

# Bill Shorten asks Labor to endorse Patrick Dodson for vacant Senate seat

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[Bill Shorten](#) has asked the Indigenous leader Patrick Dodson to fill the casual Senate vacancy created by the resignation of Joe Bullock, in a surprise announcement on Wednesday.

The opposition leader called a press conference to announce he would be endorsing Dodson, following Bullock's resignation late on Tuesday night.

[Bullock quit only two years into his six-year term](#) due to Labor's stance on same-sex marriage, which is to make a yes vote on the issue binding for party members from 2019.

Shorten asked Labor's national executive to convene an urgent meeting in order to launch Dodson into the seat.

"I hope that Pat will be someone our parliament and our community can look to for wisdom and guidance. Particularly as we seek to address the unfinished business between Australia's first people and the rest of us," Shorten said.

"It shouldn't be strange or unusual for people of Pat's renown, experience and wisdom to be given the chance to serve in our Parliament. Yet at the moment it is."

Shorten described Dodson as "a truth teller, a powerful advocate for recognition, justice, equality and fairness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people".

Dodson said he was surprised by Shorten's phone call to sound him out for the position, but says after giving the proposition "deep thought" he decided it was a "good opportunity and not one that should be passed up".

Dodson, a Yawuru man from Broome in Western Australia, has had a long and distinguished career fighting to end Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage.

He has worked towards equality for decades, and on Wednesday said it was time to "step up to the plate" and try to influence politics from within parliament.

In show of rare bipartisanship, the Indigenous affairs minister, Nigel Scullion, congratulated Dodson on his nomination.

"Should Prof Dodson fill the position, he will bring a great deal of political and life experience around First Australians to the parliament," Scullion said. "For too many years under successive governments, the constant change in approach taken in Indigenous affairs has, itself, become a barrier to improving outcomes for first Australians."

“I would look forward to working with Pro Dodson in parliament to further advance the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”

Dodson chaired a royal commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody in the late 80s and early 90s, and on Wednesday vowed to keep pushing for lower incarceration rates for first Australians.

“That matter has to be dealt with. I don’t know why we’ve increased the number of incarcerations for Indigenous people after 339 recommendations of the royal commission,” he said. “We also have 15,000 Aboriginal kids placed in some kind of home care. That has to be addressed.”

It is Labor’s policy to [create a new justice target](#) in the Closing the Gap campaign. The prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, acknowledges that the incarceration rate was too high, [but will not commit to a new target](#).

In 2009, Dodson was a finalist for the senior Australian of the year, and has been a Catholic priest and director of land councils in the past.

He said parliamentarians had goodwill in trying to achieve reconciliation, but had not always been well-informed. He urged greater engagement with local communities and said that future settlement deals between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians would be vital.

After agreeing to become a Senate candidate, Dodson tendered his resignation as [co-chair of the Referendum Council](#). The council advises government on the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian constitution.

Dodson will continue pursuing recognition of Australia’s first peoples in the nation’s founding document, rather than a statement of recognition outside the constitution, as proposed by some.

“The notion of getting the words right is a real challenge,” Dodson says of the wording of the eventual referendum question. “I would be clearly focused on us achieving the recognition of Aboriginal people in line with the wishes and aspirations of Aboriginal people and ultimately the Australian public.”

“Constitutional recognition has been drifting along,” he said. “There’s a lot of hard work that is in train.”

The Broome elder brushed aside concerns that joining a political party would end the bipartisanship that recognition had enjoyed in the past.

“I’m not swapping Indigenous tribalism for white fella tribalism as it were,” Dodson joked. “We can find some solutions to this, and I’m happy to work with anyone.”

If Dodson’s candidature is successful, Shorten wants him as an adviser on issues to do with the development of northern Australia.

“[Western Australia] often doesn’t get the attention they require,” Dodson said. “I live in one of the biggest electorates in the country I suppose, Durack, and we don’t always get the kinds of services citizens require. That’s all people, not just Indigenous peoples.”

He slapped down the state government for proposing to defund remote communities, a policy that prompted the former prime minister, Tony Abbott, to say that governments should not be [funding people’s “lifestyle choices”](#).

“We’ve got a Western Australian government that’s talking about closing communities without any plan as to how those people are reconnected or relocated into those major towns in the north.”

If formally endorsed, Dodson will join a very small group of Indigenous people in both houses of parliament, including Labor’s Nova Peris and Liberal minister, Ken Wyatt and backbench senator, Joanna Lindgren. Independent senator Jacqui Lambie also claims Indigenous ancestry.

Louise Pratt, who was bumped off the top spot on the Senate ticket by Bullock, has thrown her hat in the ring to reclaim the spot.

Shorten praised Pratt as an “excellent senator” with a “contribute to make in public life again for the Labor party”, but backed in Dodson.

“On this occasion though, I’ll be supporting Pat Dodson. I think he is, by all agreement, a distinguished Australian,” the opposition leader said.

Including Bullock, Labor has lost four WA MPs and senators in 2016, but shadow communications minister, Jason Clare, was not concerned. He told ABC Radio on Wednesday that the party had “some good MPs waiting in the wings”.