***[Voice to parliament a risk? Let’s count the other bodies just like it](https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/voice-to-parliament-a-risk-let-s-count-the-other-bodies-just-like-it-20230831-p5e0zc.html)***[**Peter Hartcher**](https://www.smh.com.au/by/peter-hartcher-hve0w)Political and international editor September 2, 2023

The No campaign says it’s extraordinarily risky to create an advisory body to the federal parliament and government. As the No pamphlet says, “Labor’s proposed Voice model isn’t just to the parliament, but to all areas of ‘executive government’. This gives it basically unlimited scope – from the Reserve Bank to Centrelink.”

Its punchline: “[This risks dysfunctional government](https://www.smh.com.au/link/follow-20170101-p5e0as).”

If the risks are indeed so great, you could be forgiven for thinking there mustn’t be any existing advisory groups to the federal government.

Are there? Well, there is the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation, or ATAGI. We all discovered this during the pandemic when it turned out that it was pretty important for the health minister to get expert advice on safe and effective COVID vaccinations. But ATAGI has been around advising the government much longer, 25 years now. The current chair is Professor Nigel Crawford of the Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne.

Just the one advisory body? No. There are more. There’s the Medicare Services Advisory Committee. Its job is to look at new medical services and advise the government on whether they should be funded through Medicare, which already costs over $30 billion a year. This one’s also been around for a quarter-century, currently headed by Professor Robyn Ward, a cancer expert and Dean of Medicine at Sydney University.

[**Watch out for the big little lies on the Voice**](https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/watch-out-for-the-big-little-lies-on-the-voice-20230830-p5e0rn.html) [**David Crowe**](https://www.smh.com.au/by/david-crowe-h0waa9)Chief political correspondent

And while we’re talking about health, I suppose we should mention the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee, the experts who advise the government on which drugs should be subsidised by the $17 billion-a-year Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. This 70-year-old advisory group is chaired by Professor Andrew Wilson, a health policy expert at Sydney University.

Beyond the health portfolio? There are some more advisory bodies in the Treasurer’s portfolio, such as the Foreign Investment Review Board that advises him on which assets should be sold to which foreigners, and which should not. This 47-year-old body is chaired by a former diplomat and intelligence analyst, Bruce Miller.

And then there’s the Productivity Commission, which does important work advising governments on how to “drive prosperity” by making difficult change. Which is why it’s generally been ignored for the past couple of decades. Maybe its new chair, public policy expert Chris Barrett, will have better luck. The PC’s forerunners, dating back a century, were essential in educating Australia on economic reform in the 1970s and 80s especially.

Some advisory committees are listened to more than others. A recent standout? A new body, the Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce led by businesswoman Sam Mostyn. It made six recommendations to Finance Minister Katy Gallagher for the May budget; four were accepted, even though some cost real money. A total of $9.5 billion over four years, according to the government. Which has only encouraged the taskforce – Mostyn has now handed a much bigger list of recommendations to Gallagher.

While we’re on social policy. There’s also the respected advisory group that informed and contributed to the Albanese government’s well-received National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032, a joint state and federal plan. The body, the National Plan Advisory Group, set up by the Morrison government, speaks for a wide range of research organisations, peak bodies and victim-survivors.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has used a speech in Adelaide to announce the date of the Voice referendum.

And while we’re in the Social Services portfolio, there’s a bit of a list of advisory groups to the minister, Amanda Rishworth, and her department – there are at least 13 more.

Beyond social services, name the subject and there’s an advisory group on it. On climate change, the government is advised by the Climate Change Authority and the new Net Zero Economy Agency Advisory Board.

On law reform, the Australian Law Reform Commission and the Family Law Council, both of which are approaching their half-century. On immigration, the Ministerial Advisory Council on Skilled Migration, the Australian Multicultural Council and the Settlement Advisory Board. On cybersecurity, there’s the Expert Advisory Board on Cybersecurity Strategy chaired by former Telstra chief Andy Penn. On submarines, the Submarine Advisory Committee.

