

Man in the middle: Ken Wyatt on being caught between the Uluru statement and his party

Minister for Indigenous Australians says he has to manage expectations on all sides as he seeks to build a consensus on a voice to parliament

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Ken Wyatt says he doesn't mind being in the middle between Indigenous communities who want a voice enshrined in the constitution and those in his own party who do not. Photograph: Mick Tsikas/AAP

Minister for Indigenous Australians Ken Wyatt will this week announce the third and final group of people he has selected to build consensus on a voice to government, even as he accepts this approach is facing criticism from many quarters.

“The first thing I have to manage is the expectation from our community,” Wyatt said. “And that is diverse across the nation, depending on what the issues are.”

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“The other is the expectation of my own party. And then the expectation that Australia has, given that I'm the Indigenous person who sits in this portfolio and leads it.

Speaking to Guardian Australia, Wyatt said he doesn't mind being in the middle between Indigenous communities who want a voice entrenched in the constitution – after years of reports, inquiries and referendum council recommendations – and those

in his own party who say they will oppose a “divisive” voice and voting “based on race”, no matter what form it takes.

Key supporters of the Uluru Statement from the Heart reject the constitutional recognition he proposes as merely symbolism.

“I don’t have an issue with people who have a completely different and opposing view,” Wyatt said. “That’s the beauty of our country, we can have a range of views. Hence if you look at the membership of all three tiers, it reflects that range of views, including some who were involved with the deliberations around the Uluru statement,” he said.

Wyatt’s three-tier structure has Indigenous and non-Indigenous appointees who will develop models for how a voice to government might operate at a local, regional and national level.

Contrary to the demands expressed in the Uluru statement from the heart, Wyatt wants to legislate the voice before any referendum on constitutional recognition.

His senior advisory group, co-chaired by Marcia Langton and Tom Calma, will propose models for the voice by June.

There was surprise at the inclusion of rightwing commentator Chris Kenny in the national group, but Wyatt said he wanted to hear from as wide a range of views as possible because “that’s society”.

“And if we want to win now, if we want to achieve the outcomes I’m seeking, then I need a reflection of as wide range of views that I would find outside of [Parliament House], in any community.

“Then you can say, I’ve got a diverse group of Australians who have given me advice and believe that this is an acceptable way forward.”

This week, Wyatt will announce the membership of the the third tier of this consultation process: the regional and local level.



National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation CEO Pat Turner and prime minister Scott Morrison at the Indigenous peak bodies roundtable in Canberra last week. Photograph: Mick Tsikas/AAP

“And the regional voices could be cultural. So the Warlpiri people said to me, if you do a local voice, it has to be our cultural group. When I spoke with the Yolngu people and with Gumatj people, with Galarrwuy Yunupingu, they said, we’ve got clan leaders, so you should be shaping it on our clan leader structures.”

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Ken Wyatt

“I’ll be saying to the regional and local voice, I don’t care what the models are. If they vary across the nation, then that’s healthy. One size does not fit all.”

Wyatt said addressing the “deplorable” rates of youth suicide and closing the gap were his key priorities.

“The single challenge that is paramount is closing the gap and working with 50 peak organisations and my parliamentary colleagues, particularly cabinet colleagues.”

Last week Scott Morrison and several senior ministers – including the treasurer, Josh Frydenberg, the deputy PM, Michael McCormack, and the education minister, Dan Tehan – met with Wyatt and the peak Aboriginal community organisations.

They agreed on “priority reforms” including having greater Aboriginal involvement in decision-making and service delivery at a national, regional and local level. There was also a commitment to making sure “all mainstream government agencies and institutions undertake systemic and structural transformation to contribute to closing the gap”.

“It was the first time in a long time that we’ve been in the cabinet room to talk about the best way forward for our people,” the convener of peak organisations, Pat Turner, said after the meeting. “This is not just business as usual.”

Turner said it was a step closer to “where decision-making is shared, and the expertise and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is fully recognised”.

Wyatt said the meeting was “fruitful”.

“I made the point that every minister around the cabinet table has a responsibility for Indigenous people within their portfolios. The PM jumped in and said, we will all be ministers for Indigenous Australians. But he said, my minister [Wyatt] will lead the work that is needed. And that’s a telling comment. It reflects the fact we’re focusing on people, not the issues. By focusing on people, then we will have a better outcome.”