

Government rejection of referendum proposal sends 'shockwaves' through Indigenous community

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The Turnbull government has been accused of turning its back on Indigenous people after cabinet rejected the proposal for a constitutionally enshrined 'voice' based on fears it would be seen as a third chamber of Australia's Parliament.

Aboriginal advocate Noel Pearson said Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull had broken the hearts of Indigenous Australians, while the National Congress of Australia's First People's said the decision had sent "shockwaves" through Indigenous communities.



Opposition Leader Bill Shorten, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Lucy Turnbull and Minister for Indigenous Affairs Nigel Scullion at Indigenous event The Long Walk earlier this year

Cabinet knocked back the idea of an Indigenous 'Voice to Parliament' - the central recommendation of a recent convention at Uluru - because it was not "desirable or capable of winning acceptance in a referendum". Mr Turnbull has now moved to develop a more modest proposal.

In a statement, Mr Turnbull, Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion and Attorney-General George Brandis said the idea of a representative assembly for Indigenous Australia - in addition to the House of Representatives and Senate - would be

inconsistent with the fundamental democratic principle of all citizens having equal civic rights.



Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Opposition Leader Bill Shorten and Labor senator Pat Dodson at a meeting of the Indigenous Referendum Council in July.

"It would inevitably become seen as a third chamber of Parliament," the trio said of the proposal, which called for an advisory body only without veto power over legislation.

The government said there were doubts about how the body would function, as well as whether such a "radical change to our constitution's representative institutions" had any realistic prospect of being supported by a majority of Australians at a referendum.

Senator Scullion said the proposal was guaranteed to fail, a result he predicted would have set back the cause of reconciliation by decades.

A furious Mr Pearson accused the government of "egregiously dishonest" dog-whistling in their argument against the Voice.

"Malcolm Turnbull has certainly consigned himself prematurely to a footnote in Australian prime ministerial history," the veteran activist told ABC radio.

"There's no reconciliation and recognition under this Prime Minister," he said.

National Congress co-chair Jackie Huggins said: "People are disappointed that the Prime Minister and cabinet has not heard the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the country."

The proposal for a Voice to Parliament emerged from a year-long national consultation process with Indigenous communities and a summit of 300 leaders at Uluru in May, which emphatically rejected recognition in the constitution that is merely symbolic.

The government has announced a decision on the Referendum Council's other recommendation, a Makarrata commission that would oversee a truth and reconciliation process and the creation of treaties between government and Indigenous communities.

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten and Senator Patrick Dodson said "this looks to be a sad day for First Nations Australians and all of us who believe First Nations people deserve meaningful recognition in our nation's constitution".

"All of this indicates that Malcolm Turnbull is seeking to impose his own view of what recognition of First Nations people should be and does not seem willing to listen to First Australians about what recognition and reconciliation means to them," the pair said in a statement.

Labor, which announced its support for the Voice and a "Makarrata" reconciliation commission in August, warned that "without bipartisanship, the path from here is far from clear".

The government will now back Labor's suggestion of a parliamentary committee to decide on a final referendum proposal.

Hoping to rediscover bipartisanship, the government wants the committee to examine the high-level work conducted on Indigenous recognition over the last decade, including the 2012 expert panel and 2015 committee report.

Greens senator Rachel Siewert said she was "deeply distressed" by the government's decision.

"I urge Malcolm Turnbull to show leadership and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to implement the Referendum Council's recommendation," Senator Siewert said.

Conservative think tank the Institute of Public Affairs welcomed the government's decision.

"The Coalition government's decision to reject the divisive Indigenous-only 'Voice to Parliament' is a win for equality and liberal democracy," IPA policy director Simon Breheny said.

Former prime minister Tony Abbott also said it was the correct decision.

"Indigenous recognition should come in a way that brings all of us together and this proposal, for a further level of indigenous representation, was unlikely to achieve that," Mr Abbott said.