

Time for Tony Abbott to sweat some blood on Indigenous recognition

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Analysis

New Indigenous recognition proposal draws support

A recognition of Indigenous Australians outside of the Constitution would be a 'less objectionable' proposal says libertarian Senator David Leyonhjelm.

Before Noel Pearson's latest intervention, the push to recognise Indigenous Australians in the nation's constitution was running behind schedule and in danger of running out of puff.

Now, the enigmatic leader from Cape York has thrown his weight behind an idea that abandons the threshold proposition that the recognition be afforded in the nation's founding document, or "the big law".



Prime Minister Tony Abbott should now act on constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians. *Photo: Fiona Morris*

It is an idea with considerable merit, but one that has taken many Indigenous leaders by complete surprise, prompting them to wonder what they have achieved in five years of campaigning. "We're back where we started," said one.

It is also problematic because it only addresses one aspect of recognition: the yearning for a symbolic statement acknowledging that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were the original custodians of this land.

Pearson is acutely aware of this. He was a key member of the expert panel that proposed several changes to update the constitution, rid it of racism and recognise the first Australians.

But, since the panel reported in 2012, he has become convinced that constitutional conservatives will kill off any referendum proposal that includes the prohibition of racial discrimination. This is why he has proposed a different constitutional amendment to give Indigenous Australia a voice in the Parliament.

He is also persuaded that recognition will be a more meaningful if the words are not subject to judicial scrutiny, and he may be right. He proposes a series of [Indigenous conventions](#) to debate the competing models and agree on one that could be approved by 2017.

The danger is that the quarter of a million Australians who have signed up to Recognise, the body set up to press the case for constitutional recognition, or those who supported a Recognise relay that has covered some 33,000 kilometres, or attended hundreds of Recognise meetings will scratch their heads at the proposed change in direction.

It is also that the parliamentary committee set up to propose a model will feel similarly blindsided.

This is why it is time for Tony Abbott to act. Until now, he has been a passive supporter of recognition, promising to "sweat blood" for the cause, but anxious to allow the committee to do its work without interference from him.

Having agreed to Bill Shorten's proposal for a meeting of political and Indigenous leaders, Abbott should set a date for the meeting soon after the budget, if not before, ensure that Pearson is invited, and start sweating blood.