

The Morrison government proposes an Indigenous recognition referendum this term

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The Morrison government [plans to hold a referendum](#) in the next three years on whether to enshrine constitutional recognition of Australia's Indigenous people.

Announcing the proposal on Wednesday, the minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt, said he would:

develop and bring forward a consensus option for constitutional recognition to be put to a referendum during the current parliamentary term.

He said he had begun seeking the counsel of Indigenous leaders on the best way forward. But Wyatt made it clear that the final decision on whether the referendum goes ahead this term will depend on achieving a high degree of consensus and the prospect of it having a very strong chance of success.

Constitutional recognition is too important to get wrong, and too important to rush.

Wyatt stressed the importance of bipartisanship, and will establish a cross-party parliamentary working group to assist with engagement to develop a "community model" for the referendum.

Labor's shadow minister for Indigenous affairs, Linda Burney "will be integral to this process", Wyatt told the National Press Club in a major speech outlining the Morrison government's approach to Indigenous affairs. Both Wyatt and Burney are Indigenous.

Read more: [Ken Wyatt faces challenges – and opportunities – as minister for Indigenous Australians](#)

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Wyatt did not indicate how he envisioned changing the constitution, which has been highly controversial in the last few years.

The May 2017 [“Uluru Statement from the Heart”](#) called for “the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the constitution”.

The Referendum Council proposed a national Indigenous representative assembly be added to the constitution, but this was [rejected by the Turnbull government](#) .

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has recently shifted course and begun speaking with Labor leader Anthony Albanese about a bipartisan approach to constitutional recognition. Without bipartisanship, any referendum is doomed to failure; passage is difficult enough even with agreement of the major parties. The [last successful referendum](#) of any sort was in 1977.

Changing the constitution through a referendum requires an overall majority of votes and a majority in a majority of states. When Prime Minister Tony Abbott wanted to hold a referendum on Indigenous recognition, the plan slipped away amid arguments over its content and doubts about getting the necessary support.

Read more: [Listening but not hearing: process has trumped substance in Indigenous affairs](#)

Wyatt also promised the development of “a local, regional and national voice”. He did not spell out the detail of a national “voice”.

He said the concept of the “voice” in the Uluru Statement from the Heart “is not a singular voice”.

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It is a cry to all tiers of government to stop and listen to the voices of Indigenous Australians at all levels.

All they want is for governments to hear their issues, stories of their land and their local history.

He said Indigenous communities are asking the three tiers of government to stop and take the time to listen to their voices.

The national interest requires a new relationship with Indigenous Australians based on their participation and establishing entrenched partnerships at the community and regional levels.

Wyatt also said he would work on “progressing how we address truth telling.

Without the truth of the past, there can be no agreement on where and who we are in the present, how we arrived here and where we want to go in the future.

Read more: [*Treaty talk is only one problem for Indigenous recognition referendum*](#)

On the treaty issue, he said it was important for states and territories to take the lead.

Wyatt said the significance of symbolism must never be forgotten but “it must be balanced with pragmatism that results in change for Indigenous Australians”. He highlighted the [new National Indigenous Australians Agency](#)

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, which was set up by Morrison to oversee Indigenous affairs policy.

With the establishment of the agency on 1 July, we began a new era for the government to work in partnership with Indigenous Australians. It will provide opportunities for growth and advancement in education, employment, suicide prevention, community safety, health and constitutional recognition.

The most important thing that I and the agency will do is to listen – with our ears and with our eyes.

I intend to have genuine conversations, not only with Indigenous leaders and peak bodies, but with families, individuals and community organisations so that I can hear their voices and work together to agree to a way forward for a better future for our children.

He also wanted businesses “to sit with me around boardroom tables – and around campfires – and discuss how they can contribute”.

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

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