

Liberals won't accept Indigenous recognition model, Institute of Public Affairs warns

Head of libertarian thinktank rejects proposal put forward at Uluru talks as an attempt to 'enshrine racial division in the constitution'



A Gumatj dancer from East Arnhem Land performs at the opening ceremony of last week's convention on constitutional recognition in Mutitjulu, near Uluru. Photograph: Calla Wahlquist for the Guardian

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A constitutionally enshrined Indigenous voice in parliament is “unlikely to ever be accepted by the majority in the Liberal party”, the Institute of Public Affairs executive director has warned.

John Roskam, the head of the influential libertarian thinktank, rejected the proposal put forward by the Referendum Council at a meeting of more than 250 community leaders at Uluru, labelling it an attempt to “enshrine racial division in the constitution”.

Conservative Coalition MPs including Craig Kelly and George Christensen have lined up to criticise the proposal, but it was supported by MP Julian Leeser, suggesting the issue will be highly divisive in the party room.

In a statement on Friday the Uluru conference said Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were the sovereign first peoples of Australia and a significant practical change was needed, not a symbolic reform. In addition to the proposed Indigenous voice in parliament, it called for a commission that would lead to a treaty.

In 2015 the IPA campaigned against constitutional recognition, arguing instead that all references to race should be removed from the constitution to assert the principle of equality.

On Monday Roskam told Guardian Australia parliament represented all Australians and the suggestion of a separate Indigenous voice was “just as offensive as to give people a special say due to their religion, or gender or anything else”.

“In reality, all policy decisions are Indigenous policy decisions, because Indigenous Australians are Australians.”

Roskam said that the “moral force [of the Indigenous body] would be very significant, in effect making it difficult to override it”, describing it as an “effective veto” on matters of policy such as the Northern Territory intervention.

On the proposed treaty, Roskam argued it was impossible for the crown – representing all Australians – to make an agreement with a subset of Australians, the Indigenous nations.

“The idea of a treaty is radical identity politics. In any case a country cannot have a treaty with itself.”

He said the point of the 1967 referendum, in which Australia resolved to count Indigenous people in the census, was “to make us all the same” but the recognition proposal would do the opposite.

“All parties should focus on what unites Australians and brings us together. These proposals are unlikely to ever be accepted by the majority of the Liberal party.”

The IPA is highly influential in the Coalition, leading campaigns against superannuation reform that resulted in major changes to the government’s election policy and forcing reform of section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act back on to the agenda.

On Monday Ken Wyatt, the commonwealth’s first Indigenous minister, told ABC AM he was “extremely confident” the Uluru talks would lead to a referendum on recognition next year.

Wyatt said scare campaigns had the potential to derail the process and advocated an awareness program “that informs all Australians of the intent behind the set of words – what it means – and that it’s not in enshrining special privileges”.

“But it is in fact recognising the reality that Aboriginal and Torres Islander people lived on this continent long before settlement, and that Australia’s history should be reflected in that statement within the constitution.”

Leeser, a Sydney Liberal MP and constitutional conservative, welcomed the Indigenous delegates’ strong rejection of earlier proposals for purely symbolic recognition or anti-discrimination reforms which he characterised as a “one-clause bill of rights.”

Leeser said the government should consider a representative body if it did not have voting rights or a right of veto. He said the Liberal party traditionally had been opposed to a treaty but a “settlement” could be contemplated.

The conservative Liberal backbencher Craig Kelly said the Indigenous body in parliament would be “very divisive in the community” and many in the Coalition party room would be “very reluctant” to pursue the full recommendations agreed at Uluru.

He said there were now a number of Indigenous MPs and they were a strong voice for their community.

Influential backbench MP George Christensen told Sky News it was “dangerous” to give “one group special privileges that no other group in the country has”.

Christensen said he would vote against the proposal in both the lower house and in any referendum, saying recognition was “segregating us”.

He said the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, which was abolished by the Howard government, was “a demonstrable failure ... [that] elevated one section of our society to a special basis where there were special policies in place for them”.

Christensen said that government should work for practical outcomes for Indigenous Australians, such as jobs, health and education rather than the “academic, elitist” issue of recognition.

Cape York Institute senior policy adviser, Shireen Morris, said the proposal was not about dividing Australians but “creating a fairer relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Australian government”.

Morris said parliament “already makes Indigenous-specific laws” and could do so without the race power, as it had done for the Northern Territory intervention.

“All this says proposal says is: of course Indigenous should have a fair say and a fair voice in policies that affect them.”

Morris said the objection to the crown making a treaty “with itself” were philosophical but in practice the government enters agreements all the time, including native title agreements.

The Referendum Council has been contacted for comment