

Australia: Shaq Dunks the Voice

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*August 27, Sydney. The scale was jaw dropping and amusing. There he was, the still fresh Labor Prime Minister, **Anthony Albanese**, rendered pygmy-like by the enormity of one **Shaquille O’Neal**, popularly known as Shaq. No degree of expert photography at this press conference could conceal the disparity in size between the two.*

Albanese has made it his crowning ambition to campaign for the Voice. By that, he means to put to Australian voters a question on constitutionally recognising Australia’s First Nations peoples (admirable and irrefutable) and enshrining a vague, as yet undetermined political forum that will represent them (problematic). He hopes to get popular consent to alter the Constitution first without necessarily putting a model to the vote, a distinctly brave proposition.

Opponents and sceptics have been lingering in the bushes, but the appearance of Shaq provided grist to the mill. While movie stars, tartlets and personalities find their mark in the politics of some countries (the Philippines comes to mind), Australia remains unaroused by the tinsel and bling. Generally speaking, the celebrity factor duds when it comes to proposing substantive political change.

As much as Australians love their sports stars and, less significantly, their film stars, using them to promote an agenda that might result in votes reeks of shallowness and condescension. When combined with finger pointing moral authority, the voter in question is bound to switch off and drop out. This [did not cross](#) Albanese’s mind. “Shaq is someone who is well known to younger people, and one of things that we have been doing is trying to mobilise support for the Voice to Parliament by talking with sporting figures.”

The antics of the Albanese-O’Neal show, however innocently done, served to emphasise political distance, not collective worth. It suggested a deal in the making, one to be refined behind closed doors away from the curious mob. “[I]f there is anything you need from me, let me know,” Shaq [offered](#) the Australian prime minister before the cameras. This might well work for a certain demographic of green salad voter but unlikely to interest the

pragmatically suspicious sort.

The event did not even feature anything profound from the titanic figure. The focus was all about having him there. "We know that Mr O'Neal does a lot of work in the United States about social justice and lifting people up who are marginalised, including through sporting organisations," [stated](#) Albanese.

This is undoubtedly true as a statement, but the inference here is that local Australians involved in such projects simply don't cut the mustard or, if they do, need something of a hand up. Marvellous it may be that "Shaq has that record" and realises "that Australian history didn't begin in 1788", such celebrities can hardly be seen as high authorities of cerebration. They could even come across as nosey meddlers.

The waft of condescension did not take long to find a number of keen and irate noses. "Anybody else uncomfortable that our PM needs to hall [sic] in an American basketball star to shill for the Voice?" [wondered](#) the cranky former Senator Derry Hinch.

Always happy to screech his agreement with the next contrarian spark, Barnaby Joyce MP of the Nationals also [claimed](#) that O'Neal had few, if any credentials, to talk about such matters. "Why are we having a multi-millionaire American basketball star... over here to talk about how we run our Constitution?"

Presumably, the cynic might retort, because you don't run it, the true locus of power lying with her Britannic majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, exercised via her representative, the Governor General. The rest is left to the discretion of US power. All is fair and mockery when you are a monarchical outpost and Washington's bit of rough.

Harder to dispel was the question from Joyce as to whether something serious had unfolded. "Are we selling McDonald's here or are we changing the Constitution?" It had to also come to a matter of size - or height. "Why have you got an American basketball star standing at the podium about 10 feet taller than Anthony Albanese, I mean what's this about?"

Had the grunts and grumbles remained confined to a few conservatives of pallid disposition, nothing more would have been said. Albanese, for his part, [could only see](#) the value of the show. Shaq "approached me and I think people should chill out a bit basically." The star's appearance meant conversation about the Voice, "and that's a good thing."

But certain First Nations politicians refused to chill. Victorian Senator Lidia Thorpe preferred boiling, [launching her own salvo](#) of dissatisfaction from the perspective of the First Nations who were seemingly placed in a runner-up position relative to a US sporting star. "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."

In an [interview](#) with Melbourne radio station 3AW, she kept the fusillades coming. "He's putting his nose into business that has nothing to do with him." Shaq, she suggested, did "not understand what is going on in this country and he should not be commenting". Thorpe continued to note that the basketball figure was "here for a speaking tour, good on him" while also promoting PointsBet "which is about gambling which is about destroying families."

Of different political persuasion but also of First Nations sensibility, Country Liberal Party

Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price [found herself in furious agreement](#), a rare sight indeed. “If the PM and the Minister for Indigenous Australians thinks Shaq’s experience with ‘lifting people up who are marginalised’ 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.”

From this, an echo of the Republican campaign [that failed](#) so spectacularly in 1999 can be discerned. Then, the papers, media outlets, pundits and lobbyists thought the Australian Republic in the bag. In the final referendum outcome, it barely fitted. A key, and failed figure then, was Malcolm Turnbull of the Australian Republican Movement. In his company were the authorial-thespian-professional class who thought victory a foregone conclusion. The Constitutional Monarchists, and the devious conservative Prime Minister at the time, John Howard, thought otherwise.

Since then, Turnbull entered parliament, became a victim of his own party’s malice, but not before arguing against the Voice. The fact that he is now in favour of it should worry Albanese, given his past misreading of the Australian mood. Down under, celebrity figures, actual and pretend, can kill worthwhile political causes.

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