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Constitutional recognition not just symbolic



From left: Bonnie Riley, Lucy Brereton, Lachlan McDaniel, Belinda Frail and Michael O'Loughlin with his daughter Taya and son James. There is optimism that Monday's historic meeting between political and Indigenous leaders will deliver real and strong outcomes. **Louie Douvis**

by **Lucille Keen**

Lucy Brereton wants people to know that the changes being debated as part of the constitutional recognition of Indigenous people are not just symbolic.

The "race laws" in the constitution, which will be abolished as part of the process, allow the federal Parliament to make laws that discriminate adversely on the basis of race.

"Those sort of clauses were around not that long ago," says Brereton, 26, a program co-ordinator at the Commonwealth Bank.

"When my dad was in school, the power of veto was in effect so he could've essentially been kicked out of school if a non-Indigenous said that he wasn't clean enough or whatever his conditions were.

"I think people don't realise that it's not generations and generations ago; this is my dad. It still affects us. We've made all these leaps and bounds in my lifetime but we still have more to go."

She hopes Monday's historic meeting between political and Indigenous leaders will deliver "real and strong outcomes", including a date for the referendum, now promised in 2017.

"I am hoping all our leaders can agree to move closer to a referendum," Brereton says.

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Former Australian Football League player Michael O'Loughlin says it is important that Indigenous leaders, such as Warren Mundine and Noel Pearson, come to a unified position on the referendum question.

"Both of those guys are intelligent and both have great insight and knowledge to give," O'Loughlin says.

"It's a process, and a tough road to the right solution. But it's very important the Australian constitution recognises Indigenous Australians.

"I want a bright future for our kids," the father of three says. "Once they are old enough to understand the constitution they will realise how valuable it is to be recognised."

'FEAR AND TREPIDATION'

Telstra employee Lachlan McDaniel says there's always "fear and trepidation" in the community when significant changes are made in the area of Aboriginal affairs.

"I think it shows how far we've come as a nation and that we're reaching a point where the prime minister and the leader of the opposition and Indigenous leaders are sitting down and having a frank and honest conversation about something that is on a national scale of Indigenous affairs. I think it is very significant in terms of our history.

"I think we are seeing time and time again, once these events take place and milestones [such as] the Mabo decision – like the apology – it actually makes the nation a stronger place," McDaniel says.

"So I think there are changes taking place, but I think at the same time we are moving to a more positive place for the nation as a whole.

"I would hope there would be a protection against racial discrimination written into the Australian constitution. I think it's not an extraordinary wish, it's a very common thing in the constitutions of democratic developed countries across the world."

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