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Recognise date is a priority: Abbott

PATRICIA KARVELAS THE AUSTRALIAN OCTOBER 11, 2014 12:00AM

TONY Abbott yesterday confirmed that the Council of Australian Governments had discussed the referendum to acknowledge indigenous Australians in the Constitution, and said he believed setting a date was his next step before a set of words were agreed on.

The Prime Minister said setting a date would let everyone know people were “serious” about making it happen.

“It’s important that there be a high level of bipartisanship and it’s also important that there be a high level of discussion, not just with the indigenous community, but certainly including the indigenous community, and there are some discussions that need to take place before I think I can be too prescriptive about what the next steps are,” Mr Abbott said.

“I am determined that we will have this referendum, (and) that we will soon set a date.

“I think it is important to set a date because I think that will help to crystallise the debate.”

His comments came after prime ministerial indigenous adviser Warren Mundine called for him to convene a meeting with Bill Shorten and determine the next steps towards the referendum, amid concerns there has been no progress since Mr Abbott’s trip to Arnhem Land last month.

Mr Mundine wants to apply pressure on Mr Abbott and the Opposition Leader as the terrorism threat draws attention away from the issue. “If we are to meet the 2017 deadline, then discussion should be happening now,” he told The Weekend Australian.

“For the referendum to succeed, we need a bipartisan support. It’s time for the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader to get on the same page. If there is no bipartisan support, then you can kiss the referendum goodbye.”

Mr Shorten said: “The Prime Minister and I are continuing to discuss how we take this forward. The most important thing is to get this right.

“ We can’t rush it, but we can’t take too long either.”

The debate on the next steps comes after the government received a report from the panel headed by former deputy prime minister John Anderson, which says that if the preconditions it outlines can be met earlier, including widespread support for an agreed proposition, there is a case for an earlier referendum.

After nationwide consultations, the panel recommends that a referendum be held no later than the first half of 2017, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the 1967 indigenous referendum.

The report urges parliament to amend the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Recognition Act 2013 to demonstrate continuing commitment and ensure the act does not end next March. The act should be extended for no more than three years, to align with the timing of the referendum in 2017.

The report says there is consensus on a statement of recognition and removal of section 25 of the Constitution, which envisages the ability of state governments to disqualify a group from voting

based on race.

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