate releasing a public statement and calling on the NBA to take a pro-active

approach toward racism. The statement claimed, 'Rather than sincerely apologise for being insensitive and unaware of the hurtful impact of what he claims was a joke, Mr O'Neal issued a statement blaming those who accuse him of making inappropriate remarks and of misunderstanding his humour.' Charlene Tsang-Kao, the president of Houston's OCA chapter, added that O'Neal 'also attempted to excuse his behaviour by claiming he is not the first and only one to use these words.' [🔗](#)

Ten years later, on January 2, 2013, O'Neal posted a cartoon about proper conduct in a urinal on Facebook. In the drawing, one man uses the urinal directly next to another man, even though many others are available. O'Neal commented on the image, 'This is an automatic fight in my book.....LMFAO.' The posting prompted more than 1,015 comments in one day, most of them homophobic. Some comments condemned O'Neal for having posted the original image. One stated, 'Glad to know you like to start hate dialogue against gay people, Shaq. Just lost a fan here.' [🔗](#) Towleroad, a leading LGBT news and content site, observed, 'Though [O'Neal] may have not intended it, the post, which points out a common men's room faux pas avoided by straight and gay men alike, has encouraged and produced hateful dialogue against the latter.' [🔗](#)

The post caused significant confusion among O'Neal's fan base. O'Neal had previously taken a public stand against discrimination and harassment of homosexuals. In October 2011, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), America's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) media advocacy and anti-defamation organization, revealed a new public service announcement (PSA) featuring NBA superstar Shaquille O'Neal speaking out against anti-LGBT bullying. As part of the announcement, O'Neal stated, 'Millions of gay and transgender youth are made to feel like they don't fit in every day.' [🔗](#) O'Neal's apparently anti-gay Facebook post two years later left supporters and others uncertain of his real attitude toward homosexuality.

Finally, it has been noted that O'Neal is not a supporter of racially progressive positions in the United States. O'Neal does not support former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick's refusal to stand for the United States national anthem as a protest against the mistreatment of African Americans. O'Neal has noted that he was raised by a stepfather in the military and that he has police officers in his immediate family and would not be comfortable taking a position against constituted authorities. [🔗](#) In a comment published in The Conversation on August 29, 2022, Keith Rathbone and Averill Gordon, senior lecturers at the Auckland University of Technology, stated, 'O'Neal has previously been tied to more conservative causes. He is a strong supporter of police and sheriff's departments across the United States, including in Los Angeles, Miami and, controversially, Maricopa County, Arizona... O'Neal's strong support for law enforcement, despite the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States, might make activists working in the Stop First Nations Deaths in Custody uncomfortable, as it has for many African Americans too.' [🔗](#)

Further implications

The Prime Minister's concern that many Australians have not heard about the Indigenous Voice to Parliament appears not to be well based. When commenting on the use of Shaquille O'Neal to spread awareness of the Voice, Anthony Albanese speculated that many of those hearing about the issue through O'Neal may well be hearing about the proposal for the first time. Recent research suggests that may not be the case.

In August 2022, JWS Research released survey results on the extent of popular support for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Australian Constitution. The surveys were conducted between Friday 12th and Monday 15th August 2022, approximately a fortnight

before the Prime Minister held a press conference with O'Neal.

The results showed that 79 percent of those surveyed had heard of the issue. However, it suggests that much of the electorate's knowledge of the issue is superficial with 37 percent claiming to know only a little about the idea of an Indigenous Voice to Parliament and a similar number (34 percent) aware of it in name only. Just 8 percent of adults claim to already know a lot and 15 percent claimed to know nothing at all. [↗](#)

Despite the lack of detailed knowledge of the issue, 47 percent of those surveyed are in favour of establishing an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. As it seems likely that the referendum will be held in some 12 months\ time, the initial level of support should be encouraging to those who want the referendum to be passed. However, to pass, the proposal needs both an overall majority and a majority of the states. State results are less encouraging, with 40 percent support in both South and Western Australia and 38 percent in Queensland. [↗](#) Securing a majority of the states may be difficult.

Currently the Labor government seems more focused on spreading awareness of the Voice than on developing detailed knowledge and conducting debate. The above survey data suggests that now may already be the time for deepening knowledge and engaging in debate. However, the government's hesitancy is understandable.

Australia's last referendum was in 1999 on the question of whether the country should become a republic. Despite pre-referendum surveys indicating majority support for a republic, the referendum failed. Many commentators have argued that this was because the debate became bogged down in whether the president who would replace the monarch should be elected by the populace or appointed by the parliament. Thus, though there appeared to be majority support for a republic, there was not majority support for how it would be implemented. [↗](#)

To this point, the government has not given explicit detail on how the Indigenous Voice which would give advice to Parliament would be formed. It is likely that the government does not want to lose the level of popular support that already exists for the proposal through disputes over the details of implementation.

Using high profile figures to promote the cause may be seen as a way of generating further popular approval while reducing the risk of divisive debate. However, it is a strategy not without risk. Some opponents of the referendum proposal appear to be exploiting the use of an imported figure like O'Neal to undermine support for the Voice.