

Proposed indigenous 'voice' will be to government rather than to parliament

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Two prominent indigenous Australians, Tom Calma and Marcia Langton have been appointed to chair a senior advisory group to oversee an extensive process for developing options for an indigenous “voice to government”.

The process will also develop ways to get more indigenous input to state and local decisions, especially on the issue of service delivery.

Announcing details, the Minister for Indigenous Australians Ken Wyatt said indigenous people throughout the country would be able to have their say.

But the government is already under criticism because Scott Morrison has rejected the proposal in the Uluru Statement from the Heart for a voice to parliament to be put into the constitution.

Instead the government plans to legislate the voice. It is notable that it is calling it a “voice to government” rather than a voice to parliament.

Calma is the chancellor of the University of Canberra and was formerly the Race Discrimination Commissioner and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner.

Langton was a member of the Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians (2012) and is Associate Provost at the University of Melbourne.

Models will be developed over the next year, in two stages. In the first stage, two groups - a local and regional group and a national group - will work up models to improve local and regional decision-making and to identify how the views and ideas of indigenous Australians can best be captured by the federal government.

The groups will have a majority of indigenous members.

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In the second stage consultations will be held with indigenous leaders, communities and stakeholders to refine the models.

“We need to get it right”, Wyatt said. “Models will be workshopped with communities across urban, regional and remote Australia”.

He said “the best outcomes are achieved when indigenous Australians are at the centre of decision-making. We know that for too long decision making treated the symptoms rather than the cause.

“It’s time that all governments took better steps to empower individuals and communities, and work in partnership to develop practical and long lasting programs and policies that both address the needs of indigenous Australians and ensure that indigenous voices are heard as equally as any other Australian voice”.

The senior advisory group will have up to 20 leaders and experts, with a range of skills and experience.

While the federal government cannot dictate outcomes to other governments, it hopes they will welcome the opportunity to hear directly from indigenous people and react to what comes out of the process.

Apart from developing the voice, the government has said it will run a referendum this term to recognise indigenous people in the constitution “should a consensus be reached and should it be likely to succeed”.

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 their academic appointment.

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