

Monday 6th July 2015

Historic meeting agrees to engagement for constitutional recognition proposal

National advocacy organisation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights today welcomed the agreement between the Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition, and First Peoples representatives to progress engagement on a proposal for constitutional recognition.

ANTaR National Director Andrew Meehan said the meeting was historic, and provided a pathway towards finalising the form recognition of the First Australians in the nations founding document might take.

“ANTaR has been calling for a clearer process for finalising a model for some time, and today’s meeting has put a process forward designed to do this by the middle of next year,” Mr Meehan said.

“It is critical that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the central voice in this, and that any proposal taken to a referendum has the support of the vast majority of First Peoples,” he said.

The process outlined involves members of parliament discussing recognition, and community conferences to provide an opportunity for all Australians to have a say, as well as the Parliamentary Joint Select Committee developing a discussion paper to help facilitate community discussion. A referendum council will be established to progress a range of issues including how a question might be settled, and any next steps.

“While aspects of the process are similar to that undertaken by the Expert Panel in 2011, this provides greater clarity around how engagement will happen to finalise what might be taken to a referendum,” Mr Meehan said.

“As you would expect there are a range of views on recognition, including among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, so this will allow for those views to be aired and discussed in a structured and meaningful way,” he said.

Mr Meehan noted that since the Expert Panel in 2011, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives have consistently told government that any change taken forward must be substantial and meaningful, rather than purely symbolic. He said today was no different.

“It would be extraordinary to move forward on this without that as the starting point. Recognition of the First Peoples must first accord with their wishes,” Mr Meehan said.

ANTaR is the only non-Indigenous organisation dedicated solely to supporting the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and working to educate the wider community, shape public opinion, and speak up for justice, rights and respect for Australia’s First Peoples.

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