
Treaty talk dooms referendum: indigenous panel head

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The chairman of the federal government's First Australians recognition panel is "vehemently opposed" to a debate on a treaty with Aboriginal people because it will destroy the chances of a successful referendum next year.

John Anderson, former deputy prime minister and chairman of the indigenous recognition panel, believes there is "great good will" among Australians for constitutional changes but warns "any prospect of a treaty" will have a damaging effect on the referendum process.

Bill Shorten's support on Monday for a treaty as part of a "post-recognition" settlement with Aborigines brought a sharp rebuke from Malcolm Turnbull about politicising the debate in an election campaign and "undermining" the bipartisan process for constitutional change.

The debate about symbolism, history, practical reconciliation and indigenous recognition has created a diversion in the election campaign, with Barnaby Joyce yesterday disagreeing with the Prime Minister's concession that the British landing in Australia in 1788 was an "invasion" after Mr Shorten also acknowledged it could be described that way. The Deputy Prime Minister and Nationals leader broke with Mr Turnbull and Mr Shorten to reject the use of the word "invasion" to describe white settlement.

"My view is that if you are going to have an invasion, you need an army," Mr Joyce said.

Asked why the European arrivals were not an invasion, Mr Joyce said: "Because they were prisoners that came to Australia. They didn't want to be here." Mr Anderson said he didn't want to get into a political debate but was concerned about getting a referendum passed next year on the 50th anniversary of the -overwhelmingly supported 1967 changes on Aboriginal inclusion.

"I know from the research we did for the panel recommendation that there is enormous good will towards constitutional recognition for the first Australians but any sign of something that singles out one racial group will derail the process," Mr Anderson told *The Australian* last night.

He said Mr Turnbull was "absolutely right" in the past two days to caution against "muddying the waters" of constitutional recognition with calls for a treaty.

Mr Anderson said the 2014 report that recommended constitutional recognition said the research showed a successful referendum would be difficult despite the enormous good will, because people were uncertain of what the proposal meant and strong opposition to any special treatment, such as a treaty, for any group.

"I do not support a treaty," he said, "but I know any suggestion that constitutional recognition is part of a process towards a treaty will have a deleterious effect." After nationwide consultations, Mr Anderson's panel recommended a referendum be held no later than the first half of next year and that "political leadership is needed to break through the ongoing cycle of deliberations".

It also warned that "putting off a referendum increases frustrations and raises expectations of the final model" as well as polarising attitudes on race because of - increasing "constitutional uncertainty" and "unrealistic expectations on several fronts, leading to ambiguity and a sense of frustration among key groups".

Mr Joyce, who was campaigning in Gladstone yesterday, said he supported the Recognise movement aimed at achieving constitutional recognition of indigenous Australians, but warned that talk of a treaty risked undermining the political consensus recognition.

"We need everybody on the same page. If you start making the application too big, you start losing people," he said. On the treaty issue, he said: "I am always a little bit apprehensive about starting to stir up troubles where no troubles exist." Mr Shorten appeared to retreat from his comment on Monday night backing the idea of a treaty, saying yesterday it was "one idea" in what would happen after the constitutional recognition of indigenous Australians.

He only commented on the issue when asked by The Australian what a treaty would entail and who the parties to the treaty might be. "If we're going to have an equal society, we need to address all the causes of inequality for indigenous Australians," Mr Shorten said while campaigning in Perth.

"The truth of the matter is it is a national shame that your skin colour in this country is a predictor of your life expectancy, whether or not you go to jail or have proper housing, the opportunity for -employment. "And the path towards a proper settlement of equality and an equal go, a fair-go all around for Aboriginal Australians, has to involve constitutional recognition." Mr Shorten cited the views of Labor's new senator for Western Australia, indigenous leader Pat Dodson, to argue that there had to be a discussion about a new settlement after the referendum on -recognition.

"Now the idea of a treaty is one idea in the conversation, and I certainly believe that Australia needs to respect the voices of Aboriginal Australia and give them a voice in their own future," Mr Shorten said.

"But beyond that, if we want to make sure that Aboriginal Australians get a fair go, vote Labor. Vote Labor because we have the plans to improve their educational -outcomes." He then changed the subject to Medicare, Western Australian transport projects and the National Broadband Network.