

Q&A: Noel Pearson critical of response to Aboriginal recognition plan



Noel Pearson has called for a referendum within a year. Picture: James Croucher

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- Greg Brown

Indigenous leader Noel Pearson has criticised the early political response to the proposal for a constitutionally recognised Aboriginal “voice” as he called for a referendum to be held within a year.

Mr Pearson said that politicians should have been more considered in responding to indigenous leaders who repudiated the so-called minimalist change to the wording of the Constitution so it would recognise indigenous Australians.

Instead, the Referendum Council agreed last week the Constitution should be changed to recognise a body that would advise Parliament on laws relating to Aborigines.

Mr Pearson said on ABC’s Q&A that the proposals in the Uluru Statement last Friday would bring real change to indigenous Australians and they should have been celebrated.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said on the weekend that only “conservative” constitutional changes would succeed while Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce said the proposal was an overreach.

“It was a profound moment at Uluru. It was a culmination of the work of (fellow panellists Pat Anderson and Megan Davis) here who led the dialogues relentlessly for six months,” Mr Pearson said.

“A consensus position was reached and, you know, it was a bit disappointing and we didn’t pause and honour the statement.

“(Former US president) Lyndon Johnson brought civil rights by playing a very long game - going way back in his political career, plotting the day when he would one day have the opportunity to work with civil rights leaders to deliver change.

“I think there’s a window here that we can seize, but the political leaders of the country have got to do a lot of catch up. There’s been no Lyndon Johnson plotting and trying to crowbar the planets into alignment.”

Mr Pearson said that the time for action had come on holding a referendum to give Aborigines a greater say in their own affairs.

“We should cut to the chase now and have a question in the next 12 months. We have been 10 years into this, we’ll be into year 11 if we put it off too much longer. There is tremendous goodwill in the Australian community for a successful referendum,” he said.

“The challenge for us is to get through the first hurdle, which is this Parliament. We can only do that if Australians with goodwill help us persuade these guys in relation to what is a set of modest but profoundly important proposal.”



Stan Grant has warned that Indigenous people are ‘not going away’. Picture: John Feder

Mr Pearson appeared on the panel with co-chair of the Referendum Council Ms Anderson, lawyer and activist Professor Davis, playwright Nakkiah Lui and journalist Stan Grant.

Mr Grant said that politicians were selling Australia short for saying that only conservative changes would be successful.

“It’s going to get very political, but here is the thing - I think our politicians sell us short as a nation all the time,” he said.

“Don’t underestimate the goodwill of Australians and don’t underestimate the patience and persistence of our people because they’re not going away.”

Professor Davis said that Mr Joyce’s claim that the body would be like a third chamber of parliament was wrong.

“One he hasn’t read the report. That’s one important point. The second one is that he’s inaccurate. It’s not true. It’s not a third chamber of Parliament,” she said.

“On the issue of overreach, the actual reform is quite modest. It’s actually quite common in many parts of the world, particularly in western liberal democracies. These are the kind of things that were spoken about in the dialogues.”

Mr Pearson said that the body proposed by the Referendum Council could be elected democratically by different Aboriginal tribes. He said it would be like the “Tent Embassy in stone”.

“It would be elected by the First Nations. I think it’s important to understand that the First Nations across the country,” he said.

“The tribes, as they used to be called, or the language groups right across the country, it would be those units.

“We’re going to formalise the indigenous voice in this country, going to get out from under the fringes, out of the fringes and the shadows, and be put in the centre of action, the democratic action in this country, and its primary function will be to provide political and policy advice to this Parliament and to the government of the day.”

The statement also called for the creation of a new body called Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement making, or treaties, between governments and indigenous tribes. This would not require constitutional acknowledgment.

“The general model is that it would be an umpire that sits between the government and the Parliament, and the First Nations of Australia, and supervise agreement-making. So it would be in the form of an eminent umpire, like the Waitangi Tribunal in New Zealand,” Mr Pearson said.

“That would be legislated to perform this function of supervising agreement making and importantly a series of agreements down at the local level, at the First Nation level.”

Ms Anderson said that the changes recommended in the Uluru Statement would bring substantive changes to the welfare of Aborigines.

“In 2017 we’re asking to be heard. We are voiceless and powerless in our own lands. This is our country. We have been here for 60,000 years,” she said.

“There has to be substantive change, structural change that will make a difference. We have been asking for this since 1840 and nobody listens and hears us. I don’t understand that.

“What is it that we’re saying that you can’t understand? I’m hopeful this is an opportunity, I think, Australia is ready for it. I think we’re mature enough and sophisticated enough to have this what might be a difficult conversation, but for goodness sake let’s have it and be done with it.”