

# Indigenous recognition: enough support for referendum, says Warren Mundine

Indigenous Advisory Council chief says compromise solution is possible and that Pearson's opposition 'muddied the waters' on a bipartisan issue



Warren Mundine is a member of Tony Abbott's Indigenous Advisory Council. Photograph: Joel Carrett/AAP

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A referendum on constitutional recognition of Indigenous people could still go ahead despite emerging divisions on the issue, the Aboriginal leader [Warren Mundine](#) has said.

The Cape York leader Noel Pearson said on Monday constitutional [recognition did not have the support of conservatives](#) and that Australia should move towards "symbolic" recognition instead. That would take the form of a document outside the constitution and the formation of a new body that would vet issues relating to recognition.

But Mundine, who heads Tony Abbott's hand-picked Indigenous Advisory Council, condemned the push for symbolic recognition, saying Pearson's comments "muddied the waters" on the bipartisan issue.

“I will definitely not be supporting it. I will be campaigning against it,” Mundine told Guardian Australia. “[Pearson] is on a campaign to push his own agenda.”

Pearson’s suggestion, which he has been touting for some time, did not have the support of parliamentarians and was politically “dead”, Mundine said.

But the prime minister said on Tuesday that Pearson’s ideas would be “carefully considered in the context of taking this important issue forward”.

“We need to hear from all voices, including [Indigenous Australians](#), and there will be opportunities for all Australians to contribute to this important discussion.,” Abbott said.

Mundine said symbolic recognition existed now, and did not have the support of Indigenous Australians. “Aboriginal communities would like something stronger,” he said.

But he admitted that a radical approach to recognition, which included the addition of clauses in the constitution, would not work.

The more likely approach, which has more support from the conservative side of politics, is to have the formal recognition in the preamble of the constitution and remove racist clauses in the body of the document, Mundine said.

Abbott has said he would hold a referendum on constitutional recognition in 2017, to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Indigenous people being counted in the census.

The attorney general, George Brandis, on Tuesday reiterated the government’s position.

“It is the intention of the government to proceed with an appropriately phrased referendum question on the constitutional recognition of Indigenous people,” he said.

The model to be taken to the referendum has not yet been decided. A joint parliamentary committee is expected to hand down its recommendation on the referendum model in May.

Committee chair, Liberal MP Ken Wyatt, indicated that Pearson’s proposal for a declaration of recognition external to the constitution would not be on the table.

“There’s a notion [in the community] that anything like that would be tokenistic, and that we’ve moved on from that,” Wyatt told ABC Radio on Tuesday night. “The message has been very clear: substantive recognition, not tokenistic.”

Committee member Bridget McKenzie, a Nationals senator, said the committee heard from a number of stakeholders, including Pearson, in the drafting of its report.

The deputy chairwoman of the committee, Labor senator Nova Peris, said it was time for action on the expert panel’s recommendations.

“We need to get on with the job of explaining why this will benefit all Australians,” Peris said.

Brandis said the eventual question would take into account the concerns of sceptics.

“I agree with Mr Pearson’s assessment that those who are conservative or sceptical about constitutional change need to be reassured and whatever referendum question the government adopts will be adopted with a view to giving an appropriate measure of reassurance to people of a more sceptical or conservative state of mind,” he said.

Mundine said Abbott was committed to holding a referendum, and that he and the opposition leader Bill Shorten, were working on the wording of the question.

He expects the wording to be released early next year but Shorten wants the process to move faster.

The Labor leader said on Tuesday: “Tony Abbott needs to stop the playing in the traffic between the constitutional conservatives of the right wing of his own party and the legitimate expectations of many Indigenous Australians.”

“This debate is going off the road, it is veering out of control because Tony Abbott, I think, finds it too hard,” Shorten said. “Again I say to Tony Abbott, we need to meet with the voices and the leaders of Indigenous Australia to see if we can agree on a question. Until we sort that out, everything else will be stalled.”

The opposition spokesman on Indigenous affairs, Shayne Neumann, said Labor would not support symbolic recognition alone.

“The public want an end to the non-recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people,” he said, adding there was “goodwill” on both sides of parliament to make this happen. “I think the public and politicians are at one on the issue.”

A recent [survey found that nearly three out of four](#) people supported the mention of Indigenous peoples in the preamble of the founding document, and an even greater percentage supported the removal of clauses that discriminated on the basis of race.

McKenzie acknowledged there was widespread support from the public on the issue, saying: “I hope that parliament will reflect the will of the people.”

Mick Gooda, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander social justice commissioner, said Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders must come together to work out the best way to proceed.

“All political parties agree that the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples have to be included in any decisions made about constitutional recognition. [Noel Pearson](#) has put forward another option for us to consider,” Gooda said.

“It’s time for us now to convene a national meeting of Indigenous leaders so that we can agree on the next steps, including Noel’s proposal.”