

# Prime Minister Tony Abbott puts Indigenous support for recognition at risk

Date: August 3, 2015



[Michael Gordon](#)

Political editor, The Age

COMMENT



Noel Pearson's response to Abbott's rejection suggests Indigenous conventions will go ahead regardless of government support. *Photo: Peter Eve*

Tony Abbott has endangered Indigenous support for constitutional recognition of the first Australians by ignoring the advice of Noel Pearson, the Indigenous leader he has called a visionary and a prophet.

It is not just that the Prime Minister has rejected a process Pearson and other prominent Aboriginal figures have told him is "crucial" if Indigenous support for a referendum question is to be ensured.

It is that Abbott has asserted the process they advocate – involving independent Indigenous conferences before broader community events – "might produce something akin to a log of claims that is unlikely to receive general support".

In other words, the Prime Minister fears that, if the question truly reflects the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, it will be too ambitious to win the support of the nation.

This implies that Indigenous leaders would preside over a process that culminates in an unrealistic outcome, when Pearson and others have consistently demonstrated a deep understanding of the scale of the task.

Their problem is that the Prime Minister has never clearly stated what he believes is possible, beyond a phrase here or there suggesting success is more likely if the question is "spiritually ambitious" but legally conservative.

For their part, they still believe something substantive, not merely symbolic, can win popular support.

It is now more than three and a half years since the expert panel produced its recommendations, including those for a constitutional prohibition on racial discrimination, yet there has been no detailed response from either this government or the previous one to the panel's report.

Abbott has declared a willingness to "sweat blood" for the cause, but declined to offer leadership by declaring what he considers the limits of the debate.

In his letter rejecting the proposal for taxpayer-funded Indigenous conferences, Abbott says he would be "disappointed" if an "Indigenous position" fails to materialise in a series of broad community conferences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Disappointed!

The timing of Abbott's rejection could hardly be worse, coinciding in Indigenous despair and disgust at the treatment of Adam Goodes and a national debate about racism.

But it gets worse. It was sent after the close of business on Friday, when Indigenous leaders were on their way to the annual Garma festival in North-east Arnhem Land, and discovered on a fax machine on Monday, just before they were to discuss the referendum.

In the circumstances, Pearson's response was restrained, but it suggests Indigenous conventions will go ahead regardless of whether they are supported by the machinery of government, even if they proceed in a scaled-back form.

While the general response of Indigenous leaders was anger and pessimism about the prospects of a meaningful outcome, no one is ready to give up just yet.