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'We won't sell out our mob': Delegates walk out of Constitutional recognition forum in protest

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The breakaway delegates holding an impromptu meeting today. (NITV News)



A group of delegates have walked out of the Constitutional recognition forum. (NITV News)

A breakaway group of delegates have walked out of the Referendum Council's Uluru talks, claiming it was a flawed process.

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A group of delegates have walked out of the national First People's summit to discuss constitutional recognition stating, "we won't sell out our mob".

At least seven delegates from Victoria and Dubbo, along with a large group of supporters, walked out from the Referendum Council's talks on constitutional recognition, claiming the process was fraught with danger.

Speaking to reporters minutes after walking out of the convention hall, Jenny Munro condemned the Referendum Council's efforts to support constitutional recognition.

"It's not a dialogue, it's a one-way conversation. Every time we try and raise an issue our voices are silenced," she said.

"They are not looking at any alternative options other than the Noel Pearson road map. And like Native Title that will prove to be an abject failure."

She told NITV News the facilitation process had been "disappointing".

Victorian delegate, Lydia Thorpe, said her delegation had come to represent a number of nations with the greatest respect and integrity, and hopeful to reach an agreement - but said such an agreement was no longer possible.

"We as sovereign First Nations people reject constitutional recognition. We do not recognise occupying power or their sovereignty, because it serves to disempower, and takes away our voice," she said.

"We need to protect and preserve our sovereignty."

"We demand a sovereign treaty with an independent sovereign treaty commission, and appropriate funds allocated."

She called for the treaty negotiations to follow the Vienna convention on treaties.

Dubbo delegate, Lyall Munro, said the whole bipartisan process was a "racist" one.

We still have a chance, says Council in response to walkout

The Referendum Council has responded to the walk out saying that the process had been "a hard journey", but it was still an important one.

"The recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as human beings," council member Phillip Wilyuka said.

"We came to this conference here to have a say and put in a strong position to be recognised ... That's the only thing we are here for," he added.

"Coming together as one voice to send a message out to white Australia to be recognised in the Constitution, so that we can too live in harmony and work together and live together."

Anangu delegate and local resident, Alison Hunt, said her people had supported the meeting on their land "to have a quiet meeting and an opportunity for the people to talk to government, and [to tell] white Australia that we are ready and need support".

“We have to be united,” she said.

She reminded the crowd that the conference was being held on sacred land, “where you are talking on and standing on, and visitors need to understand that”.

“We got one last chance to make it happen, and we are responsible, and we have to be seen as responsible people, speaking together,” she said.

Tensions had been rising since early today. During the lunchtime break, many delegates were already voicing their concerns, saying they had felt their voices had been “silenced”.

Uncle Les Coe told NITV News earlier today a lot of the tension started as some delegates felt the council had been “changing the rules” as they went along to mould a “set agenda”.

The Intervention casts cloud over proceedings

Dubbo delegate, Lyall Munro, told NITV News he felt it wasn't right to “get in bed with the government”, to discuss constitutional recognition while being on Anangu country, given that they are still suffering the consequences of the intervention.

“Our mandate that came from Dubbo, was a no mandate across the spectrum, because we are concerned about the fact that we've come to a country where the intervention is still being played out,” he explained.

“I think that's embarrassing. We're expected to get into bed now with these governments, and we're talking about the bipartisan approach here.”



*Exclusive: Shorten 'hopes for consensus' at Uluru convention
Opposition Leader sees road to treaties through constitutional recognition.*

Mr Munro says the Australian government's racist policies persist and continue to do harm.

“We've seen these destructive campaigns and programs that are based on a bipartisan approach. We're subjected to the same racism no matter which side of the political spectrum, and that's been played out here.”

Despite criticisms, the Referendum Council maintains that the importance of the meeting is that it has provided a first-time opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to lead the discussion on what they would like to achieve with constitutional recognition.

Earlier this morning, Referendum Council member, Dalassa Yorkston, told reporters that today's agenda would focus on the two options for reform that would deliver the substantive change Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been demanding during the 12 discussions preceding the convention.

“Today’s discussion will focus on the two options for reform that would deliver this, and they are the Indigenous voice in Parliament and agreement making,” she said.

Ms Yorkston said the Indigenous voice to Parliament is “vital” to allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to “have a say in the policies that affect our people and our rights”.

“An Indigenous voice to Parliament would mean an elected group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would be able to advise Parliament about Indigenous issues. It would have significant authority and staying power, if it was written into the Constitution.”



Where does Native Title fit in?

But Constitutional Recognition and or a treaty with the Australian government have not been the only pressing issues on people's minds.

Nyoongar man, Joe Collard, drove 31 hours from Perth to Uluru to take part in the talks. He didn't come as a delegate. He attended the Perth dialogue and was asked by organisers to come to the summit by special invitation.

Mr Collard told NITV News that for his people, there needs to be more clarity in regards to where land rights fit in the whole discussion.

“Where does the native title act fit in? Where does [it leave] the tribal groups that have no agreement?,” he asked.

Mr Collard emphasized that the situation for Indigenous peoples across the country vary widely, and he feels Western Australian people haven't been properly represented in the Referendum Council.

“There are a lot of Aboriginal groups in WA ... From what I can see there's no WA appointment within the Referendum Council to hear our voices and understand what our needs are,” he said.

“For us, the Nyoongar people, we have no agreement. We don't have land rights, we don't have native title, so where do we fit into this nationwide treaty that they're talking about? ... To us, sovereignty [was] never ceded, so we've never sold our land.”

Mr Collard believes given the high stakes, Indigenous peoples need a treaty among themselves first in order to get it right.

“It’s not really about Constitutional reform, it’s about sovereignty. And what I’m trying to say about treaty, if we’re looking at time frames, I think we can sort this out amongst ourselves first and then the second part would be, once we get that consensus, having that one voice to the government,” he said.

Despite the kerfuffle, the Referendum Council talks are continuing as planned.

Co-chair Pat Anderson said the forum is still united and will reach "some outcome" when the summit wraps up on Friday.

She stressed that most NSW and Victorian delegates are still supporting the process.

"This is a difficult conversation. It's inevitable that there will be some robust debate," Ms Anderson said.