

ONE ON ONE

Due recognition

Australia's first Indigenous member of the House of Representatives speaks about his role in our nation's journey for change.

Ken Wyatt says the argument to allow for recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia's founding document is clear.

"There's a tremendous reaction from the breadth of Australian society to that whole concept of recognition within the Constitution," he says.

"What we're asking is peer recognition, to be recognised by fellow Australians that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were here for 40,000 years."

As chair of federal parliament's Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, Mr Wyatt is leading a process which aims to build enough parliamentary and community support to ensure when a referendum is put to voters it will be successfully passed.

It's a journey for change that has already been going on for several years.

In 2012 an expert panel on the subject recommended to government several changes to areas of the Constitution to recognise Australia's continuing cultures, languages and heritage, remove racist elements and ban discrimination.

This would involve removing some sections, such as section 25, which can allow states to ban people from voting on the basis of race, and adding others which would recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages as the country's first.

The committee is now tasked with putting its own response to those recommendations out for public comment and consultation before making a final report to parliament about the best way forward.

Mr Wyatt says a key part of ensuring success is to get all Australians on board for change, especially given referendums are notoriously hard to get over the line. They are also reasonably rare. The last was held in 1999 which means many young people will have not yet had one put before them.

"We've got to keep the bottom line and that is the Constitution belongs to every Australian so the challenge is to ensure that we bring everyone with us," he says.

There is already cross-parliamentary support for recognition. In early 2013 both houses passed legislation which lays out the timeline towards a successful referendum. However, many of the details are yet to be worked out, such as the form of words to be used in the referendum question.

Mr Wyatt is well-known around Australia as the first, and so far only, Aboriginal member of the House of



▶ HOPEFUL: Ken Wyatt believes parliament can help to close the gap

Representatives. While he questions why he is often described by his ethnic background when other MPs are not, he acknowledges that he essentially has two constituencies – his Western Australian seat of Hasluck and Indigenous Australia.

"There are people who do come to me with problems and we do work them through and resolve them," he says.

However, he says all 150 MPs in the House of Representatives should be working for their Indigenous constituents.

"What I want Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to do is to utilise their federal member, because the federal member needs to be aware of the issues challenging Aboriginal constituents in their electorates.

"I honestly believe we will not Close the Gap in Australia unless every member of parliament gets to know what the gap is."

Mr Wyatt also believes parliament as an institution can make more progress to close the gap but he is wary of symbolic efforts which essentially lead nowhere in the long-term.

"I think we've got to face up to some realities. Symbolism is powerful and I support the concept of symbolism because it gives people hope and optimism, but if that symbolic behaviour doesn't translate to real things on the ground where you can see the change happening ... then we're wasting our time because after 50 years we should have had significant closure of the gap." ■