



MINISTER FOR INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Reference: C14/43855

Dr Dennis Jensen MP
Chair
Parliament of Australia House of Representatives –
Standing Committee on Petitions
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear ~~Dr Jensen~~

Thank you for your letter of 26 May 2014 about a petition regarding the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Constitution. I apologise for the delay in responding.

This matter is a most significant priority for the Government and I appreciate the Committee bringing this petition to my attention. My response to the petition is attached.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are the first inhabitants of this nation, the movement to recognise them in our Constitution presents an historic opportunity to acknowledge their unique culture and history, and their enormous contribution to this nation.

I have copied your correspondence and this letter to the Attorney-General, Senator the Hon George Brandis QC, given his role in progressing Indigenous constitutional recognition.

Yours sincerely

NIGEL SCULLION

NS July 2014

Response to the petition

The Australian Government is strongly committed to pursuing recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are the first inhabitants of this nation, and the movement to recognise them in our Constitution presents an historic opportunity to acknowledge their unique culture and history, and the enormous contribution they have made.

The Government has taken a number of important steps to progress this matter. An effective, multi-partisan process and broad support will be critical to the success of the referendum. This is why Parliament re-established the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Joint Select Committee) on 2 December 2013.

As part of its role, the Joint Select Committee, will inquire into and report on steps that can be taken towards a successful referendum on Indigenous constitutional recognition, including working to build a secure strong multi-partisan parliamentary consensus around the timing, specific content and wording of referendum proposals for Indigenous constitutional recognition. The Joint Select Committee will also take account of the 2012 Expert Panel on the Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians (Expert Panel) recommendations in the course of its inquiry. The Joint Select Committee's final report is due by 30 June 2015.

The Government has also appointed a Panel to undertake a Review under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Recognition Act 2013 to consider the levels of support amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the wider Australian public and the governments of the states and territories for amending the Constitution.

As part of its remit, the Review Panel will consider proposals put forward by the Expert Panel, including giving consideration to those which are most likely to obtain the support of the Australian people.

The Review Panel will report to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs by 28 September 2014, after which a copy of the Review Panel's report will be tabled in Parliament.

The work of both the Review Panel and the Joint Select Committee are critical steps informing the Government on how to achieve constitutional recognition.

The Government continues to fund the 'Recognise' campaign to raise public awareness and support for Indigenous constitutional recognition. Understanding why recognition is important for the nation will be critical for achieving a successful referendum that will unite the country and provide a new foundation into the future.

The Government has indicated that it will take the time necessary to do this right. A successful referendum would be a unifying moment for the nation, similar to the 1967 referendum and the 2008 National Apology. The Government intends to announce its proposed approach to Constitutional Recognition in late 2014.