

## THE AUSTRALIAN

# Time to get a move on with recognition: Ken Wyatt

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Ken Wyatt, in a traditional kangaroo skin booka, at Gooseberry Hill in Perth. 'People will become frustrated.' Picture: Colin Murty  
Source: News Corp Australia

**Surveying his Hasluck electorate overlooking Perth's sandplains, federal Liberal MP Ken Wyatt is wondering what this week's Canberra summit on constitutional recognition of indigenous people has amounted to other than a gathering of 40 prominent Aboriginal leaders — one of whom, Noel Pearson, wishes he'd not attended.**

Mr Wyatt, who chairs the joint select committee on constitutional recognition and is the first Aborigine elected to the House of Representatives, says he is concerned that momentum will falter unless certain steps are set in train.

In a gentle warning to his leader, Tony Abbott, he says a constitutional committee should be formed "within a month", followed by the rollout of 40 community conferences.

"Constitutional recognition will fail if we don't start the process of engagement and awareness across Australia. It's absolutely critical. And if we do delay, people will become frustrated and say, 'I can't be bothered'."

Wearing a traditional kangaroo skin booka, which denotes his Nyoongar ancestry, Wyatt says he was unimpressed by "hissy fit" comments by Mr Pearson that he would have preferred to stay at home and "send a cardboard cut-out" to the summit.

Mr Pearson also told ABC Radio that the Prime Minister and Bill Shorten “did a very good job of pretending to listen, I thought”.

“Hissy fits are not helpful, because it divides us and the broader Australian community,” Mr Wyatt says. “Statesmen don’t do that. If you want to bring about change in the constitution, leaders have got to step up and let go of their own personal desire and seek a uniform approach.

“There was a strong commitment in that room to effecting recognition in the Constitution. If some people were unhappy, they should have been honest at the meeting.”

But Mr Pearson says the real issue Mr Wyatt needs to confront is not the divergence of views within the Aboriginal leadership, which united in a spirit of shared purpose on Monday, but fatal flaws within the reports of the committee Mr Wyatt chaired.

All of the reports handed down by that bipartisan committee backed the inclusion of a racial non-discrimination clause, which Mr Wyatt has previously said he does not support.

“Ken still needs to explain why he has said the non-discrimination proposals are not likely to survive, given that all of the models contained in his reports are premised on a non-discrimination clause,” Mr Pearson said.

Mr Wyatt says the non-discrimination clause will be resisted by people, “including those in my own party”, who saw it as “effectively a bill of rights.”

“Two state premiers have already indicated to me that they would not feel comfortable with it. They cited Palm Island prohibition of alcohol, which under such a clause could be seen as discriminatory even though the law is used for the betterment of those people. I support stronger positioning around discrimination, but I’m not sure it would get up in the Constitution.”

He said Mr Pearson seemed disappointed by the summit response to his alternative model of an all-indigenous elected body being enshrined in the Constitution to advise the parliament on indigenous issues. “I think it has merit, but I don’t think it will be embedded in the Constitution,” Mr Wyatt said.

Mr Abbott acknowledged the deadline will be tight to achieve his preferred May 2017 deadline for the referendum on indigenous recognition, 50 years after the historic referendum that gave indigenous Australians the vote.

Mr Wyatt said he felt passionately that the referendum vote could be as momentous as that referendum. “But we have to build momentum as they did back in the 1967 referendum, among churches, community organisations, service clubs, trade unions and corporations.

“We asked for a constitutional committee of Aboriginal leadership outside the parliament to start the process of engagement, and there was a commitment from the Prime Minister.

“I’m hoping we can set it up promptly within the month. You cannot commit to 40 leaders and then do nothing about it.”

Mr Wyatt, who is also descended from two other Aboriginal groups — the Wongi and Yamatji — said he took on the select committee chairmanship with some trepidation.

“I thought, ‘What happens if this fails, and what I’ve been asked to do causes people to walk away?’

“But over the 18 months I’ve become optimistic that, whatever the referendum question is, Australians will vote for it.

“They see the oldest living culture as important.”

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