

# Indigenous recognition poll likely in 2017

BY ELISE SCOTT AAP SEPTEMBER 15, 2014 5:40PM

**A TIMEFRAME for constitutional recognition for indigenous Australians could be revealed within weeks.**

BUT a proposal isn't likely to come while Prime Minister Tony Abbott is in Arnhem Land visiting indigenous communities and operating the government from tents on the outskirts of Nhulunbuy.

Mr Abbott says the process of gaining indigenous constitutional recognition is still at its beginning and a timeframe for a vote would be finalised in a few weeks.



Tony Abbott says the priority is to build support to recognise Aborigines in the constitution. Source: AAP

"I think it's important that everyone know where our country is hoping to go," he told reporters from his Arnhem Land campsite.

"There does need to be a clear process in place with an end point for our consideration."

Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion says 2017 is the likely date for a referendum, which would fall outside the Abbott government's first term.

It would also mark 50 years since 90 per cent of Australians voted to remove indigenous discrimination from the constitution.

Once a timetable has been announced, the government plans to work on the precise form of constitutional recognition.

The government previously promised to have draft words for constitutional change ready by the end of this year.

The prime minister and Senator Scullion have cautioned against holding a referendum before there is enough public awareness to guarantee success.

"There's nothing worse than having a go at this and finding that it fails," Mr Abbott said.

Mr Abbott and his ministers are in the top end for discussions with indigenous leaders, including Gumatj elder Galarrwuy Yunupingu.

Mr Abbott's second day in Arnhem Land was spent visiting local employers at a potential bauxite mine site, a timber mill and a cattle station.

Those projects are run by the Gumatj Corporation, chaired by Mr Yunupingu, and designed to get Yolngu people off welfare and into work.

The region was dealt a blow recently when Rio Tinto suspended work at its alumina refinery -

costing about 1000 jobs.

While it is a priority for indigenous leaders, constitutional recognition isn't often talked about among local workers.

"For the Yolngu on the ground they concentrate on their lives," Gumatj Corporation chief executive Klaus Helms said.

"They focus on getting a house, on getting less than 15 people under their roof and being able to buy a car."

Mr Abbott landed in Arnhem Land after announcing the deployment of Australian troops to Iraq to join a multi-national effort to combat Islamic State.

The decision, which came after an official request from the US government, is likely to divert some of the prime minister's attention away from indigenous affairs.

But he remains confident of fulfilling his promise to stay in Arnhem Land until the end of the week.

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