

## **Australia's Indigenous Voice referendum**

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### **Why in news?**

- Australians will vote in a referendum on October 14 to decide whether the country's indigenous peoples should be formally consulted in making laws.
  - This will be the first referendum to alter the national constitution in almost a quarter century.
  - A referendum is where voters are asked to make a "Yes" or "No" decision on a proposal, question or idea.
- The referendum asks whether to recognise Indigenous people and establish a representative body that can provide non-binding advice to parliament.
  - The referendum question reads:
    - "A Proposed Law: to alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and **Torres Strait Islander Voice**. Do you approve this proposed alteration?"

## The Torres Strait Islands

- The Torres Strait Islands, mentioned in the referendum question, is an archipelago of small islands in the Torres Strait.
- Torres Strait is a narrow body of water between the northern tip of the state of Queensland and the large island of Papua New Guinea.

## News Summary: Australia's Indigenous Voice referendum

### Who are the 'First Peoples of Australia'?

- The 'First Peoples of Australia', as well as the word '**aboriginal**', refers to the indigenous inhabitants of the continent.
- These are the people who lived on the Australian mainland and surrounding islands for tens of thousands of years before the first Europeans arrived in the early 17th century.

### What does the referendum seek to do, and why?

- **Objective of referendum**
  - The referendum asks:
    - whether indigenous Australians should be recognised in the country's Constitution, and
    - whether a body called the indigenous "Voice to Parliament" should be set up to advise lawmakers on matters that impact their lives.
  - The proposed body would ensure a voice for the original inhabitants of the continent.
- **Need**
  - The Aboriginals find no mention in Australia's 122-year-old Constitution.

- Aboriginal people make up about 3.2% of Australia's population and track below national averages on most socio-economic measures.
- According to the govt of Australia, indigenous Australians have:
  - A life expectancy 8 years shorter than non-Indigenous Australians;
  - Worse rates of disease and infant mortality;
  - A suicide rate twice as high as non-Indigenous Australians.

## The referendum likely to fail

### • Requirement

- For the referendum to be passed, more than 50 per cent of voters must vote in favour nationally, plus the majority of voters in the majority of Australian states.
- Any constitutional alterations in Australia require a national referendum. Voting is compulsory for all adults.

### • Opposition to this referendum

- The 'No' campaign has argued that **details of the proposed body** — such as the members it would include, their powers, etc. — have not been made clear.
- There is also an argument that saying 'Yes' would amount to dividing Australian society on the lines of race.
- A section of the indigenous people too have rejected the proposal of having a consultative body, saying it would be toothless, and without real power.
  - They have argued for a formal treaty for a substantial transfer of power between the government and indigenous people.

## How far back before the arrival of the Europeans can we trace Australia's history?

- Ancient rock carvings suggest humans inhabited Australia some 45,000 years ago.
- According to the National Library of Australia, the first documented landing of a European was by the **Dutch explorer Willem Janszoon**, who arrived on the western side of Cape York peninsula in 1606.
  - The Europeans were aware at the time of a land mass in the southern hemisphere that they called Terra Australia Incognita.
- **Captain James Cook's** famous voyages took place in the second half of the 18th century.
- The early British settlers on the continent were criminals and convicts who were sent there to serve their prison sentences.
  - Between 1788 and 1868, more than 162,000 convicts in crimes committed in Britain and Ireland were transported to Australia.

# How did the Australian government's policies impact indigenous people?

- **Initial phase of marginalisation**

- Laws and policies made by the colonial settlers over time contributed to the marginalisation of the indigenous communities.
- Under the **Infants Welfare Act of 1935**, indigenous children on Cape Barren Island were removed from their families based on claims of child neglect.
- They were then placed in the care of non-native families and institutions and were kept separate from their culture, often facing abuse as well.
  - These laws were applied to thousands of children for many decades, and those children are now referred to as "**The Stolen Generation**".

- **Changes in recent years**

- In recent years, legislation to improve the status of indigenous Australians has been introduced.
- Voting rights were granted in 1962.
- In 1992 Australia's apex court decided that native title exists over particular kinds of lands — unalienated Crown Lands, national parks and reserves — and that Australia was never terra nullius or empty land.

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## Q1) Who was Captain James Cook?

Captain James Cook (1728-1779) was a British explorer, cartographer, and naval officer. He was born in Marton-in-Cleveland, Yorkshire, England. His father was a farm laborer.

## Q2) Who are aboriginals of Australia?

Aboriginal Australians are the Indigenous peoples of the Australian mainland and many of its islands. They are the first peoples of Australia, meaning they were here for thousands of years prior to colonization.

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**Source:** [What is Australia's Indigenous Voice referendum?](#) | [Election Buddy](#) | [Al Jazeera](#)

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