

Indigenous youth meet Indigenous MPs on recognition



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Just ahead of the 45th Australian parliament starting up, a group of young Indigenous Australians has pushed MPs to have constitutional recognition for Indigenous people on their agenda.

The teenagers are part of a campaign called 'Recognise', a push for amending the constitution to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians.

Recognise campaigner Rebekka Rogers has told MPs she and many other young Indigenous Australians yearn for constitutional change.

"I think back to one of the darkest times in our history when my grandmother, my aunties, my uncles and even my own mother were not recognised in the constitution as human beings. But after 11 long years of fighting, constitutional change ensued. However, as you still know, there are still discriminatory flaws that remain within the constitution today."

The young woman from Adelaide asked MPs to continue the work of Indigenous activists who have fought for the rights of Indigenous Australians.

"Recognition is not the end of the road. It's just one step in the ongoing journey of reconciliation. So I invite you all to join me in carrying the same torch that our elders have carried through the journey of recognition, because only together can we make lasting change for the future generations of Australia."

Labor MP Linda Burney thanked Ms Rogers for her words, and thanked the entire group for the visit.

"What they are saying, in essence, is that they want the founding document, the document that this place is built on, to tell the truth, and I think that is a perfectly reasonable request. And we commit ourselves to what you are asking us to do, and that is to argue, to pursue and to support constitutional reform."

Labor senator Patrick Dodson, an Indigenous elder and reconciliation activist, has been fighting for the cause for many years.

He says it is an important step Australia should take for its future.

"Recognition in the constitution would put beyond doubt the fact and the reality and the truth of the matter that the Indigenous peoples were the first people of these lands and that they do have a rich and abiding culture, and that that culture is critical to the future of our nation as a unified, prosperous and modern democracy."

The deadline for the constitutional-recognition referendum has been pushed back until 2018 to allow for better consultation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

But Liberal MP Ken Wyatt says he has spoken to many people who are growing impatient.

"The majority of Australians that I've been associated with, that I've talked to, have become impatient that we're not moving on this in a way that we indicated some time ago."

Australia's parliament now has the highest number of Indigenous representatives in its history.

Independent senator Jacqui Lambie was due to attend the event, but she could not locate it in Parliament House.

In 2014, she surprised some in the Indigenous community when she claimed she was related to, if not descended from, a prominent Aboriginal resistance leader from Tasmania.

At the time, some Indigenous elders disputed that claim.

Today, Ken Wyatt acknowledged that doubt.

"I'm looking forward to having two really good old friends in here, both Linda and Pat, but also, the fact that we will have four ... and, if Jacqui Lambie is Aboriginal, then she is the fifth person. She has said that she is, and I'm not going to challenge her on her claim."

Mr Wyatt says he is looking forward to having other Indigenous Australians in parliament to push for constitutional recognition.