

Chance for indigenous constitutional recognition ‘may be squandered’

- [THE AUSTRALIAN](#)
- FEBRUARY 02, 2015 12:00AM
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CRUCIAL bipartisanship on a move to recognise indigenous Australians in the Constitution risks being “squandered” and the momentum exhausted if a form of words and a voting date are not released this year, the Business Council of Australia says.

The BCA, which represents the 100 biggest companies in Australia, said in its submission to parliament’s joint select committee on the matter that it would prosecute the case among its members but could not do so without basic scaffold for the debate.

“Setting a clear process and timeline will allow for a proper awareness campaign, community discussion and a clear advocacy agenda for supporters,” the submission says.

“Failure to do so could squander current bipartisan support and lose important momentum Recognise and others have built over the past three years. If the current process is not followed through, it may be difficult to generate the political will in the near future to restart the agenda.”

The BCA submission says the process, whatever it looks like, must involve indigenous Australians and be developed in advance of a date being announced.

Allens chief executive partner Michael Rose, who leads BCA work on the possible referendum, told *The Australian* the idea was for it to be more than tokenistic.

“I don’t think anybody is suggesting this is the only answer to the many issues which are relevant to indigenous Australians,” he said. “This is another important step in a long process of reconciliation, just like the previous amendment and national apology.

“What we’ve tried to say is that symbols matter. We’re not arguing that it should be merely symbolic but, even if it is, that does not mean it is not worthwhile. Symbolism matters.”

The BCA says, however, that this doesn't mean "substantive change to the body of the Constitution" should be avoided.

It backs an introductory statement or preamble recognising indigenous Australians and the removal of "outdated references to race, in particular section 25".

"If the final referendum proposition includes a 'recognition' preamble or statement and the removal of outdated race references, while preserving the ability of parliament to make laws to benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the current generation of Australians will be in a position to significantly and meaningfully progress the ongoing process of reconciliation," the submission says.

"The experience of business council member companies shows how recognition and respect are fundamental to creating conditions for improved material outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples." Tony Abbott has previously said his preference would be for a vote in 2017 on the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum but nothing has happened on either setting the date or devising the question.

The Prime Minister also warned people advocating for change to "temper their ambitions" so it had the "best possible chance" of succeeding. Legal experts told *The Australian* that developing a model beyond mere symbolism should not be rushed as referendum dynamics are more complex than in 1967, when more than 90 per cent of voters agreed to amend the Constitution.