

Indigenous treaty merits election debate

OPINION June 27, 2016

Indigenous issues have received lamentably little attention in this federal election campaign, given the policy and moral challenges of the appalling disadvantages faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

So The Age welcomes that the notion of a treaty emerged during Opposition Leader Bill Shorten's recent solo appearance on the ABC's Q&A program. After agreeing British settlement of Australia should be described as an invasion and reaffirming his support for constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians, Mr Shorten also said we need to look further ahead, to talk about what a post-constitutional recognition of Indigenous people would entail. Asked whether this could look like a treaty, he concurred.

Unfortunately, the government moved quickly to stymie the debate. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull accused Mr Shorten of potentially derailing the planned referendum on constitutional recognition, claiming discussion of a future treaty would jeopardise existing support for the referendum. This is an indication of the political sensitivity surrounding Indigenous issues.

Peak Indigenous bodies have collectively released a historic plea for Indigenous voices to be heard and respected in the election campaign. They released a plan, the Redfern Statement, to address the plight of this marginalised group.

While it's not surprising that both parties want to stay "on message" during the election campaign, shutting down the treaty discussion was an error, and another example of our political leaders ignoring the Indigenous community's views.

Many Indigenous leaders in recent days have publicly restated their support for a legally binding treaty, including the chairman of the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council, Warren Mundine, and National Congress of Australia's First Peoples chief executive Geoff Scott.

The Greens have also backed a treaty, which, while a legal document, is also fundamentally important symbolically.

Mr Scott argues that the government has long ignored calls for a treaty and he is among many in the Indigenous community who argue that debate over a treaty and constitutional change can take place at the same time. There is a clear logic to the argument that you cannot have recognition without having a relationship, and you cannot have a relationship without some formal understanding of settlement - that is, a treaty.

While calls for a treaty from the Indigenous community are not new, political leaders have rarely seized the issue. Bob Hawke promised a treaty when he was prime minister, John Howard quashed the proposition in 2000 and no prime minister has championed the idea since.

Among the US, Canada and New Zealand, countries with comparable settlement histories, Australia is alone in failing to recognise Indigenous sovereignty with a treaty. Mr Turnbull says now is not the right time, that discussion of a treaty would muddy the waters for constitutional reform, but why is it never the right time for this issue to be considered? The Indigenous community suffers shocking outcomes in such areas as health, employment, incarceration and education.

Constitutional reform and a treaty are not either/or propositions and are both matters of justice and respect. Political leaders ought to demonstrate genuine commitment to Indigenous people and engage in a national discussion of these defining issues.

The Age believes Australians are eminently capable of simultaneously considering constitutional recognition and a treaty, both crucial to a fairer future for this nation's first peoples.