

Pat Dodson and Nigel Scullion spar over 'perplexing' Indigenous voice budget allocation

Indigenous affairs minister says \$7.3m will be invested 'to see what Aboriginal peoples' view is'

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The Indigenous affairs minister, Nigel Scullion, has defended the budget allocation of \$7.3m for a co-design of an Indigenous voice to parliament as necessary – saying there is still not enough detail for Australians to support it.

Scullion told parliament the voice “still after all this time, is five letters”.

“We would like to understand what a voice is before we put it to the Australian people,” Scullion said in response to repeated questioning.

The West Australian Labor senator Pat Dodson said he was “perplexed” by the \$7.3m allocation, and asked whether it meant the prime minister, Scullion, or the party had changed their minds about rejecting a voice to parliament.

“I don’t accept that I or anyone else has changed their mind, senator,” Scullion replied.

Dodson said the request of the First Nations peoples at Uluru was a voice entrenched in the constitution.

“The premise you are putting forward is somehow we should support the Uluru statement,” Scullion replied. “You know my view about that. I think the Uluru statement was so lacking in detail that no one can support it, and most Australians agree with me, senator. That’s the problem. So this process is to put some meat on the bones, so we can all actually understand what that is.

“It’s more than poetry, that’s what was asked for.”

Dodson said he was trying to clarify whether there was now a Coalition commitment to a referendum process, to entrench the voice in the constitution.

“A referendum for what? What’s the proposal? What’s the proposition?” Scullion shot back. “The voice? That’s just five letters, it’s gotta be a bit better than that, mate. That’s the challenge, that’s why we have to invest \$7.3m to see what Aboriginal peoples’ view is.”

There have been several reports in recent years canvassing proposals and processes for a constitutionally enshrined voice to parliament, including those of the Referendum Council (2017), the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017), the joint

select committee on constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (2015), and the expert panel on constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians (2012).

“We would like to understand what a voice is before we put it to the Australian people,” Scullion said. “And this process is a significant investment that will allow that to happen and that is consistent with the recommendations of your committee.”

The minister was referring to the joint select committee on constitutional recognition chaired by Dodson and the Liberal MP Julian Leeser, the most recent of these processes, which released its report in November.

The Liberal senator Dean Smith estimated that the amount of government funds invested to date on various constitutional recognition processes was between \$30m and 40m, and wondered how Scullion might characterise the success of that expenditure.

“I think it’s an issue that is now much higher in the psyche ... but in the detail, we haven’t progressed at all,” Scullion said. “Let’s hope this next investment and those discussions lead to a more effective, efficient outcome that we’ve had so far.”

Thursday night’s hearing may be Scullion’s last as Indigenous affairs minister before a federal election is called.

The chairman of the committee, Senator James Paterson, opened proceedings by saying: “It may be your last. If it is, then last can I just place on record the committee’s gratitude for all your work in this area.”

The associate secretary of Indigenous affairs in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Ray Griggs, also acknowledged Scullion’s contribution.

“While many things can be debated and argued in this place, it’s hard to argue with the minister’s exceptional drive and energy and commitment to his portfolio commitments and we collectively wish him well on the next part of his journey,” Griggs said.