

Recognise campaign: Dodson, Pearson unbowed by PM's snub

[AMOS AIKMAN](#) 12:00AM August 4, 2015 *The Australian*

Angry indigenous leaders have vowed to press ahead with their quest for a unified position on constitutional recognition, regardless of Tony Abbott's unwillingness to fund a new round of consultation specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Some leaders, including West Australian Patrick Dodson, suggested corporate Australia might be asked to fund the meetings aimed at establishing an indigenous consensus view that other Australians could then debate or support. "I do think that many people in Australia would be supportive of indigenous people having those conventions, so we will go to those people and ask for their support, and we will try to undertake the process as we've outlined," Mr Dodson said. "There's a range of corporate entities that have signed up to corporate action plans."

Cape York leader Noel Pearson accused the Prime Minister of failing to grasp the purpose of the meetings, which he said would be the next phase in the referendum process, rather than a backward step.

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"There's a lot of madness but not a lot of method in the way the federal government is conducting itself," Mr Pearson said. "If there's no serious indigenous position then I can't see any referendum being feasible."

"The views of the 3 per cent indigenous population may not decide the final vote, but they're crucial to what the other 97 per cent is asked to vote for. Indigenous views are crucial to the construction of the question."

A panel debate at the Garma Festival in Arnhem Land yesterday descended into opprobrium after it emerged Mr Abbott had declined to back the indigenous consultation round.

Melbourne University indigenous academic Marcia Langton suggested Mr Abbott was too beholden to the backbench MPs who had tried to roll him earlier this year, and to "AFL thugs" who she said were typically Coalition voters.

"They are the tradies who turn up with their Eskies and like nothing better to show to each other how racist and sexist they are," Professor Langton said.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda said he wasn't sure what else to do besides "curling up in the fetal position under the doona".

In a letter faxed to Mr Dodson and Mr Pearson on Friday night, a copy of which has been obtained by *The Australian*, Mr Abbott said his anxiety about a separate indigenous process was that it "jars with finally substituting 'we' for 'them and us'".

"I am in favour of building a consensus, but strongly believe this should be a national consensus in favour of a particular form of recognition rather than simply an indigenous one," Mr Abbott wrote.

"The risk with an indigenous only — or even an indigenous first — process is that it might produce something akin to a log of claims that is unlikely to receive general support."

Mr Pearson described that assertion as "the most offensive line in the whole letter". "It's as if indigenous leaders were not cognisant that we have an expert panel, that there has already been a joint select committee process," he said. "I shook my head when I read that line and thought: 'What do you take us for — idiots?'"

The aim of a new consultation round was not to expand the scope of ideas, but to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people understood the various proposals and to "close the gap" between those now on the table.

Speaking yesterday afternoon, Mr Abbott said he was determined to ensure constitutional recognition succeeded, but that it needed a bipartisan approach. "I am determined to ensure we do get constitutional recognition. What I want to ensure is that it is worth doing and that it is doable," he said. "That's what I want to ensure. Now, plainly, it is important that there's a bipartisan approach. It is important that it's something that can be supported not just by indigenous people but by Australians generally because while it is vital that we do acknowledge and recognise indigenous people in the Constitution, ultimately our Constitution has to belong to every Australian."

Bill Shorten, who had written to Mr Abbott urging him to support indigenous conferences, yesterday urged him to keep an open mind on indigenous conventions. "I know the government has been paralysed by other issues over the past few weeks but this is an issue that needs to be taken seriously," the Opposition Leader said. "We need to remain flexible on how we achieve constitutional recognition. Part of that is ensuring indigenous Australians have their views genuinely heard."

Mr Pearson said that if Mr Abbott wanted clarity then he should show his hand: “When is the Prime Minister going to reveal his thinking? What’s he prepared to champion?” He told ABC radio last night there was at least “unanimity between indigenous leaders and Labor in relation to the process”.

He questioned whether Mr Abbott’s objective was to “punt” the issue into the next term of parliament, saying bipartisanship seemed to have stalled. “In a sense, bipartisanship ends at the election,” he said. “After the next election, one of you will not be here.”

Mr Dodson called on Mr Abbott to “deal with the complexities within his own constituency” and give better leadership.

“It’s definitely not the calibre of leadership that you would associate with someone who wants to be known as the (prime) minister for Aboriginal people — it’s a long way from it,” Mr Dodson said. “We need to go back and have a chat with him, and if he’s not prepared to move then I think we’re going to have some serious problems.”