

# Indigenous referendum back on track for next year



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[Michael Gordon](#)

Constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians is back on track for 2017, after the Referendum Council mapped out a plan to give all Australians a voice in shaping the question in coming months.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island leaders will hold three meetings across the country next month to plan concurrent Indigenous-only and community-wide consultations.



Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull shakes hands with Indigenous MP Ken Wyatt after he tabled the Closing the Gap statement earlier this year. *Photo: Alex Ellinghausen*

The council will then report to the government and opposition by year's end, making a referendum likely next year if there is consensus on the question to be put.

"We would be encouraging the government to hold the referendum before the end of 2017," council co-chair Pat Anderson told Fairfax Media after the council met in Melbourne on Tuesday.



Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull embraces senator Nova Peris after delivering the Close the Gap report earlier this year. *Photo: Andrew Meares*

Both Ms Anderson and her co-chair Mark Leibler stressed that the process must not be rushed and the question be put when success was most likely. "We can't rush this, but at the same time we don't want the energy to leech out of it, either," she said.

Mr Leibler said it was even possible that the referendum could be put on May 27 next year, the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum that gave the Commonwealth the power to make laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and include them in the census.

"We're hoping that we will be able to get a successful referendum up next year – and it's not impossible that we might do this by May 27," Mr Leibler said.

Aside from up to 18 Indigenous meetings and community-wide events in all capital cities, the council will create a digital platform for Australians to give their views.

Up for debate will be all the proposals to have emerged over recent years, including a prohibition on racial discrimination in the constitution and the establishment of an Indigenous body to advise the national parliament on matters affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Both Ms Anderson and Mr Leibler said there would be no attempt to limit the scope of discussion and preclude debate on a treaty or compact.

Ms Anderson said the focus of the council was constitutional reform, but there was no intention to rule things out.

"Other things are important in changing the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the nation state – there has to be a settlement," she said.

The three meetings next month are likely to be held in Broome, the Torres Strait and Melbourne.

Malcolm Turnbull has declared a referendum is "achievable" next year, saying the first hurdle is to come up with a form of words that "sings" to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

"I would like to see it get up, but it's got to have something that enthuses Indigenous people, that they see as meaningful, and then it's got to be in practical, political terms achievable," the Prime Minister told Fairfax Media in February.

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten has consistently expressed his support for "meaningful" recognition and the question being put as soon as practicable.