

By James Garriock

“Australians are being asked to give their consent to a fundamental change in the way that we allocate the rights of citizens.” Former Senator Amanda Stoker, *Between the Lines*, ABC Radio, Feb 3, 2023.

The Voice to Parliament referendum provides a formal opportunity for First Nations people to participate in decisions. How much participation are we talking about exactly? Is it a “fundamental change in the way that we allocate the rights of citizens?” Are we ceding our sovereignty somehow? These issues might concern any prospective voter. Fortunately, engagement researchers have a framework for describing how much power we’re handing over. It’s the International Association for Public Participation’s “spectrum”, known as IAP2 for short. Using some actual detail, this post will tell you how much participation is being offered, which might guide your vote in the upcoming referendum.

Let’s look at what’s on the table. The PM has said that the draft wording of the referendum is:

- “In recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the First Peoples of Australia.
- There shall be a body, to be called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.
- 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.

- 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.”

This accords with the wording of other referenda, where the vote is based on principles and the detail is left to lawmakers.

So, exactly what participation promise is being made? The only relevant words in the draft are “...*may make representations to Parliament and the Executive Government on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.*”

For reference, the IAP2 spectrum has five levels which represent increasing participation: Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate and Empower. Each one has a related “Promise”. The Inform promise is “we will keep you informed”.

The Consult promise is “We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge your concerns and aspirations and provide feedback on how your input influenced the research”. This sounds like it might be close. Let’s go to Involve and see whether it fits, or whether it is a step further than the referendum contemplates. Note that I’m not even going to bother with “Collaborate” or “Empower”.

Involve: “We will work with you to ensure your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected...and we will provide feedback on how your input influenced the research”. This is way further than the referendum even implies, so we’re back at Consult.

Does the Consult promise stack up? Does the referendum promise to keep the Voice group informed? No. Does it promise to listen or acknowledge? No. Does it promise to provide feedback? No. It makes no such commitments whatsoever.

If you think that too much power is being offered then feel free to vote No. My conclusion is that the Voice referendum is a breathtakingly meagre offering to our First Nations people.