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Path for Indigenous recognition mapped out at historic meeting



Tony Abbott and Bill Shorten met with Indigenous leaders on Monday.



by [Laura Tingle](#)

A historic bipartisan meeting with Indigenous leaders has mapped out a process for proceeding with a referendum on Indigenous recognition in the Constitution, but the possibility of some slippage in the [expected May 2017 timing for the referendum](#) also emerged.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten met with 40 Indigenous leaders at Kirribilli House in Sydney on Monday, and set out a series of forums to discuss the referendum proposal.

In a rare joint statement, Mr Abbott and Mr Shorten said the country "has moved closer to recognising the First Australians in our constitution and ending the great silence about Indigenous people in our founding document".

The meeting focused mainly on processes, but Indigenous leaders said after they had reaffirmed the point that Indigenous people [want the issue of racial discrimination in the Constitution](#) dealt with as part of the referendum, not just recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' prior ownership of the land before white settlement.



Tony Abbott and Bill Shorten meet indigenous leaders Monday.

Indigenous Leader Patrick Dodson said the meeting was "a great occasion, a great event: historic and terribly meaningful in the context of what we're trying to do around a very complicated matter".

The constitution is "a narrow, pretty erudite sort of subject area, when you haven't got decent organisations to deliver on health, or housing, or assisting you with family violence and all those matters", he said

"We're not unmindful of that. But I think this is an occasion in the history of this country where we need some of our leaders focusing on how the complexities can be handled and taken forward around the constitution – because this is an opportunity we have."

The two political leaders "restated our commitment to recognising Indigenous people in the Constitution", and "to holding a recognition referendum".

They acknowledged that no referendum is likely to succeed without bipartisan support and said there needed to be a "national discussion involving all Australians; because this should be a unifying moment owned by everyone".

"Based on today's discussions, we consider that the referendum could not be held before the next term of Parliament and should be outside the politics of the election cycle."

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GOAL SET FOR MAY 2017

They later clarified that this meant the ambition would still be to hold a referendum in May 2017 – the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum – but Mr Abbott said "that's a tight deadline, I've got to say".

However, he said, "I would be very disappointed, I would feel that we had not lived up to our high expectations and we had not quite been our best selves if we weren't able to do this in the next term of Parliament".

The hope is the question that would be put in the referendum could be ready by the middle of next year, so that it was settled before the next election campaign and therefore not an election issue.

Both sides of politics, but particularly the Coalition, will have to deal with internal debates about the sensitive and potentially politically divisive implications of changing race laws.

The meeting set out the process for "a more intense and structured broad-based national conversation on what Indigenous recognition can achieve and on the precise form that it could take".

The meeting agreed on three separate process to push the process forward a series of community conferences, a parliamentary discussion paper and a referendum council.

The parliamentary joint committee on constitutional recognition will be asked to develop a discussion paper "on various issues regarding constitutional change to help facilitate an informed community discussion".

A Referendum Council will be established – comprising both Indigenous and non-indigenous leaders "to progress a range of issues around constitutional change including how a question might be settled, timing and constitutional issues. This process should inform the further steps we take, including any constitutional conventions."

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