

## **Labor must not betray Indigenous voters by delaying voice to parliament, Keating and Pearson say**

*Former prime minister and Indigenous leader say that if the ALP wins government, it must hold a referendum in its first term*



*Noel Pearson fears Labor could repeat the mistakes of the past by delaying a referendum on constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians.*

Lorena Allam  
Wed 6 Apr 2022

Paul Keating and Noel Pearson have said that if Labor wins government, it must not postpone a referendum on a voice to parliament, lest it repeat the mistakes of the past and betray its base of loyal Aboriginal voters.

In a wide-ranging conversation in Sydney on Wednesday, the director of the Cape York Institute and the former prime minister discussed a voice to parliament, constitutional recognition and treaty-making.

Keating said Labor should be “on the front foot” on negotiating a treaty with Indigenous people, and noted that the point of the voice to parliament was to “provide a measure of empowerment” that had been lacking since the abolition of ATSIC under the Howard government.

“The centrality of these ideas feed the truth of the [Labor] party’s existence, feeds its soul. Otherwise you live a lie,” Keating said. “I tried in the Redfern speech to articulate the lie, but we shouldn’t be living the lie ... we’re still living the lie.”

Pearson said constitutional recognition was necessary first, and warned Labor not to postpone a referendum until a second term of office.



*'We're still living the lie,' says Paul Keating.*

Pearson, one of the key architects of the Uluru statement from the heart, said there has not been a public policy issue as “protracted” as the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Islander people, noting that in the 14 years since the commitment to recognition was made at the 2007 election, there have been four parliamentary processes and three public inquiries, but no real progress.

“[John] Howard went into the 2007 election with that commitment. Kevin Rudd immediately said he would do the same. And the unfortunate thing was, when it was clear that Rudd was going to prevail at the election, he said we will deal with this in the second term. He never got a second term.

“And I fear that the opposition now is in danger of repeating the same mistake, deferring the question of putting recognition to the Australian people in a referendum to a second term and we’ll repeat the mistake of 2007, 2008.”

Pearson said he had come to terms with “the bitter truth” that “17 long years of a failed experiment in my strategy of reaching out to the political leadership of the right had availed us of nothing in the end”.

He hoped that Labor would hold a referendum in its first term, but said Aboriginal people had been let down in the past.

“There’s probably no other group in Australia that more faithfully votes for Labor than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, yet the Labor party’s respect for that base is often found wanting and they would abandon us – they have abandoned us in

the past, like Bob [Hawke] did with national land rights in the 1980s – at the drop of a hat,” Pearson said.

“The constitutional recognition of a voice would not prevent the parliament from reshaping and redesigning the voice and amending its provisions. But it will always maintain an obligation on the part of the parliament to have a voice. And that’s why the voice is so important.”

Keating and Pearson were in conversation at the Judith Neilson Institute for journalism and ideas on Wednesday, to launch Pearson’s collection of essays, *Mission*.

Keating recalled that in 1998, Labor had offered Pearson the seat of Lawler, saying he felt at the time that Pearson had all the qualities of a future prime minister.

“I’d said to many people that in the primary requirements of leadership, particularly of an organisation such as the Labor party, in the years after I immediately left, I believed you were the most qualified person to basically lead the country,” he said to Pearson.

But Pearson said he didn’t have the “self-belief” at the time to consider it was “a serious idea”. In the book he writes: “I should have tried the political path to power inside the tent, but I hesitated. I did not possess the vantage of self-belief to see its viability. I only see it now in hindsight.”