

# Question for Indigenous recognition referendum to be ready by mid-2016

At a historic meeting on Monday, Tony Abbott, Bill Shorten and 40 Indigenous leaders set out a timeline that includes community consultation and debate



Tony Abbott and Bill Shorten pose for a photograph with Indigenous leaders before a meeting to consider the model for a referendum on Indigenous constitutional recognition. Photograph: David Moir/AAP

[Shalailah Medhora](#)

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The question that will be taken to the people for Australia's next referendum, on Indigenous recognition, will be crafted and put forward by the middle of next year, prime minister [Tony Abbott](#) has announced.

Abbott and opposition leader [Bill Shorten](#) on Monday met 40 Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander leaders in the harbourside suburb of Kirribilli, in a building just metres from the prime minister's official Sydney residence.

The historic meeting set out a timeline for the country's next referendum.

The question will be finalised by mid-2016, and the prime minister is optimistic a referendum can be held in 2017, to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the successful 1967 referendum to count [Indigenous Australians](#) in the census.

"That's a tight deadline, I've got to say," Abbott said. "I would be very disappointed if we aren't able to proceed to a recognition referendum some time in the next term of parliament."

Shorten was similarly optimistic.

“I think Australians tend to work towards deadlines,” he said. “If we’ve got a deadline we then know what we’ve got to get done and when.”

The opposition leader wants the referendum to be above politics by being held separately from a federal poll.

“I think it would be good if we have as much of the detail of the proposed referendum change locked away before the next election,” Shorten said. “If the government goes its full term [then] I think we have an opportunity to nail down some of the detail. That way it moves it out of the cycle of politics.”

Indigenous leaders had wanted a question crystallised by the end of this year, to give the community more time to absorb and understand the proposition before it was put to a referendum vote.

West Australian Aboriginal leader Patrick Dodson told reporters after the meeting that he was encouraged by the political commitment to recognition, and said the referendum should be given the best chance to succeed.

“I think there’s a commitment not to let this drift or suffer from amnesia, but also not to rush it because we may get it wrong,” he said. “I don’t think that the interference of an election somewhere is necessarily going to derail that commitment.”

About 40 community forums will be held around the country before the referendum, guided in part by a new Referendum Council. They will start in September, after both major parties discuss the referendum in their party rooms when parliament resumes in August after its winter recess.



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Indigenous leader Pat Dodson arrives at the meeting to consider the model for a referendum on Indigenous constitutional recognition in Kirribilli. Photograph: David Moir/AAP

Parliament’s joint standing committee on recognition will reconvene in order to produce a discussion paper on the community consultations.

Formally recognising Australia’s first peoples in the referendum has broad support in the community, with a new Ipsos Fairfax poll released on Monday showing that 85% of respondents support the proposition.

But Abbott must convince conservatives in his party of the merits of the referendum.

The insertion of a clause in the founding document that recognises Indigenous peoples as the original inhabitants of Australia is largely uncontested, but the [treatment of racially discriminating clauses](#) in the constitution is proving more challenging.

Indigenous leaders present at Monday's meeting issued a joint statement saying that symbolic recognition would not be enough unless it was paired with the removal of racist clauses and possibly even the insertion of a new clause banning all future racial discrimination against all people.

"We don't believe that mere symbolic change alone is enough," the co-convenor of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, Kirstie Parker, said.

Abbott did not automatically dismiss calls for the insertion of new anti-discrimination clauses, saying that Monday's meeting was not the time "to rule particular things in or out".

"These are certainly issues that a lot of participants in today's meeting would like to see, and these are the sorts of things that now need to be considered by these community conferences," he said.



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Protesters outside the meeting in Kirribilli. Photograph: David Moir/AAP

Indigenous leaders want a special emphasis on educating Aboriginal and Torres Strait islanders about the changes, with some privately citing concerns that failure to explain constitutional reform would see a referendum fail, in the same way that the 1999 republican poll tanked.

As a small but vocal group of protesters, supporting Aboriginal sovereignty, demonstrated outside the Kirribilli venue, Indigenous leaders inside the building told journalists they understand the need to bring the community with them on change.

"None of us claim to speak for all of our people and we want you to understand that and we also want our people to understand that," Parker said. "We have come together as people who are prepared to have a conversation about righting a historic wrong in Australia's history."

The Greens also highlighted the importance of community involvement.

"Any change to the constitution must be supported by Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples," senator Rachel Siewert said. "The proposed process of community conferences

needs to ensure that they enable the clear opinions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples.”

No discussion was had on holding a joint sitting of both houses of parliament to allow politicians to debate the intricacies of the proposed referendum, though Labor said it supported such a move, saying it would add to the momentum for change.