

‘Stringing people along’: New fears Coalition cannot deliver on Voice



Labor warns the Coalition is running out of time to legislate a Voice before the election.

By David Crowe
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Indigenous groups have urged the federal government to embrace a stronger plan to legislate a voice for First Australians in national decisions, amid growing fears of a conservative backlash that blocks the change before the next election.

Community leaders want the reform to enshrine the Indigenous Voice in the constitution despite Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s objections to the idea, airing widespread support for a stronger model in private consultations.

The stark differences set up a political clash as Indigenous Australians Minister Ken Wyatt promises legislation before the election while Labor believes he has run out of time and should tell communities he cannot meet the deadline.

The government’s consultation summary, obtained by *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, shows strong support for the Voice to be enshrined in the constitution even though this was not in the terms of reference for the inquiry.

“There needs to be a guarantee that governments can’t change the National Voice as they like,” one community member in the NSW regional town of Moree told the consultation process.

“Without a guarantee, people won’t buy into it unless they are sure it will last.”

A community member in Cairns told the consultation process that First Australians were “tired of being invisible” and wanted the constitutional change to make sure they were heard.

In its official summary of the talks, the National Indigenous Australians Agency told the government there were widespread references in the consultations across the country to give the Voice the power of the constitution.

“Key reasons: a sense this is needed to avoid the risk of a Voice being abolished by a future government, and as a form of recognition,” the agency said in the confidential background paper.

The consultations, chaired by Professor Tom Calma and Professor Marcia Langton, are expected to lead to a report to Mr Wyatt within weeks to guide his plan for legislation to set up the Voice before the election.

In other feedback, Indigenous groups expressed concern about the direct election of people to positions in local or national bodies as part of the Voice, amid a debate about whether leaders should be appointed instead.

“If there is an election, it favours people with large families and networks,” said one community member in Broken Hill in NSW.

The Voice is meant to be a structure that gives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people a say on local and national decisions, including by federal Parliament, although the design is yet to be decided.

Mr Wyatt said this week he planned to legislate the Voice before the next election, which is due by May.

“Oh there will be time. We’ve been doing a lot of work on this and I’m buoyed by what our people on the ground are saying,” he told ABC Radio National.

Asked about calls to enshrine the Voice in the constitution, he replied: “But that’s part of the process.”

Mr Morrison has made it clear it was never government policy to amend the constitution to enshrine the Voice.

Liberal backbencher Andrew Bragg has set out a different approach in his new book, *Buraadja*, by saying the Voice should be legislated after the election so a referendum could be held to give the new structure some power in the constitution.

Labor Indigenous Australians spokeswoman Linda Burney said she had offered a bipartisan approach to the Voice in the past but believed the Coalition could not agree on the key issue of constitutional change.

“The government, particularly the minister, is stringing people along, particularly First Nations people,” she said.

“I also think that there just isn’t time for what Ken is saying, even if it is only a legislative voice, because we’ve got eight weeks [of sittings in Parliament] to the end of the year, and they will not do this next year.

“And the really important point is that a model has to go to Cabinet. And then it has to go through the Coalition party room. Ken has enormous problems in his party room.”

Ms Burney said Labor would take a stronger alternative to voters at the election, including a Voice that is enshrined in the constitution, because she expected the conservative voices in the government to block ambitious reform.

The government’s consultation summary notes the Institute of Public Affairs, a conservative think-tank, says a Voice is “fundamentally inconsistent with mainstream Australian values” and would create a parallel system of political representation based on race.

Ms Burney said Mr Wyatt should be more direct with Australians about how he would find a path through these objections.

“Ken has flipped and flopped on this like you wouldn’t believe. What is the for what’s going to happen?” she said.

“It’s a bit like the climate change debate within the Coalition party room – nobody’s going to agree.”

A separate analysis of the consultation documents found there were “deep concerns” the government was not listening to First Australians on the best model.

“Of [the] submissions, 90 per cent believe the First Nations Voice should be constitutionally enshrined in line with the Uluru Statement from the Heart,” wrote University of New South Wales academics Dani Larkin, Emma Buxton-Namisnyk and Gabrielle Appleby in an analysis published by *The Conversation* on Tuesday.