

Abbott breaks indigenous election vow

Constitution Referendum shelved again

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Tony Abbott has co-opted Labor leader **Bill Shorten** to help make the case for the constitutional recognition of indigenous people after plans to hold a referendum were shelved for the second time in as many years.

Mr Abbott, who had promised a draft amendment to the constitution within a year of being elected, conceded on Wednesday that there was little chance of a referendum succeeding in the immediate future. He has rejected a call from a joint parliamentary committee, co-chaired by indigenous MPs—Liberal MP **Ken Wyatt** and Labor Senator **Nova Peris**—to hold the referendum before or at the next election.

"I am listening, but that doesn't mean that I am necessarily convinced by everything that everyone says," said Mr Abbott, who is spending the week at an indigenous community in Arnhem Land.

"I want the referendum to be a unifying moment, I want it to be bipartisan. I think it's going to be difficult to run a bipartisan referendum campaign in conjunction with a highly bipartisan election campaign."

Mr Abbott said he had spoken to Mr Shorten before leaving for Arnhem Land and said there needed to be greater discussion of the timing and nature of the referendum.

"I don't want to get too prescriptive until I've had a lot more discussion here and until I've had further discussions with Bill Shorten," he said.

It is now likely the referendum will be held in 2017, the year after the next election, although the Prime Minister would not confirm this.

The issue has the potential to cause

enormous divisions within the Liberal Party, with its conservative wing opposed to constitutional change. One

member of that faction warned the issue had the potential to split the party as severely as the carbon price debate when **Malcolm Turnbull** was leader.

The referendum was first promised by **Julia Gillard** as part of her power-sharing deal with independent MP **Rob Oakeshott**. It was promised to be held at or before the 2013 election, but Labor shelved the idea in September 2012 because not enough work had been done and the push would have failed.

Mr Abbott promised that if he were elected, he would progress the issue and there would be a draft amendment within his first year of office. This, too, has not been forthcoming.

During the last election campaign, **Kevin Rudd** promised that if he were elected, the referendum would be held by 2015 at the latest.

Apart from the timing, the nature of the question needs to be worked out. Options range from a change to the preamble to something more meaningful in the constitution proper, such as including a clause against racial discrimination.

On Tuesday, Mr Shorten supported Mr Abbott's delay and said he would be pushing for a substantive constitutional amendment.

"Any changes that we make to our constitution, I think, need to be more than tokenistic," he said. But he accepted they would need to be acceptable to Aboriginal Australians and ensure the rest of the population were also comfortable with them.

"It's a pretty big balancing act and it certainly has to be bipartisan and I will work with [Mr] Abbott to see what we

can do to secure meaningful change [that] has real value for Australia now and in the future," Mr Shorten said.

"It's important that people agree with what the question is and what we're trying to do. If that takes a little longer, then so be it."