

INDIGENOUS

Mining giant backs recognition of indigenous in Constitution



Recognise joint campaign director Tanya Hosch with BHP Billiton chief executive Andrew Mackenzie yesterday. Picture: Aaron Francis

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- SARAH MARTIN
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BHP Billiton will today join the campaign to include indigenous Australians in the Constitution, as Tony Abbott announces a long-awaited meeting on recognition in July.

BHP Billiton chief executive Andrew Mackenzie said the mining giant had “unconditional” support for recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Constitution. “We are nailing our colours very firmly and early to a very - important mast,” Mr Mackenzie said.

Announcing the commitment today to mark the anniversary of the 1967 referendum on indigenous rights, Mr Mackenzie said he hoped a consensus would emerge on the model for change. “We want to find a way forward through the reform of the Constitution that garners an enormous support, but garners that support because it has that consensus behind it,” he said.

“It would be wonderful if we are going to build an overwhelming majority in the country (and) if there was broad multi-partisan support for this right across the spectrum of politics.”

The Prime Minister and Bill Shorten will meet indigenous leaders involved in the debate in Sydney on July 6.

“The meeting will help to inform the process for deciding on a referendum proposal that will have the best chance of success,” Mr Abbott said. “It will be an important opportunity ... to hear the views of a range of indigenous Australians as our country contemplates change.”

Mr Abbott said he and the Opposition Leader maintained a bipartisan commitment to recognising indigenous Australians, which would “complete our constitution, rather than simply change it ... This should be a unifying moment for our nation and this meeting will be an important part of this journey”.

A parliamentary committee report on the next steps to achieve a successful referendum in 2017 that had been due by the end of next month will be released after the meeting takes place.

Indigenous and political leaders will debate the merits of various proposals for change at the meeting, including that of Cape York leader Noel Pearson, who wants a declaration of recognition paired with an indigenous representative body.

His proposal has the support of some indigenous leaders and conservatives, but has failed to convince many others, who remain committed to the recommendations of an expert panel made in 2012.

Mr Pearson, Patrick Dodson, Warren Mundine, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Mick Gooda and Recognise joint campaign director Tanya Hosch will also be at the meeting.

Ms Hosch welcomed BHP Billiton’s commitment to the campaign: “For them to add their voice to this, we hope it will encourage others to step forward proudly ... and join with them.”