

Tony Abbott changes mind, supports Indigenous meetings on recognition

Indigenous leaders say the Indigenous-only consultations on constitutional recognition, which are essential to gaining consensus, will now go ahead



Aboriginal activist Noel Pearson leaves after talking to the media in the press gallery at Parliament House, Canberra on Thursday. Photograph: Mick Tsikas/AAP

[Shalailah Medhora](#)

Thursday 20 August 2015 15.24 AEST

Indigenous-only meetings on the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples will go ahead after the prime minister, [Tony Abbott](#), backed down on his earlier opposition to the idea.

Community leaders met with Abbott on Thursday to push for the Indigenous-specific consultations, which they insist are vital for gaining consensus.

Earlier this month, [the prime minister rejected the proposal](#), saying they would be “akin to a log of claims that is unlikely to receive general support”.

On Thursday, he changed his mind.

“Over the next 12 months there will be referendum council oversight process of national consultation, which will include the program of Indigenous consultations that we originally proposed,” Cape York leader [Noel Pearson](#) told reporters. “What we’ve agreed today is that this can happen concurrently with the mainstream conferences.”

Pearson, who joined the head of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, Kirstie Parker; Indigenous constitutional lawyer Megan Davis and Broome leader Patrick Dodson, said the foursome fought hard for the outcome.

“It’s a rumble we had to have to get the ground rules right, to get the understanding clear, but now we’re very positive that we’ve got this show back on the rails,” he said.

He rejected suggestions that the consultations would discuss anything other than a model for how Australia’s first peoples can be recognised in the nation’s founding document.

“There’s no intention to construct some kind of log of claims or additional agenda other than those that are on the table,” Pearson said.

Dodson told reporters that Indigenous leaders and the government had been drifting apart on the issue of consultations in recent weeks and that Thursday’s meeting was a win for communities.

“There was a genuine attempt to try and find accommodation and a way forward without us having to compromise in ways that we wouldn’t compromise on, so I thought it was a good outcome,” he said.

A spokesman for Abbott said the Indigenous consultations are “broadly in line” with the proposals but forward by Pearson, Dodson, Davis and Parker.

“The referendum council will be announced shortly by the prime minister with the leader of the opposition and comprise equal Indigenous and non-Indigenous representation,” the spokesman said.

Earlier on Thursday, Abbott denied he had backed down on the issue.

“There hasn’t been any about face,” he told reporters. “What I want to do is to ensure that we have a unifying and unified process which will produce, I hope, a national consensus towards the middle of next year that can then go to the people in the next term of parliament.

“What we want to do is to have a unified process which certainly will involve Indigenous people talking. It will involve the wider community talking and what I want to see is not some kind of them-and-us process but a we-the-people process.

“As part of a we-the-people process, obviously it’s important for Indigenous people to have a chance to talk this through as thoroughly as possible.”

Labor supports the proposal for Indigenous-specific meetings.

The issue of constitutional recognition has broad bipartisan support, though a model of what form that recognition will take has not yet been finalised.

Abbott has vowed to put a model to the people by the middle of 2016, ahead of a referendum on changing the constitution the following year, to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Indigenous people being counted in the census.

Next week, Abbott will visit the Torres Strait as part of a pre-election promise to [spend one week a year in Indigenous communities](#).

“I don’t think it’s too much for a prime minister to spend a week a year with a priority on Indigenous issues,” he said.

Parker acknowledged that there were concerns that the visit was too brief for the prime minister to really understand the community.

“A week is a good start, but it needs to be much more,” she told reporters.