

Noel Pearson claims Indigenous summit on referendum 'stage-managed'

The Cape York Indigenous leader said the progress of the event had been worked out in advance but other leaders there said they were 'buoyed' by the meeting



Noel Pearson (left) and Pat Dodson arrive at the Kirribilli meeting to consider the model for a referendum on indigenous recognition. Photograph: David Moir/Australian Associated Press

[Shalailah Medhora](#)

The Guardian - Tuesday 7 July 2015 13.15 AEST Last modified on Tuesday 7 July 2015 15.45 AEST

Cape York Indigenous leader [Noel Pearson](#) has criticised a historic summit on recognising Australia's first peoples in the constitution as "stage-managed", saying he should have sent a "cardboard cut-out" of himself to the event.

Prime minister Tony Abbott and opposition leader [Bill Shorten](#) came together with 40 Indigenous leaders on Monday in a rare show of bipartisanship to work out a roadmap for recognition.

Many of the participants told Guardian Australia that they were happy with the progress made at the event, which was the first time the group had sat down together to discuss the issue.

But Pearson was less than impressed, telling ABC Radio on Monday night that the event was "highly stage-managed".

"It was very clear at the end of it that the way forward had already been nussed out between Bill Shorten and [Tony Abbott](#) prior to the meeting," he said. "So a lot of the input by people speaking at the meeting was rather redundant because the prime minister and opposition leader had decided the parameters going forward."

“I would have preferred to stay at Cape York at my beach house with my kids and sent a cardboard cut-out down to this meeting today, but I couldn’t do that. It was very beautifully finessed, might I say, both of them did a very good job of pretending to listen, and I started searching for my wallet at the end of it. It was [the] perfect kind of pickpocket.

“This is the cream of Indigenous leadership, and a great number of us [were] perfectly divested of our underwear without us knowing about it.”

Pearson said that he came to the summit, held in the picturesque harbourside Sydney suburb of Kirribilli, smiling, but “an aftertaste of having been manoeuvred through the morning towards a pre-determined outcome started to taste a bit bitter in my mouth”.

Bruce Martin, who is part of the prime minister’s Indigenous advisory council, has dismissed Pearson’s claims that the meeting was pre-determined, saying it was a “genuine conversation”.

“The strength of this process is that we as Indigenous people, and the government and the opposition, want the same end. So we’re arguing for the same thing,” Martin told Guardian Australia. “The back and forth is about how we get there.”

Martin said that most participants arrived at Monday’s summit ready to compromise and negotiate. “At no point did we think that we’d get everything we wanted,” he said.

“To say that it [the meeting] was just lip services devalues ... what we’re trying to achieve,” Martin said, adding that disunity “will cause concern and confusion” among first Australians and the wider community alike.

Pearson has been pushing for the creation of a new Indigenous representative body to be included in the constitution, but has argued that conservatives would never stomach the provision of non-discriminatory clauses to be added to the nation’s founding document.

The other participants comprehensively rejected that possibility, issuing a communique after the summit which stated that reform “must involve substantive changes to the Australian constitution”.

“It must lay the foundation for the fair treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples into the future,” the letter said.

Pearson was among the leaders who signed the communique.

Australia’s race discrimination commissioner, Tim Soutphommasane, said he would like the constitution to include a clause on non-discrimination.

“Constitutions shouldn’t exist as historical artefacts or relics, they should exist as living documents. And today we have an opportunity to right old wrongs,” Soutphommasane said on Tuesday. “We have an opportunity to make a statement about racial equality. And it’s time that our constitution is purged of ideas about racial superiority and the natural order of imperial power.

“It’s time that we also guarantee that all Australians have a protection from racial discrimination, because our constitution should and must speak more truly in the spirit of our democracy. One committed to equal citizenship and to the rejection of racism,” he said.

The co-convenor of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, Kirstie Parker, said that it “remains to be seen how much real listening was done” at Monday’s summit.

“The prime minister and the opposition leader said afterwards that they listened and they heard,” she told ABC Radio on Monday.

She said there were a range of views at the summit, just as there are in the broader Indigenous communities.

“All of these views are perfectly legitimate and that’s why we have to have these opportunities for our people to speak amongst ourselves,” she said.

“I will say this: that passionate is one thing. An unwillingness to hear what others have to say is regrettable and it is important that people treat each other with dignity and respect in this process, even if you have a difference of opinion.”

The head of the prime minister’s indigenous advisory council, Warren Mundine, told Guardian Australia that the summit’s key function was to bring together the diverse groups so that a roadmap to the referendum could be framed.

“None of us have been together with the prime minister and opposition leader at the same time,” he said. “The conversation yesterday was about bringing us together.”

The chief executive of the Northern Land Council, Joe Morrison, was similarly positive about the event.

“Aboriginal people that were in that meeting were, at the end of it, buoyed,” he told ABC TV on Monday.

He acknowledged that Pearson had a right to speak out.

“We’re a democracy,” he said, “but the bottom line is we’ve got to collectively get together and understand that this was the first time in a long time that many of these Indigenous people have gotten together to deal with some of the most challenging and pressing issues that this nation’s been dealing with.”

Mundine said that gaining the trust of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people was paramount to ensure the referendum did not tank like the 1999 republican referendum before it.

“If we’re going to have passion for change, it’s got to come from the mob,” he said. “We’ve got to sit down in the dirt with the local mobs and explain it to them.”

Around 40 community consultations will take place before the referendum, which could be held as early as 2017.

Wording for the question that will be taken to the people is expected to be finalised by the middle of next year.
