

Abbott holds race key: Pearson

By Patricia Karvelas
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CAPE York leader Noel Pearson has declared he can convince Tony Abbott to back significant changes to the Constitution, including a contentious clause against racial discrimination, and says the conservative side of politics now ``holds the key'' to a successful referendum to acknowledge the nation's first people.

Mr Pearson confirmed he was in the Opposition Leader's ear advocating for the changes that he argues are crucial to remove racism from the Constitution.

``More than Labor, it is the conservative side of politics that hold the key to this,'' Mr Pearson told *The Australian* yesterday.

``Whether this succeeds or fails rests in their hands more than the other party.''

A 22-member panel, of which Mr Pearson was a member, presented a report last month recommending that the Constitution be altered to remove racist sections and create power for the advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and the protection of their language and culture.

It also called for a clause against racial discrimination.

The new section for the advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders needs to be created, they argued; otherwise laws that pertain to Aborigines would not be legal. ``This is not going to go anywhere without Tony Abbott,'' Mr Pearson said.

``Same as America wouldn't have gone to China without Richard Nixon, this indigenous question is not going to happen without Tony Abbott.''

Mr Abbott said last night: ``I have spoken to Noel. I look forward to further discussions.''

Mr Pearson said there was no rush on constitutional change.

``However long it takes, really, we've got to get it right,'' he said.

Mr Abbott said last week that the expert panel had overreached, and called for the referendum to be held separately from the federal election.

Mr Pearson said that if the race power was removed, which he strongly advocates, but an anti-racial discrimination clause was not included, indigenous people would

go backwards.

``If you replace the race power with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander power, the net effect of doing that is to then enable the commonwealth parliament to only discriminate against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people," he said.

``So other races will be free from discrimination and the only group the parliament has the power to discriminate against will be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

``In a sense, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander power by itself without a prohibition of discrimination will put indigenous Australians in a worse position than they are constitutionally at the moment.

``Whereas if you had an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander power and you prohibited discrimination, that's the best result because all Australians regardless of race would be free from discrimination."

Mr Pearson said he was talking ``to everybody who can lend me their ear". ``Abbott and the Coalition are still at an early stage of understanding the meaning of different propositions themselves and it would be too early to be ruling things in and out completely without understanding the consequences," he said.