

Indigenous leader Pat Dodson is Shorten's 'captain's pick' for Senate

Written by The Conversation USA

Pat Dodson, the father of reconciliation, is set to become a Labor senator for Western Australia following Joe Bullock's surprise announcement that he is quitting over the ALP's position on same-sex marriage.

Dodson has been personally recruited by Opposition Leader Bill Shorten, who told a news conference he had asked for an early meeting of the ALP national executive to consider the preselection. The changover will take place within weeks. Parties nominate replacements for Senate casual vacancies, with the relevant state parliament ratifying the choice.

"I want Labor to seize the moment, to give someone of Pat Dodson's remarkable qualities an opportunity," Shorten said. "I hope that Pat will be someone our parliament and our community can look to for wisdom and guidance, particularly as we seek to address the unfinished business between Australia's First People and the rest of us."

He hoped Dodson's Senate presence "will help us to come together to work on solutions on constitutional recognition. On the yawning gap of opportunities between our first Australians and the rest of us. And on the sustainable development of northern Australia, which Pat brings unique experience and commitment to."

Dodson told the news conference he would make advancing constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians a priority. Last year he was named co-chair of the Referendum Council advising on progress towards the referendum, which is due to be held next year. He is resigning from that position.

Dodson said Shorten's call had come as a surprise and it took him a while to adjust to the proposal he enter the Senate.

But it had become clear to him that he should not pass up the opportunity. "Having spent much of my adult life trying to influence our national conversations, debate, government and the parliament from the outside, it is now time for me to step up to the plate and have a go trying to influence those same conversations, debates and public policies from the inside."

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Dodson is the second high-profile Labor Indigenous candidate announced this week. Deputy NSW ALP leader Linda Burney said she would seek preselection for the Sydney seat of Barton. If elected she would be the first Indigenous woman in the House of Representatives. At the moment there are two Indigenous federal parliamentarians – Ken Wyatt (Liberal) and Nova Peris (ALP).

Bullock told the Senate late Tuesday that his resignation was driven by Labor's decision at its national conference last year to deny its MPs a conscience vote on same-sex marriage from 2019.

The matter had dogged him for six months. "How can I, in good conscience, recommend to people that they vote for a party which has determined to deny its parliamentarians a conscience vote on the homosexual marriage question? It is a question which I regard as having a fundamental significance to the future shape of our society. The simple answer is that I can't."

Bullock said he rejected the option of moving to the crossbench and sitting as an independent because he had been elected "only because I was on the ALP ticket".

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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