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## **Coalition is far from settled on indigenous reform**

By Patricia Karvelas  
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It may not be one of the central campaign issues but if Malcolm Turnbull becomes Prime Minister again on July 3, his pledge to get indigenous constitutional reform through is fraught.

The notion that there is bipartisanship on this issue masks a deeper truth. Significant numbers of Liberal and National MPs are deeply agnostic about this issue or actively resistant and prepared to break ranks.

One MP told me the recognition process had failed to go through party processes from the moment John Howard had promised it in 2007. The view is that this has "never" gone through the partyroom and that the Liberal Party "base" would never accept even the most basic change, let alone something more ambitious.

What complicates this for the Prime Minister is that indigenous Australians will never accept tokenistic changes to the nation's founding document. Why would they use significant political capital to achieve a reform that is superficial and meaningless? Turnbull faces the challenge of satisfying their needs against a group in his own party who think almost any change is too much. Minimalism is an option they would consider to forge peace - but the minimalism would fail to satisfy most activists in this space.

One unintentional consequence of Tony Abbott being deposed as prime minister is some Coalition MPs becoming emboldened to reject changing the Constitution to acknowledge First Australians. The great irony is that Tony Abbott - the conservative - was given more licence to push this agenda by his side of politics because he had made it his signature issue.

Brand Abbott - with all its eccentricities - was deeply linked to indigenous constitutional reform. Turnbull by contrast, though "wetter" and more progressive, has not made this his signature issue. Some fear that will be exploited by some constitutional conservatives among the Coalition MPs.

Those people feel steamrolled by the entire process and are prepared to resist change when the process reaches a tipping point and a question is presented.

One MP told me there had been a plan to push back against Abbott on this issue when a question was finally framed and that there was a widespread view that he had mismanaged the local governed referendum he initially supported but then dumped.

Some Turnbull supporters say though there is division on this issue, his experience with the republic means he will more deftly manage it in a divided partyroom.

"No one knows how hard it is to get a referendum up more than Malcolm Turnbull. His experience puts him in a far better position to navigate all the problems that referendum campaigns inevitably throw up," one MP told me on condition of anonymity.

Last week the Prime Minister used the anniversary of the 1967 anti-discrimination referendum to focus on indigenous employment, promising \$115 million for entrepreneurs. He said that on the 49th anniversary of the referendum "we look forward to the referendum on recognition next year. " Asked about opposition to constitutional recognition of indigenous Australians within the Coalition, Turnbull stood firm on Saturday. "The government's position is to support the recognition of our first peoples in the Constitution," he said.

"My party, my government, is committed to that constitutional recognition, but we obviously have to have the form of words, the amendment, coming from our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities because it has to be an amendment that is not only acceptable and supported by the broader Australian community in the referendum, but it also has to be an amendment that is meaningful, that sings, that speaks to the First Australians." Bill Shorten has stopped short of putting a timeframe to a referendum on constitutional recognition if Labor wins on July 2, but says he is committed to it at the earliest possible moment.

Father of reconciliation and now Labor senator Pat Dodson, previously a member of the referendum council, said a series of conventions and conferences still have to settle on a proposal that people support.

Abbott had aimed for May next year to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum. It is unlikely that deadline will be met. But if Turnbull does make this a priority next year, expect some Coalition MPs to threaten to break ranks and run a "no" campaign if the proposition goes too far, in their view. How Turnbull manages this will be one of the biggest early tests of his term if he is returned as Prime Minister. His challenge is complex and enormous.

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