

Statement: Referendum delay demonstrates lack of government leadership on constitutional recognition

10 August 2016

Today's announcement that a referendum on constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is unlikely to be held next year is the result of a profound lack of leadership by the Federal Government on this important issue.

The Referendum Council, which is responsible for advising the government on the referendum, has announced that it will delay submission of its final report to the government. This virtually eliminates the possibility that a referendum could occur in 2017, as had been previously expected. While we support the Council in its endeavours to ensure that all Australians are adequately consulted, we urge the government to prioritise the issue of constitutional recognition to ensure that it does not get bogged down in confusion and misinformation.

The government's ongoing delays and obfuscations on constitutional recognition have understandably given rise to significant anxiety about the issue in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. These anxieties will only be allayed if the government can demonstrate a clear commitment to a reform process that adequately incorporates and serves the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As long as constitutional recognition remains an apparently peripheral concern for the government, it seems unlikely that any section of the Australian population will be willing to give the referendum that support it needs to be passed and implemented.

We fully support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' ongoing campaigns for a serious national discussion about the possibility of a treaty and/or treaties. We therefore believe that the constitutional recognition process should be dealt with as quickly and effectively as possible to enable the Australian community to embark on the next step of its journey towards reconciliation.