



Without A Model Backed By Aboriginal Communities, What Are We Actually ‘Recognising’?

By [Amy McQuire](#) on August 11, 2016 New Matilda [Aboriginal Affairs](#)

When media outlets recently latched on to a ‘delay’ in the timeline for a referendum on constitutional recognition they failed to acknowledge the real problem, writes **Amy McQuire**.

If you ever need an example of the way mainstream media swims around in circles in relation to Aboriginal affairs, look no further than the current debate on constitutional reform.

Earlier this week, all sections of the media – from the ABC, to the *Sydney Morning Herald* to SBS – informed the public that the proposed referendum on constitutional reform had been ‘delayed’.

It was almost as if they had colluded to come up with their own interpretation, so uniform was their misinformation.

The illusion that the referendum had been ‘delayed’ was sparked by a media release issued by the 16-member Referendum Council, following a series of three invite-only consultations with about 150 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders over the past few months.

But nowhere in the media release did the Council say it was abandoning a date for a referendum – probably because there has never been one. The symbolic date of 27 May 2017 has been thrown around as a tip to the anniversary of the 1967 referendum, but it has never been set in stone. It’s a date promoted by the government-funded Recognise campaign and occasionally given partial endorsement by people like the former Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

What the media release did say is that the timeline will be extended to allow for further consultations with mob into 2017, who have been largely left out of this process so far.

Talking about a date and reporting shallow, media-driven interpretations of a delay only benefits those who are too lazy and shallow to actually wade into what is an incredibly complex debate around ‘recognition’ or investigate what Aboriginal people actually want. There has never been a delay – what there has been is an attempt to actually bring this process back to blackfellas – because it has largely been an incredibly white, government-driven, media-manipulated process that has alienated a great section of our community.

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This talk about a date is already incredibly outdated. The media has been focusing solely on a timeline, as if this were some sort of horserace over the trajectory of the constitutional reform debate, despite the fact there has never been a question or model put forward, let alone one endorsed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Professor Megan Davis, a constitutional law expert and one of the Aboriginal members of the Referendum Council, told me on 98.9 FM's Let's Talk program that the preoccupation with a date and process has fed into the cynicism.

“There's absolutely cynicism and that's because when people talk about a referendum date being set, it's perfectly normal for humans, or shall I say, the people they are purporting to Recognise – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – it's quite normal for them to go, ‘oh a Referendum date is set, well we haven't been consulted, so they must know what a model is’.”

“It created all sorts of suspicion when people were talking about a referendum date before there had even been a process.”

Prof Davis says the mob have never been “over consulted”, even though the media has driven this perception.

“That's where we got the push back from the community that they felt excluded from this process. There is no use going to a referendum on constitutional recognition if we don't have the people you seek to recognise front and centre of that debate... but that seems to be a very foreign concept.

“They've got used to doing things without us... We've had ten years in the wilderness post ATSIC in which the space is not filled with any voices of people with cultural authority, or even democratic legitimacy. But rather it's filled by many, many freelancers who have been able to step into the debate, or just discussion on many different issues with no accountability.”

That's what the three meetings were attempting to do. The first, in Broome, brought together Traditional Owners around the country; the second, on Thursday Island, was for the peak Aboriginal bodies; and the third, in Melbourne, included First Nations writers, thinkers, academics, and community members. The goal was to get a sense of the types of models to take to the Indigenous-led conventions, which will be rolled out into 2017. Prof Davis expects this will result in a ‘package’ of models to take to the government, and then potentially to a referendum.

The issue of Treaty, or a series of treaties and agreements, has been discussed within these meetings but doesn't require a change to the constitution.

This is an attempt to bring the process back to Aboriginal communities, and yet the media has been lazy in presenting it, using ‘deficit discourse’ – the language of delay – which is the usual mode of reporting Aboriginal affairs. It's also incredibly dishonest and untruthful.

Regardless of what you think about the next stage forward for constitutional reform, and the money wasted on it so far, the fact is that we are being fed the wrong information, with a focus on the timeline at the expense of what mob actually want. There is an opportunity, for example, to push for treaty in these conventions – an issue the media has just ‘discovered’ in much the same way Cook ‘discovered’ Australia.

The level of civic debate around this process has been low, and to this date the ‘movement’ has excluded the majority of mob who don’t sign up to the bright, shiny, ‘smoke and mirrors’ campaign that has been Recognise. This process has been a farce and has fed into the deep cynicism in community. Recognise has been complicit in the divisions it has driven.

But there may now be a chance to rein it back and push for a model that might actually have the backing of our people.

Let’s focus not on a date, but on what our mob might actually want.