

Bill Shorten: Abbott cared more than Turnbull about Indigenous recognition

Labor leader says the public has a greater ability to adapt to cultural change than given credit for



Coalition MPs criticised Bill Shorten for suggesting constitutional recognition should be a stepping stone to a treaty with Indigenous Australians. Photograph: William West/AFP/Getty Images

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Bill Shorten has said the Liberal party is not giving the same level of attention to the constitutional recognition of [Indigenous Australians](#) as it did when Tony Abbott led the party.

The Labor leader also dismissed criticism he was pushing for too many cultural changes at once, saying Australians had a greater ability to adapt to change than people thought.

Coalition MPs criticised Shorten on Monday after he suggested constitutional recognition should be used as a stepping stone to a “post-recognition settlement” or treaty with Indigenous Australians.

The prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, warned Shorten that he risked [chipping away at the delicate consensus](#) for constitutional recognition by overcomplicating the matter and asking for too many things at once.

Shorten dismissed that view on Tuesday, saying Australians were capable of dealing with multiple issues simultaneously.

“Just because we’re having constitutional recognition, it doesn’t mean we shouldn’t talk about the treatment of young people in the youth justice system in the NT, it doesn’t mean we shouldn’t speak up loudly and clearly to do something about a third world disease which exists in a country like Australia, preventable illnesses,” he said. “Australia can deal with a range of issues at the same time.”

He also criticised the Coalition’s handling of the issue of constitutional recognition, saying it wasn’t getting the attention it deserved under Turnbull’s leadership.

“I might say something which would surprise you, but I respect the fact Tony Abbott was interested in this topic,” he said. “It hasn’t had the same level of attention since [Tony Abbott](#) hasn’t led the Liberal party.”

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He said he still wanted to work with the government to ensure a referendum went ahead, despite the protestations from some Coalition MPs.

“We stand ready to listen to the advice of the referendum council, a council of eminent Australians, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. I will work with the parliament,” he said.

“My principal position is our constitution is the nation's birth certificate. I think it is wrong of the nation's birth certificate to have no reference to our first Australians.”

Meanwhile, the fallout continued on Tuesday from the resignation of Brian Martin, the recently-appointed royal commissioner of the inquiry into childhood detention in the Northern Territory.

[Martin stood down from the position on Monday](#) after reports surfaced that he lacked the confidence of key sections of the NT Indigenous community, given his role as former chief justice of the Northern Territory.

When resigning, Martin told reporters it had become apparent to him that the effectiveness of the commission was “likely to be compromised from the outset” given the lack of confidence in him.

The attorney general [George Brandis](#) said on Tuesday that he still thought Martin “would have been fine” as royal commissioner but Martin had made up his mind.

He also said [he and Turnbull had already discussed](#) the “desirability” of adding an Indigenous royal commissioner to the inquiry before Martin announced his resignation.

Following Martin's departure on Monday, Turnbull moved quickly [to appoint two royal commissioners to head his inquiry](#) – Margaret White, a former justice of the supreme court of Queensland, and the social justice commissioner, Mick Gooda.