

# Kevin Rudd calls for bipartisan support for Indigenous recognition

Former PM warns failure to obtain bipartisan support in referendum for constitutional recognition would risk creating a ‘divisive national debate on race’



Kevin Rudd greets Sadie Canning from Perth after giving his apology speech to the stolen generations at Parliament House in February 2008. Photograph: Stephan Postles/AAP

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Australia risks engaging in an ugly “political bunfight” with a “divisive” no campaign if a referendum to recognise Australia’s first peoples in the constitution does not secure bipartisan support, former prime minister [Kevin Rudd](#) will warn.

If a referendum failed to pass, the world would conclude that “the ghosts of white Australia had somehow returned in a different form”.

Rudd is due to deliver the Australian National University’s reconciliation speech on Wednesday. He is expected to announce that he will donate \$100,000 of his own money to a foundation promoting Indigenous reconciliation.

In the advance text of the speech he acknowledges the great “political difficulty” associated with passing a referendum on recognition.

“The vicissitudes of the house, in which the government commands a majority, is little compared with the vicissitudes of public opinion, if and when a politically effective ‘no’ case is mounted, irrespective of whether it is formally endorsed by one political party or another,” it says. “The race demon has not yet been fully exorcised or expunged from our national soul.”

He will urge the [Coalition](#) and Labor to stand together to withstand the “hazardous waters” of a referendum.

“A failure to obtain such support would most likely result in the proposal for a referendum dying before it was actually put to the people. Or if it was, we would run the greater risk of a divisive national debate on race which would deeply scar our as yet fragile tissue in the living process of reconciliation,” the text says.

Constitutional recognition has in-principle bipartisan support, though the form it will take, and what will be included in the referendum question, have not been decided.

The Coalition government, led by Rudd's successor, Tony Abbott, has committed to consultation with Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians before taking a final question to the people in 2017. That coincides with the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum which, when passed, meant that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians were counted in the census.

Rudd wants to make sure constitutional reform stays on the agenda.

"I genuinely fear the loss of national political momentum on constitutional recognition. The Australian public want it. Let it not degenerate into a public bunfight," he was due to say. "We should be very wary of the risks of political dissipation as other priorities emerge, or as the political process concludes that consensus on recognition is deemed too politically difficult or simply impossible."

But he will warn stakeholders against "rigidity", saying that holding out for a "perfect" solution could mean it was "defeated in the potential political ugliness of a divisive referendum".

Rudd [delivered an official apology](#) to members of the stolen generations in parliament in 2008, shortly after winning office.

The apology was "the tentative beginnings of deeper attitudinal change" towards reconciliation, his speech says.

"The essence of reconciliation is the acceptance that a deep wrong has been committed, by one person against another, by one group against another, or most disturbingly by one race against another."

Australians "will not be complete" without achieving reconciliation with its first peoples, Rudd's speech says.

"Let us for a moment lift up our eyes from the trenches of political battle and gaze for a moment upon the mountains, unleashing our imagination on the new possibilities that might just lie beyond constitutional recognition, towards an Australia that is utterly, wonderfully, magnificently racially blind."

[His organisation, the National Apology Foundation](#), which he says is "committed to perpetuating the spirit and objects" of the 2008 apology, is awaiting approval for not-for-profit status.

Rudd came to power in 2007 after Labor ended the Coalition's 11-year rule. He was deposed in a bruising leadership spill by Julia Gillard in 2010, and in turn deposed her in 2013.

The Rudd-led [Labor party](#) was defeated by the Coalition in the September 2013 federal election. Rudd has worked at raising his international profile since leaving politics.