[**Yes or No? A selection of prominent voices on the Voice**](https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/yes-or-no-the-voice-referendum-2023-20230830-p5e0kb.html)

Think of an obscure policy area and there’s a strong chance there’s an advisory committee for it. A body part, say the knee? The Hip and Knee Expert Clinical Advisory Group reports to the Health Department.

A far-flung part of the world, say Africa? That’d be the Advisory Group on Australia-Africa Relations, reporting to Penny Wong.

Let’s get whacky. Robots? Sure, that’s the National Robotics Strategy Advisory Committee, reporting to Industry Minister Ed Husic.

Um, movies? Yes, the Film Certification Advisory Board advises Arts Minister Tony Burke on which ones should get tax breaks.

Bomb-throwing? It depends – good guys or bad? There’s the Woomera Prohibited Area Advisory Board to advise on the use of the Defence Department’s vast Woomera weapon-testing range in South Australia, and there’s the Australia-New Zealand Counterterrorism Committee.

The Voice referendum roadshow rolled into Tasmania today with the Yes and No campaigns on the Apple Isle.

Alright, something they’d never think of. Halal meats? The Halal Consultative Committee reports to the Agriculture Department.

In fact, don’t get started on food. There are dozens of advisory bodies on very specific food types – scallops, anyone? – and broader food-related areas such as Health Stars ratings and sub-Antarctic fisheries management.

Okay, very interesting, but the No campaign specifically warned about the special risks of having an Indigenous advisory group offering counsel to two institutions in particular – the Reserve Bank and Centrelink. Wouldn’t that be dangerously unprecedented?

Actually, no. Any new advisory group would have to join the queue. First, the Reserve Bank. Australia’s central bank has been running a small business consultation program for 20 years, according to a senior bank official. And early last year, then governor Philip Lowe introduced two new consultative panels to the bank, one comprising academic economists and another market economists. The governor meets twice a year with each.

Not only do those three advisory mechanisms already exist, but the Albanese government’s review of the Reserve Bank this year recommended creating another. Recommendation 8: “Constitute an expert monetary policy board with diverse perspectives and knowledge.” This supposedly would be in addition to the existing Reserve Bank board. Treasurer Jim Chalmers accepted the recommendation in principle and the Coalition didn’t quibble. So what’s the big deal even if an Indigenous Voice joined the party and offered its advice?

Second, Centrelink, operated by Services Australia, the federal agency that delivers government payments. It consults a bunch of community organisations already. Its main consultative mechanism, the Civil Society Advisory Group, has members from 15 peak organisations across the country, representing the young, the old, the disabled, the poor, and so on.

And the Centrelink parent agency also has an established system of regular consultation with a body representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. It’s called the National Indigenous Coalition. Plus it has internal Indigenous consultation processes, including its Indigenous Services Officers.

Is anyone screaming “dysfunctional government” and demanding that these advisory groups be disbanded immediately? Of course not.

In truth, there’s nothing so ordinary and innocuous as another advisory group. They are so plentiful that there is no central list of all of them. The ones cited here are a mere sampling. Some are obscure, a few are well known. Some are sidelined, some highly effective.

They are everywhere, advising on just about everything. They are as useful as their advice is good and the recipient of their advice is interested. They are no more risky or radical than wallpaper.

Executive power resides exactly where it should – with the parliament and the executive government. Not with any of the advisers. The creation of a Voice would do nothing to change that; that’s explicit in the text of the proposed constitutional amendment. The No campaign’s hysteria is nothing more than base scaremongering.

South Australian Premier [Peter Malinauskas put it in perspective](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/aug/30/indigenous-voice-to-parliament-yes-campaign-launch-adelaide) when he spoke on the subject this week: “If our forefathers and mothers can say yes to universal franchise, if our great grandparents can say yes to waves of migration, if our grandparents can say yes in 1967, if our parents can say yes to land rights, then this generation is capable of saying yes to an advisory committee.”

Because that’s all it is.