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Under fire: Josephine Cashman stands firm against author Bruce Pascoe



By [Chip Le Grand](#)

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Josephine Cashman wants people to know she is not mad.

She may be angry but not crazy, as is being suggested by some to explain why a smart, emerging Aboriginal leader would blow up long-standing friendships, a promising business and an influential government position over the indigeneity of an author she has never met.



Josephine Cashman: "I'm a very stubborn person and I'm not stopping." DOMINIC LORRIMER

In the two months since she joined a campaign led by conservative commentator Andrew Bolt against the work and claims to Aboriginal heritage of *Dark Emu* author Bruce Pascoe, Cashman

has fallen out with her former mentor, Marcia Langton, been abandoned by her business partners, and been dumped from a high-powered group advising on how best to create an Aboriginal "voice" to parliament.

In an interview with *The Sunday Age*, she says her reputation has been trashed, her family targeted, and her sanity questioned. "Everybody I know has been called and told I am mad," she said.

Yet, despite having seemingly little to gain from either challenging Pascoe or aligning herself with Bolt, a commentator who breached the racial discrimination act a decade ago with comments about light-skinned Aboriginal people, Cashman insists her campaign is worth the cost and will continue.

"I paid the price, I nearly lost everything but I don't care because I want to do the right thing," she said.

"I'm a very stubborn person and I'm not stopping. I am committed and can't back down. What else can they do to me?"

The decision by the Minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt, to sack Cashman from a senior advisory group that includes some of the nation's most respected and influential Aboriginal figures has split Indigenous Australia.

"I have had people text me and say how dare you pick a white man over a black woman," Wyatt told *The Sunday Age*. Other constituents have expressed concern about the debate Cashman has fuelled.

Wyatt recalled a conversation with an Indigenous woman who called him late last week. "She said, 'I have a fair-skinned child who is now worried they are going to be asked to prove their Aboriginality'," he said. "I don't need that, given the level of suicides we have in our communities."

An eminent Noongar woman from Wyatt's home state of Western Australia raised the same issue. "She said, 'Ken, I am now fielding questions about my fair-skinness. I thought I had gotten over that.'

Bruce Pascoe at his property in Gipsy Point last month as bushfires ripped through the region. RACHEL MOUNSEY

"This has opened up a debate for some people who continuously question the identity of Indigenous Australians," Wyatt said.

Cashman says the problem isn't identity, it's money – literary grants and other financial support intended for Aboriginal recipients that helped establish Pascoe as a best-selling author. The allegations raised by Cashman that Pascoe may have benefited financially from falsely claiming to be Indigenous have been assessed and dismissed by the Australian Federal Police.

"Aboriginal families have always adopted people, I have no problem with that. But you can't claim to be Aboriginal if you are not Aboriginal. The money is not getting to the ground and you have got someone who is quite privileged, compared to someone at Wilcannia, who is getting these grants."

Pascoe has previously told *The Sunday Age* he believes the attacks on his ancestry are an attempt to discredit his best-selling book, *Dark Emu*, which argues that Indigenous Australians had sophisticated farming methods before European settlement.

Professor Marcia Langton, a key figure in the push towards constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians, EDDIE JIM

He says he has Indigenous ancestry on both sides of his family. "I know who I am and I know who my family is, and I know my place in the community."

Wyatt does not believe it is his place to question Pascoe's Aboriginality. That judgment belongs to the Indigenous communities with whom Pascoe identifies. Cashman accepts the role of Aboriginal communities to affirm the ancestral bona fides of their own people but says there needs to be more rigour.

Her suggestion for the establishment of a national Indigenous registry put her at odds with Professor Langton, other members of the advisory group and Wyatt, who grew up with a file registered to the state native welfare department. "I don't want to go back to a system where we are allocated a number on a register," he said.

Professor Langton, the chair of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne and a key figure in the push towards constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians, declined to be interviewed about her relationship with Cashman and the part she played in her removal from the advisory group.

The breakdown of their once-close relationship is evident in an email exchange between the pair shortly after the first meeting of the senior advisory group last November.

The exchange, which Cashman last week published on social media, begins as a demand by Cashman for the advisory group to be briefed by federal police agencies about what she claims are "organised crime networks operating in Aboriginal communities and often run by leaders of Aboriginal community organisations".

"Unless this abuse of power is addressed, the voice process cannot work and I will not be able to support it," she wrote.

In response, Langton urges Cashman to rethink what she is saying. "Please withdraw this email and write a proposal not a threat," she said. "I don't think you can see how badly this reads."

By the next morning, the dispute reached Wyatt's inbox. One of the minister's advisers, Jarrod Lomas, subsequently contacted Cashman to arrange a meeting with the AFP for her to detail her allegations. By then, Wyatt had made public his support for Pascoe, and Cashman refused to take his call.

Minister for Indigenous Australians Ken Wyatt. AAP

At the time, both Langton and one of Pascoe's publishers, Morry Schwartz, were directors of the Big River Impact Foundation, a business founded by Cashman to provide Aboriginal housing. That partnership ended abruptly in December, when Cashman made her first appearance on Andrew Bolt's Sky News television show to denounce Pascoe and his book.

Cashman says Schwartz called her to say that unless she recanted her attack against Pascoe, she risked losing her foundation. Schwartz confirmed the exchange but denied her allegation of an attempted boardroom coup. He says he and other former directors intervened to protect Cashman, not Pascoe.

"We said your focus should be on the work of the foundation and not on this other nonsense which is going to come to grief and is wrong, nasty and unnecessary," he told *The Sunday Age*. "She wouldn't pull back. There was no coup; she pushed it to the edge.

"She is really bright and strong and articulate and was building something fantastic. I just see the tragedy of a person who has marginalised herself and an organisation that was starting to look strong and do good things."

Langton and Schwartz, who had served for two years as the foundation's vice-chairman, immediately quit the board. Cashman kept control of the foundation and says she is re-evaluating her business plans. She has also withdrawn from a doctorate she was studying at the University of Technology Sydney.

For Langton, the final breaking point was the emergence of a letter, attributed to Yolngu elder Terry Yumbulul, calling for an investigation into Pascoe's claims to Aboriginal ancestry. The letter was provided by Cashman to Bolt. Yumbulul has since denied, to SBS National Indigenous Television journalist Jack Latimore, that he consented for the letter to be written under his name.

"This one is probably the straw that broke the camel's back because there have been too many misrepresentations and unfounded accusations and abuse," Langton told Radio National's Patricia Karvelas. "She submitted this fraudulent letter to Andrew Bolt and he published it."

For Ken Wyatt, doubts over the veracity of the letter added to an already thorny problem. "You have a significant elder from a very strong clan headed by Galarrwuy Yunupingu being cited as having written that letter and then he comes out and says he did not write it. There are cultural sensitivities because Galarrwuy Yunupingu sits on the same body as Josephine and I can't afford to have tension. We have to focus on the outcome for Indigenous Australians as opposed to the differences of opinions between two individuals."

Cashman feels betrayed that Wyatt moved against her without seeking her side of what had happened. Wyatt, who still considers Cashman a friend, says he needed to stay clear of the fray. "I think if I had rung Josie she may not have taken my call."

The provenance of the letter remains unclear. Yumbulul did not write it but he had multiple communications with Cashman about its contents as it was being written.

In a letter of complaint to SBS, Cashman says she helped Yumbulul write the letter at his request after he contacted a family member and expressed doubt about Pascoe's book and Aboriginality. She denies anything underhanded took place. She also poses a question certain to linger beyond the Pascoe saga: "Why has a request for Aboriginal ancestry evidence turned into an untouchable domain?"



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