

Indigenous recognition a step toward a treaty, not a roadblock, says Bill Shorten



[Michael Gordon](#)

Constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians will not be a roadblock to a treaty, but a step toward a final settlement and the closing of the disadvantage gap, Bill Shorten has said.

The Labor leader has repeated his support for a treaty, or set of treaties with the first Australians, but insisted that recognition in the constitution is the first priority and next year is the time for action.

"Recognition is the next door this nation needs to walk through, together – like the '67 referendum, like Mabo, like native title, like the apology," Mr Shorten told the annual Recognise dinner in Sydney on Tuesday night.

"It is time for some Australians to move beyond knee-jerk panic and unthinking outrage every time the word 'treaty' is mentioned," Mr Shorten said.



Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten came together last month to link arms in support of ending family violence in Indigenous communities. Photo: Andrew Meares

"It is time to put away the old labels of the history wars – and to talk about what unfinished business really looks like, what treaty really means."

Mr Shorten said forms of treaty already existed in agreements at a regional and local level that delivered a better balance of responsibility and decision-making between government and Indigenous people.

"To me, post-recognition settlement, or treaty or treaties, is about building new frameworks for government to engage with, and empower, the First Australians.

"Surely we are smart enough as a nation, generous enough as a nation, to have this conversation and still achieve recognition first."



The annual dinner of the Recognise campaign was also addressed by Malcolm Turnbull, who expressed measured confidence that recognition would be achieved, but warned that "a rejection at a referendum will be seen by some as a rejection of reconciliation".

Quoting former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating from his iconic 1992 Redfern speech, Mr Turnbull said: "We cannot imagine that we will fail."

The Referendum Council appointed by Mr Turnbull and Mr Shorten is about to embark on a series of regional meetings and recommend the wording of the referendum question in its final report by June 30 next year.

"Now this is complex work. Changing the constitution, as I know better than most, is not for the faint-hearted," Mr Turnbull said.

"There are more complex discussions ahead. But as long as it remains a respectful debate, we will reach agreement on the way forward and we will succeed at a referendum."

Mr Shorten agreed, telling the gathering: "I feel, at the moment, it is too easy to say you support recognition and too hard to specify what recognition is."