1967 Referendum Essay, Research Paper

The 1967 Referendum

On 27 May 1967 a Federal referendum was held. The first question, referred to as the nexus question’ was an attempt to alter the balance of numbers in the Senate and the House of Representatives. The second question was to determine whether two references in the Australian Constitution which discriminated against Aboriginal people should be removed. This fact sheet addresses the second question.

The sections of the Constitution under scrutiny were:

51. The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution have power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to:-

(xxvi) The people of any race, other than the aboriginal people in any State, for whom it is necessary to make special laws.

127. In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives should not be counted.

The removal of the words other than the aboriginal people in any State ‘ in section 51(xxvi) and the whole of section 127 were considered by many to be representative of the prevailing movement for political change within Indigenous affairs. As a result of the political climate, this referendum saw the highest YES vote ever recorded in a Federal referendum, with 90.77 per cent voting for change.

It is interesting to note that because the majority of parliamentarians supported the proposed amendment, a NO case was never formulated for presentation as part of the referendum campaign. Copies of the YES case can be located on files identified below.

The right to vote

The 1967 referendum did not give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples the right to vote. This right had been legislated for Commonwealth elections in 1962, with the last State to provide Indigenous enfranchisement being Queensland in 1965.

Records relating to the referendum

The National Archives in Canberra holds a range of records relating to the 1967 Referendum created by the government agencies that played key roles in events leading up to and the conduct of the referendum. These include records which document Cabinet’s discussion of the so-called Aboriginal question’ from as early as 1962 and its inclusions in a referendum question; records of the Prime Minister’s Department and Attorney-General’s Department, which detail the legislative and policy considerations arising from the government decision to put the referendum, and then to implement the referendum result; and records of the Chief Electoral Office, which document the conduct of the referendum