

Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion says treaty could be considered



Tom McIlroy

Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion says Parliament should consider a treaty with Indigenous Australians if it is recommended by the recognition referendum council, breaking ranks with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull on the controversial issue.

Speaking after a week of criticism over his response to abuse in the Northern Territory's youth detention system, Senator Scullion said he had not considered resigning after admitting the situation had not "piqued his interest" before a *Four Corners* report showed footage of abuse inside Darwin's Don Dale detention centre.

Asked how the government would respond if Indigenous leaders working as part of the referendum council recommended a treaty instead of changes to the Constitution, Senator Scullion said it would be considered carefully.

Before the July election, Mr Turnbull criticised Opposition Leader Bill Shorten over suggestions of pursuing a treaty agreement similar to those in place in New Zealand and Canada, arguing the discussion could jeopardise efforts for securing "an overwhelming consensus of Australians" for constitutional change.

The recognition issue is controversial among Coalition MPs, with some speaking out against even minor changes to the Constitution.

On Wednesday, Senator Scullion said Parliament should wait patiently for the council's report but indicated a treaty could be considered.

A council meeting held in Melbourne last month heard growing support for scrapping constitutional recognition in place of a treaty, with some attendees arguing the planned 2017 referendum could be a wasted opportunity.

"There's lots of different interpretations of this and we live in a world where people like to throw a word in because it might annoy a few people but . . . let's just wait and see the context that Aboriginal people are responding to a comprehensive set of issues around recognition," Senator Scullion told ABC radio.



Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion in his office at Parliament House. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen

"If they have other elements that they want to provide advice to Parliament and to the Australia people, then I know that will be included.

"If through that engagement process ... if that's what Indigenous Australians, if that's what the process tells us to do, well that's what it is. That's what their view will be."

He warned against pre-empting the report before the referendum council finished its work.

Mr Turnbull will meet with Mr Shorten on the issue in Canberra on Thursday.

Senator Scullion conceded he should have known about abuse in the youth detention system before shocking report aired last week, sparking Mr Turnbull to call a royal commission.

On Wednesday, respected Indigenous leader and University of Canberra chancellor Tom Calma called on the minister to consider resigning over his response.

"I think it caught a lot of people off-guard, people who had more insight into the report," Senator Scullion said.

"I think a lot of people were really surprised. I did regret not having had access to all of that information.

"I should have known. I should have had processes in place to ensure that I knew earlier."

Separately on Wednesday, deputy Labor leader Tanya Plibersek said: "I wouldn't like to see discussion of a treaty slow momentum towards constitutional recognition."