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The devil remains in the details over Voice

One week into 2023 and the debate about enshrining an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament has already descended into a political tit-for-tat.

Australians would be rightly scratching their heads at a brief exchange between Anthony Albanese and Peter Dutton on Twitter on Sunday after the latter presented 15 questions he wanted the Prime Minister to answer before the referendum.

In an open letter, Dutton had asked for a range of details about the formation, oversight and efficacy of the proposed advisory body.

Instead of engaging on the substantive issues, Albanese's first response was to fire off a missive on Twitter criticising the mode of delivery.

The PM argued the matter would have been better raised in person when he and Dutton were at a McGrath Foundation fundraiser event at the cricket on Friday.

"People are over cheap culture war stunts," Albanese said in his tweet. Later Dutton replied: "Friday at the McGrath Breast Cancer fundraiser wasn't the place to discuss".

The bizarre back-and-forth begs

the question: How did we get here?

Since the dawn of time – or at the very least the 24-hour media cycle – oppositions have used "open letters" to the government to publicise their concerns or ideas.

In this particular case, the Prime Minister's office insisted they had not received a copy of the letter before it appeared in newspapers but that's all rather beside the point.

The incident illustrated how fraught the referendum debate will be this year. Across the political divide few have adeptly handled the issue to date.

The Nationals have been jumping at shadows – opposed to a proposal that is not yet finalised. The Greens are paralysed by differing priorities, while the undecided Liberals sit perilously on the fence awaiting clarity that Labor has resolutely refused to give.

Defending his letter, Dutton pointed out it was not "racist" or "opposed to reconciliation" to seek basic information about what a Voice might look like.

Labor has so far left most of the heavy lifting to a handful of pages in the comprehensive co-design report that steps out options for how the body might function.

This includes the proposed



Megan Davis, co-chair of the Uluru Dialogue, provided some answers for Opposition leader Peter Dutton.

membership – 24 people consisting of two from each state, territory and the Torres Strait, plus five additional regional representatives – as well as suggestions for length of term and the capacity and remit to provide advice to all levels of government.

The problem being, as Dutton has highlighted, this report and the options within it have not been explicitly endorsed as the model the government would follow when establishing the Voice.

Dutton has even asked the government to just rule elements of the report "in or out".

The government's reluctance to definitively answer some of the questions Dutton set out in his letter to Albanese over the weekend was not totally without cause.

The Voice model itself would not be enshrined in the constitution, so it would be unwise to send Australians into the ballot box to vote purely based on a 2023 concept that may not exist in the years and decades to come. The issue at the heart of the

referendum is a principled one: should Indigenous Australians be able to directly inform parliament about issues impacting their communities.

But however conceptual the question, the proposal cannot be totally divorced from the mechanics.

Many proponents of the Voice have argued it can deliver practical policy outcomes and the public are naturally curious about how that could occur. The government has been reticent to directly respond to demands for "detail" over fears to do so would further entrench a perception the Voice was a "Labor proposal".

It was in this vein that Albanese left it to Uluru Dialogue co-chair Professor Megan Davis to provide a considered response to Dutton's open letter.

In a statement Davis confirmed "there will be detail before the referendum" with work underway to determine the "appropriate amount" required for an "informed" vote.

Succinct and to the point. It begs the question why it was necessary for the PM to take a swipe on Twitter at all.

Short term political point-scoring risked undermining the government's own argument that the voice was not a partisan issue.

Dutton's questions were not out of order and Davis' response confirmed the matter of detail was being actively considered.

For months, government insiders have insisted work has diligently been taking place behind the scenes on resources and plans to deliver a successful referendum result.

Soon the public will have full view of exactly what they have been working on, and this could well be enough for Dutton to support the proposal.

By the end of this year the question of enshrining an Indigenous advisory body in Australia's constitution will be definitively answered but, for now, the devil remains in the detail.

Lack of mental health sessions is a big mistake

Recently, the Health Minister Mark Butler announced the number of sessions available under the Better Access mental health scheme would return to 10 per calendar year as of the start of 2023.

This was after an additional 10 per calendar year was introduced in 2020 as a part of pandemic measures to address potential increases in mental health concerns as a result of the Covid pandemic. These became known as the "Additional Covid 10".

As a psychologist working in private practice, whose clients have directly benefited from these additional sessions, I am disappointed, saddened and angered by this decision.

This anger is for our clients — the individuals who are being denied adequate mental healthcare. It is a loss for those needing critical psychological treatment and an invalidation of the needs of those



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seeking help for their mental health.

Ultimately, this decision is likely to cost lives and this is why psychologists and other mental health practitioners are outraged.

I offer the following facts in response to the rationale used to cut session numbers under Better Access.

The additional Covid 10 psychology sessions are not the reason it's harder to get an appointment with a psychologist.

In announcing the government's decision, Mr Butler quoted early modelling and advice by Professor Ian Hickie that increasing session numbers would only exacerbate the bottleneck for accessing psychology

services and would blow out waitlists.

Mr Butler claimed that data showed this modelling was correct given waitlists had blown out over the course of the pandemic and that the number of new patients being seen under Better Access had reduced by six per cent.

The assumption was that the additional 10 were being used on existing clients, directly resulting in psychologists not having the availability to see new patients.

This is an oversimplification of the reasons behind longer waitlists and reduced uptake of services by new patients. It's true there was a decline in new user uptake of treatment services under Better Access across the period from 2018 to 2021, with a steeper decline from 2020 to 2021.

This coincided with an increase in continuing users and in the number of sessions accessed by continuing users.

The problem with the way Mr

Butler presented this data is that it ignored the following facts:

- There was already an increase in wait times to access psychology services pre-pandemic and the pandemic exacerbated this;
- The pandemic increased the need for services under Better Access due to its impact on mental health (of existing patients and new patients); and
- The additional 10 sessions were not introduced as a solution to wait times but instead as a measure to ensure people with worsening mental health received adequate treatment over this period.

The number of professionals able to provide services under Better Access could not keep up with the demand. This is a long term issue which can only be resolved through reform of training pathways and early career incentives to get more practitioners into the workforce sooner.

So what did the additional 10 sessions do? They gave those who were able to access services the opportunity to have more frequent treatment as needed.

For those in crisis or with complex mental health needs, the additional sessions allowed them to receive adequate treatment without reliance on the public health or community health systems. It provided them with security, stability and choice in their mental healthcare.

These clients will now have to find alternative ways to support their mental health between sessions with their psychologist.

At some stage, someone is going to slip through the cracks. As mental health practitioners, this is what we are most fearful of — the risk of losing a client because they can no longer receive an adequate level of healthcare.

Dr Katrina Norris is director of the Australian Association of Psychologists