

## **End of indigenous council 'a chance to re-engage'**

By Stephen Fitzpatrick  
*Australian*  
3 February 2017

Malcolm Turnbull has been warned that he should listen to a full range of representative indigenous voices rather than relying on a “handpicked” council that can be suspended on a “whim”.

The Prime Minister’s 12-member Indigenous Advisory Council, established by Tony Abbott in 2013 and chaired by Warren Mundine, ended its term this week without any indication of what will follow it.

A spokesperson for Mr Turnbull said yesterday he was “committed to (its) continuation” and new members would be appointed by cabinet. On radio, Mr Turnbull described the move as a “refresh”.

However, National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples co-chair Rod Little said the suspension offered a chance to re-engage with the peak body, whose funding was eliminated in last year’s budget.

“Congress is, and will be, a much more valuable informant to the parliament than handpicked individuals with lesser networks, knowledge or experience across matters impacting on our people on a daily basis,” Mr Little said.

Co-chair Jackie Huggins said: “We have within our membership professionals, academics, trained and experienced persons, and organisations and services; plus most importantly the beneficiaries of services who would, in anyone’s mind, be the best sources to inform of the impacts of policies, programs and services.”

Labor’s indigenous affairs spokesman Patrick Dodson said the suspension was “an opportunity to reinstate the primacy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities to be front and centre of indigenous policy and strategy delivery. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander decision-making needs to be returned to communities and their entities. This path will give some credibility to the government’s mantra of doing things with us, not to us.”

Indigenous Labor MP Linda Burney described the council as having been “flawed from the start” and said “we cannot keep seeing bodies established and abolished on the whim of the prime minister of the day”.

“We already have an elected body, the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples. I would hope to see the congress, as well as the many other Aboriginal community bodies which already exist, given a seat at the table.

"Any new process will need to see a far greater level of transparency and ownership by the Aboriginal community." Mr Mundine said yesterday it "would be a matter of where indigenous affairs policy goes for now; whether there's a council or not isn't important, the real question is what is Mr Turnbull's drive forward". He said as recently as a week ago Mr Turnbull seemed not to have made up his mind about continuing the council.