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Patrick Dodson carries the possibility of hope

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Without Indigenous leaders' engagement in making policy, the seemingly intractable problems of Indigenous disadvantage are doomed to repeat like a "mantra in some depressing song".

That's what Patrick Dodson told the press when Labor leader Bill Shorten announced the former chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation would be nominated to fill Labor's casual Senate vacancy left by Joe Bullock's resignation in Western Australia. Inevitably the question arises: will Professor Dodson be the one to change the tune of that song, from depressing to optimistic?

It's a coup for Labor. Dodson, a senior Yawuru man from Broome known as the "father of reconciliation" has earned deep respect over three decades in public life for his achievement, intellect, integrity and dogged dedication to improving the lives of his people. He will lift advocacy on Indigenous issues in Parliament to a new level. The scandalous lack of representation of Indigenous Australians in our parliaments makes it hard to argue against this "captain's pick" even though he has never faced a voter. Dodson will be only the second Indigenous Australian appointed to federal Parliament by the Labor party, after Nova Peris in 2013.

Literally less than a handful of Indigenous people have ever been elected to federal Parliament during its 114-year history. They are former Democrats Senator Aden Ridgeway, former Queensland Liberal Senator Neville Bonner and Liberal member Ken Wyatt, the only Indigenous candidate to ever win a seat in the House of Representatives. Queensland Liberal National Party Senator Joanna Lindgren was appointed in 2015. Senator Jacqui Lambie revealed Aboriginal ancestry in her maiden speech.

Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion welcomed Dodson's nomination. He said the most effective way Parliament can help to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is to "ensure we work across party lines in a genuine bipartisan way". Dodson joked that he wouldn't swap "Indigenous tribalism for white fella tribalism": "We can find some solutions to this and I'm happy to work with anyone."

He will need to be. The latest Closing the Gap report shows the dire disadvantage Indigenous Australians continue to experience in life expectancy, education and employment, despite recent advances in school attendance, literacy and numeracy. Before his Senate nomination was announced, Dodson expressed concern that Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was paying relatively little attention to Indigenous policy. Veteran Indigenous advocate Jackie Higgins said there was

presently "no engagement, there is no respect" and she had "never seen Aboriginal affairs at such a low point".

Bill Shorten has said he wants Professor Dodson to focus on constitutional recognition for Indigenous Australians, equality in housing, health, justice and life expectancy and the development of northern Australia. Mr Dodson has resigned his position as co-chair of the Referendum Council but is likely to continue pressing the need for widespread Indigenous consultation to discuss the options for constitutional recognition.

The burden of expectations on Professor Dodson are heavy indeed. Some have drawn an analogy with Peter Garrett, the superstar Labor candidate who at first carried the hopes and ideals of many on the left but whose political career fell well short of those dreams. But Professor Dodson, a former Catholic priest, brings formidable political skills and experience which Mr Garrett lacked, particularly in negotiating a path between fiercely opposing views to bring people with him on a solution.

Aden Ridgeway's time in Parliament presents another comparison. He has spoken of the extreme pressure of being a senator representing the interests of (all of) NSW while being expected, as the only Aboriginal federal politician, to fight for Indigenous rights on multiple fronts.

Dodson's situation will be, thankfully, a bit different. If the NSW deputy opposition leader Linda Burney succeeds in becoming the first Indigenous woman to be elected to the Australian House of Representatives, we can start to see a more positive picture with Indigenous representation on both the Government and Opposition benches. Still not enough, but an improvement. There remains the possibility that broadcaster Stan Grant, too, will contest the next election.

It is unfair to expect Patrick Dodson to be "the one" to change the system that has condemned his people to poverty, discrimination and disadvantage. But if he can be one to stand tall among the many leading us down the path we must travel to fix the enduring national shame of Indigenous disadvantage, so much the better.