

Noel Pearson raises the stakes on ‘voice’



Noel Pearson says it is incontrovertible that ‘Australia doesn’t make sense’ without the constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians.

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Noel Pearson says legislation to establish an Indigenous voice to parliament should be drafted and then set aside, arguing that a referendum to recognise Indigenous Australians in the Constitution should be held before the indigenous advisory body is created.

Mr Pearson, the leader of the Cape York Partnership, said the nation was “incomplete” without constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians in a landmark address in which he ramped up demands for the government to reverse its opposition to a constitutionally enshrined “voice to parliament”.

Mr Pearson’s intervention will reinforce to Aboriginal leaders that Indigenous recognition in the Constitution should be their main priority ahead of a legislated voice to government.

In his address on Wednesday night, Mr Pearson lamented the failure of the political class to achieve constitutional recognition for Indigenous people, noting it had been proposed 14 years ago by John Howard ahead of the 2007 election.

He said constitutional recognition would “bequeath to our children a commonwealth that accords a rightful place to its original peoples”.

The proposal for a constitutionally enshrined voice was formed by Indigenous leaders in the Uluru Statement from the Heart in 2017 but rejected by then prime minister Malcolm Turnbull as a “third chamber to parliament”.

The Morrison government is pursuing a compromise version of the Uluru statement’s proposal in the form of a “voice to government” that would be legislated but not protected in the Constitution.

A panel of prominent Aboriginal Australians, overseen by Marcia Langton and Tom Calma, is leading the design process and public submissions are being received for the “voice to government” that Scott Morrison hopes to legislate.

Mr Pearson is also a member of the design panel, which is divided over the government’s ambition to legislate the voice before considering constitutional recognition, with some members concerned such an approach risks killing off the prospect of more significant reform.

Speaking at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, Mr Pearson proposed the panel complete its design work but urged the government not to legislate and instead shift its attention to recognition in the nation’s founding document.

“Let us complete the legislative design of the voice, and produce an exposure draft of the bill so that all parliamentarians and the members of the Australian public can see exactly what the voice entails,” he said. “Let us set the bill aside and settle on the words of constitutional amendment that recognises Indigenous Australians and upholds the Constitution, and put the amendment to a referendum of the people at the next best opportunity.

“Up until now, non-Indigenous Australians have told themselves that these 250 years of European history is the only thing that matters to Australia.

“This is but the blink of an eye of Australia’s story and recognition will bridge 65,000 years of precolonial history, cultures and languages with these 250 years.”

Mr Pearson said it was incontrovertible that “Australia doesn’t make sense” without the constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians.

“Australia is incomplete without recognition,” Mr Pearson said.

“How could there be an Australia without its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Indigenous peoples? As long as its Indigenous peoples remain unrecognised Australia is an absurdity — a nation missing its most vital heart.”

From the Heart director Dean Parkin, who is working with Mr Pearson to promote the ideals in the Uluru statement, rejected the “gradualism” of a legislated voice.

“We are told we must try a legislated voice before we earn enough credit to buy it at a referendum at some vague point in the future,” he said.

“Can anyone imagine such a patronising condition being put on a proposal for a republic?”

“Untroubled by a lack of evidence or expertise, the gradualists would have us walk away from generational opportunity for reform based on nothing more than Denis Denuto’s vibe of the thing.”

While pushing for the constitutionally enshrined voice, Mr Pearson said the process the government was engaged in “represents our best chance to achieve recognition sought by our old people”.

The Prime Minister has rejected any push to pursue a constitutionally enshrined voice, but Indigenous leaders, who believe Mr Morrison has moderated his language on the issue, are hoping he will back a push for the voice to be enshrined in the Constitution after the final model is released.

The model outlined in the interim report included a requirement for government to make joint decisions with Indigenous people who live in the most remote pockets of Australia.

The body, to be led by two co-chairs, suggests a national voice of between 16 and 20 Indigenous people provide advice to the federal government and parliament on matters of national significance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. That national body would be linked to up to 35 local and regional Indigenous voices from around Australia.

With conservative members of the Coalition opposed to a constitutionally enshrined voice, Mr Pearson declared “repudiation is the enemy of recognition”.

He also said the heritage of British colonialism should not be wiped out of the history books.

“In fighting against the repudiation of the country’s Indigenous heritage, no answer lies in the repudiation of its British heritage,” he said. “They both endure for the memory and advantage of all Australians, even as we face the truths of our colonial past for our history is replete with shame and pride, failure and achievement, fear and love, cruelty and kindness, conflict and comity, mistake and brilliance, folly and glory.

“We should not shy from the truth. Our Australian storylines entwine further each generation. We should ever strive to leave our country better for our children.”