

Albanese says Voice must be in the Constitution

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Opposition leader Anthony Albanese says an Indigenous “Voice” to parliament must be enshrined in the Constitution.

His position, spelled out in a speech to be given on Saturday to the Garma Festival, makes it difficult to see how he and Prime Minister Scott Morrison will be able to agree on a referendum question.

Albanese says in his address, released ahead of delivery:

With a Voice in place, there can be truth-telling, and there can be Makaratta. [...] It is clear to me that enshrining that Voice in the Constitution is what must come first.

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Morrison has been adamant there should be no reference to a Voice in what is inserted in the Constitution to recognise Australia’s First Peoples.

Without bipartisan support, a referendum would not have a chance of success and, indeed, would not be put.

Indigenous leaders in the Uluru Statement from the Heart called for “the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution”.

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Albanese says:

I want a Voice and Truth then Treaty to be part of our nation's journey, part of our national life. It's not just about respect and redress. It's about progress and change. It's about moving out of the darkness

Although there is a gulf between Albanese and Morrison over what should go into the constitution, Albanese says he still hopes for bipartisanship.

"We have not yet had true reconciliation, and a country that is not truly reconciled is not truly whole. And until we are whole, we will never reach our truest potential as a nation – and we have so very much potential," he says.

But how can we have reconciliation when one side has no voice?

The Voice is the bedrock upon which we must build.

I will take the fight to the government on so many things; never have any doubt about that. But on this we must work together. We must be together. My hope we can have bipartisanship on this remains alive.

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Albanese says he is encouraged by “the tentative moves towards constitutional change” by the Minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt. “I hope he gets the support he needs and deserves from his colleagues.”

He says he is also encouraged by “the epiphany experienced by Barnaby Joyce.

"After being part of the chorus pushing the myth that a Voice would amount to a third chamber in parliament, Mr Joyce did something unusual. He stopped. He listened. He asked questions from people with knowledge. [...]

"Mr Joyce then went on television to own up to his mistake, and to explain why he'd been wrong. And he encouraged others who'd made the same mistake to follow his example."

At Tuesday's caucus meeting Pat Dodson, the opposition spokesman on Indigenous recognition, said constitutional recognition had now been decoupled from everything that was in the Uluru statement. Uluru had now shifted to “co-design with select individuals”, he said.

Dodson said there was no structure for formal consultations with First Nations. “Apparently the minister has a plan for consultation with the Coalition backbench and apparently with Pauline Hanson”, he said.

The challenge now was to “assist the minister without walking away with all the fleas and ticks that would undermine a principled position”, Dodson said.

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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