

Malcolm Turnbull ‘lying’ on indigenous voice plan: Pearson



Malcolm Turnbull at the Garma Festival earlier this year in North-east Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory with Nigel Scullion with dancers from the Gumatj clan.

The Australian

- 6 November 2017
- Stephen Fitzpatrick
Indigenous Affairs Editor

Moves towards indigenous constitutional recognition have reached a damaging impasse, with Malcolm Turnbull warning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders they need to do more to get into parliament and Cape York leader Noel Pearson branding the Prime Minister a “liar” who had withdrawn his support for a key proposal.

Mr Turnbull went on the attack yesterday in comments about a now-abandoned constitutionally enshrined indigenous advisory body, describing it as “not consistent with all of the work that had been done on the recognition agenda previously”.

The suggestion prompted a stinging rebuke from Dr Pearson, who last night said a sequence of meetings starting in 2015 demonstrated Mr Turnbull had initially backed the so-called “voice” to parliament.

“He is lying; the fact is that he once encouraged me in relation to the voice,” a furious Dr Pearson told *The Australian*. “He is engaged in a historic lie and the record needs to be set straight.”

In his first remarks since announcing 12 days ago cabinet had ditched the proposal, Mr Turnbull said there were already five indigenous members of federal parliament, and the aim should be for that to increase. “To have a national representative assembly, which is what we’re talking about here, which would be in the Constitution, and to which only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders could be elected, is contrary to the principles of equality, of citizenship in Australia and it would inevitably be seen as a ‘third chamber’,” he said.

“All Australians, whether they are a First Australian whose forebears have been here for 60,000 years, or whether they’ve just got their citizenship in a ceremony last week, have the same right to vote for, stand for and serve in our parliament.”

The “third chamber” assertion put by senior Coalition figures has been widely discredited, including by the Law Council of Australia. Mr Turnbull also repeated criticism that the Referendum Council provided no detail on the body, without acknowledging a separate 78-page taxpayer-funded “design issues” research document, which was submitted to him by the council at the same time as its report.

“The drafting of the recommendations was done exclusively by (constitutional lawyer and University of NSW pro vice- chancellor) Megan Davis and Murray Gleeson — a former chief justice of the High Court,” Dr Pearson said. “If there’s insufficient detail or questions about whether it complied with the terms of reference and so on, that is down to the former chief justice of the High Court — is he really saying that?”

Dr Pearson said he had texted the Prime Minister repeatedly seeking a discussion, but his advances had been ignored.

The Referendum Council was tasked with running a series of regional indigenous dialogues in which five models for reform were canvassed, one of these being the indigenous voice to parliament. Concerned that Mr Turnbull’s previous support for the voice had waned, members wrote to him and Bill Shorten seeking clarification.

In a written response last November from the two leaders which has been sighted by *The Australian*, the council was instructed that “the Regional Dialogues should proceed as planned, without delay, and that all models should be equally tested with the community”.