

## Indigenous leaders lay out referendum dates as action urged on Voice



*Megan Davis, Pat Anderson and Noel Pearson with a piti holding the Uluru Statement from the Heart in May 2017.*

By Cameron Gooley  
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First Nations leaders have put forward two potential dates for a referendum on an Indigenous Voice to parliament, prompting Labor leader Anthony Albanese to say he still wants a referendum in the first term of a Labor government but he stopped short of committing to the timeline.

Indigenous Australians Minister Ken Wyatt accused Albanese of walking back on the party's commitments after the largest gathering of Indigenous leaders in five years urged the winner of next month's election to have Australians vote on the matter in the next parliamentary term.

The summit of key Indigenous leaders – convened by the creators of the Uluru Statement from the Heart – met in Yarrabah in Queensland over the weekend, where delegates reaffirmed their support for a constitutionally enshrined Voice to parliament. They proposed two dates for the referendum: May 27, 2023, or January 27, 2024.

Both dates fall on a Saturday, the 2023 option coinciding with the 56th anniversary of the 1967 referendum amending the constitution to allow the government to make laws for Indigenous people and include them in the census. The latter would see it fall the day after Australia Day, also known as Invasion Day or Survival Day to many First Nations people.

During the weekend's meeting, delegates visited the Knowledge Tree on Gunggandji Country in Yarrabah, where the 1967 referendum was planned.

A Voice to parliament would act as an advisory body to MPs regarding legislation and policies that affect First Nations people. Labor is promising to hold a referendum that recognises Indigenous people and also enshrines a Voice to parliament in the constitution. The Coalition's policy is to hold a referendum to recognise Indigenous people in the constitution but hasn't committed to enshrining the Voice within it. Instead, it has pledged to separately legislate Voice bodies.



*Indigenous Australians Minister Ken Wyatt.*

The government promised a referendum on Indigenous recognition in the last term of parliament but scuttled its plans due to the pandemic. Wyatt had also promised to legislate a Voice before the election but in December pushed that plan back to the first half of 2022. The March budget assigned \$31.8 million dollars towards establishing 35 local and regional bodies next financial year. However, no funding was put toward the Voice process in the forward estimates.

While campaigning in Launceston, Albanese said wanted to hold a referendum in the first term of a Labor government, but he wouldn't commit to the timeline put forward by the Uluru Dialogue.

"I'll sit down with Indigenous people and if we're successful, it would be my intention to hold a referendum in our first term," Albanese said.

Wyatt accused Labor of leaving room to walk back previous commitments.

"It is now evident that Labor has no clear plan to empower Indigenous Australians at the local and regional level and aren't committed to the design of the Indigenous

Voice co-design process, which was the result of extensive consultations and engaged 9400 individuals and organisations across Australia,” he said.

“The Morrison government has consistently said that we will go to a referendum once a consensus is reached and at a time it has the best chance of success. It seems that Labor has come to that same position, after pushing the government to rush to a referendum just a year ago,” he said.

Labor spokeswoman for Indigenous Australians Linda Burney pointed to the fact the government failed to deliver its promised referendum and said Labor wants to “maximise the chance of success and do it in a way that has the broad support of the First Nations community”.

Constitutional law expert and Uluru Dialogue co-chair, Professor Megan Davis, said it was time for action on the Voice after years of waiting for change.

“[A Voice] is something the nation has never tried, it’s something the nation has never come at, and we’re saying the time is now and the stars are in alignment in the next term of parliament,” she said.

Davis urged voters to make the issue a priority at the ballot box next month.

“[This affirmation] is really about saying to politicians, look you weren’t ready in 2017, but the Australian people are now,” Davis said.

“This is about the national interest, this is about the common good, this is about closing the gap.”