

Constitutional recognition: Indigenous voices to shape referendum question

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[Michael Gordon](#)

Political editor, The Age



Referendum Council co-chairmen Mark Leibler and Patrick Dodson. *Photo: Steven Siewert*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders will have the key role in deciding what form of "substantial" constitutional recognition will be put to Australians in a referendum.

At its first meeting on Monday, the Referendum Council agreed on a series of Indigenous conventions to decide the question that will then be considered by both sides of politics and the broader population.

"We can't go forward unless we have a model which is agreed to by our Indigenous Australians," the co-chairman of the council, Mark Leibler, said after the meeting.



Patrick Dodson *Photo: Steven Siewert*

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten attended the first meeting of the council and told its members they had the "staunch support" of both political leaders.

"People are optimistic that, yes, we can get this done in a way that is respectful and does have substance, so that it's not just some kind of bottom-of-a-barrel kind of effort," Patrick Dodson, the other co-chairman, said after the meeting.

"From both leaders, we got no indication that they were taking about minimalist positions and certainly our council wasn't talking about a minimalist position."

Former prime minister Tony Abbott initially rejected the idea of Indigenous conventions before agreeing that they could proceed in conjunction with broader town hall style meetings.

But the council has decided there could be general feedback on digital platforms on a discussion paper to be released in January, and possibly broad meetings after the Indigenous consensus is reached.

The discussion paper will outline the models that have been debated in several reports in recent years, including the one backed by Noel Pearson calling for an Indigenous body to be recognised in the constitution.

Although Mr Turnbull and Mr Shorten said they expected a report from the council by June 30 next year, Mr Leibler said it was likely to take another month or two after that date to complete Indigenous consultations.

The consultations will take the form of meetings across the country that would elect delegates to a final convention that would approve the working of the referendum question, possibly at Uluru.

Mr Turnbull told the council: "We are working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to right a great wrong, a mistake when our constitution was framed over a century ago.

"What we are seeking to do is to find a way to ensure that our constitution reflects Australia not just as it was, or as it was perceived to be in 1901, but as it is in 2015."

Reflecting on his own experience supporting a republic, Mr Turnbull said constitutional reform was not for the faint-hearted, "nor regrettably is it particularly straightforward or easy".