

# Indigenous voice proposal 'not desirable', says Turnbull

Joint statement with George Brandis says voice to parliament body 'would be seen as third chamber of parliament'



*Malcolm Turnbull and George Brandis say Uluru statement Indigenous voice proposal could not pass at referendum. Photograph: Lukas Coch/AAP*

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Malcolm Turnbull has [confirmed cabinet has rejected](#) the Indigenous voice to parliament proposed in the Uluru statement, saying it is neither “desirable or capable of winning acceptance at referendum”.

In a joint statement with the attorney general, [George Brandis](#), and the Indigenous affairs minister, Nigel Scullion, who cosponsored a cabinet submission in support of the proposal, Turnbull said the voice to parliament body “would inevitably become seen as a third chamber of parliament”.

“The Referendum Council provided no guidance as to how this new representative assembly would be elected or how the diversity of Indigenous circumstance and experience could be fairly or democratically represented,” the statement said.

“Moreover, the government does not believe such a radical change to our constitution’s representative institutions has any realistic prospect of being supported by a majority of Australians in a majority of states.”

Rejection of the Uluru statement proposals, and particularly the establishment of a constitutionally enshrined voice to parliament, has been described as a fatal blow to any hope of Indigenous recognition in the Australian constitution by a significant number of senior Aboriginal leaders and organisations.

The Uluru statement was the [culmination of an extensive consultation process](#) commissioned and funded by the federal government to determine what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples wanted from constitutional recognition.

The overwhelming response from those involved in both the 12 regional dialogues and the 300 people who attended the three-day national convention at Uluru in May was a [rejection of what was called “symbolic” recognition](#) in favour of a constitutionally-enshrined representative body, called the Indigenous voice to parliament.

In rejecting that proposal, Turnbull, Brandis and Scullion wrote:

“The government does not believe such an addition to our national representative institutions is either desirable or capable of winning acceptance in a referendum.

“Our democracy is built on the foundation of all Australian citizens having equal civic rights ... a constitutionally enshrined additional representative assembly for which only [Indigenous Australians](#) could vote for or serve in is inconsistent with this fundamental principle.”

The Uluru dialogues also proposed a *makaratta* commission to assist in the negotiation of treaties between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups and Australian governments, such as the treaty currently being negotiated in Victoria.

In the joint statement, the government said it would return to the proposal set out in the 2015 joint parliamentary committee report, which was rejected at the Uluru dialogues.

“The Referendum Council said the voice to parliament was a ‘take it or leave it’ proposal for the parliament and the Australian people,” the statement said. “We do not agree. The council’s proposal for an Indigenous representative assembly, or voice, is new to the discussion about constitutional change, and dismissed the extensive and valuable work done over the past decade – largely with bipartisan support.

“We are confident that we can build on that work and develop constitutional amendments that will unite our nation rather than establish a new national representative assembly open to some Australians only.”

The statement said the government understood and recognised the desire for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to “have a greater say in their own affairs” and it acknowledges “the values and the aspirations at the heart of the Uluru statement”.

“People who ask for a voice feel voiceless or feel like they’re not being heard,” it said. “We remain committed to finding effective ways to develop stronger local voices and empowerment of local people.”

Turnbull confirmed his government had rejected the proposal on Thursday after cabinet discussions were leaked to News Corp.

The announcement came 24 hours after Pat Anderson, the co-chair of the Referendum Council, gave the Charlie Perkins oration at the University of Sydney about the significance of the Uluru statement proposals.

Anderson said [Indigenous peoples](#) rejected the proposed model of symbolic recognition, such as a statement in the constitution acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first peoples of the land, because of concerns it could undermine Indigenous sovereignty, and because they did not trust the drafting process not to produce “a statement that would end up being so bland as to be incomprehensible”.

“They [Indigenous people] wanted things that were going to change on the ground for them,” Anderson said. “And if it didn’t fit that criteria, they just weren’t interested. We got a lot of flack because we didn’t do what we were supposed to do. But, [the government] asked us to go out and talk to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and we did. And this is what they told us.”

The decision to scrap the Uluru statement [has been criticised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples](#), the legal community – including constitutional conservatives who said the proposal was not radical but conservative – Labor and the Greens.

Indigenous leader Noel Pearson, who first pushed the idea of an Indigenous voice to parliament in 2015, said the real reason the proposal was not being put to a referendum was Turnbull’s “fundamental weakness” as prime minister. “The reality is that after today, we’ll need a new prime minister,” Pearson told ABC Radio National. “Indigenous recognition will need a new PM if it’s ever going to come to fruition.”