

Abbott open to treaties with Aboriginal nations

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THE Abbott government has declared itself open to studying whether a plan for a raft of treaties with individual Aboriginal nations should go ahead.

Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion said the word "treaty" scared people but there was merit in exploring whether an idea put forward by Warren Mundine could help indigenous native title groups.

It comes after Labor said the plan, if implemented, could waste millions of dollars, divide the community and set back efforts to recognise indigenous Australians in the Constitution.

As Tony Abbott's chief adviser on Aboriginal affairs, Mr Mundine proposed the idea in an Australia Day address, saying the treaties could allow indigenous Australians to "forgive", while resolving drawn-out native title cases.

"I'd like to talk to Warren Mundine and the new committee about how they think this might work," Senator Scullion said yesterday.

"The word treaty is about an agreement, it's an agreement that recognises certain things. It's an agreement between equals. As I move around and talk to native title groups, they raise issues with me. Many are saying 'We've settled in some cases, now what is the next step?' " he said.

"The land rich, dirt poor scenario still exists in many cases even though they have native title," he said.

"This is a committee that is supposed to provide guidance to government; clearly this is one of the issues we should look at."

Labor's spokesman on indigenous affairs, Shayne Neumann, said Mr Mundine's proposal was "stupid" and would become a "lawyer's picnic".

He said in southeast Queensland alone there were three different groups with overlapping native title claims.

"That is replicated across the country," Mr Neumann said. "If Warren Mundine thinks it's going to be easy to find who we should be negotiating with on behalf of particular nations, he is living in a fantasy land."

Mr Mundine said indigenous nations that signed a treaty with the government would receive formal recognition as a nation and as the traditional owners of a defined area of land and sea.

"In doing so, their native title claims should be recognised and concluded," he said.

Mr Neumann said the proposal overlooked the contested nature of native title claims, and risked setting back the native title process. "It's a legal quagmire. It's hard enough now to get native title standing for indigenous groups."

He said inevitable disputes would sap public support for recognition in the Constitution of prior indigenous occupation of Australia.

Mr Mundine was shocked Labor now had a policy that a treaty was "stupid and divisive".

"I think the Aboriginal community would be surprised by Labor's new policy," he said. "This is a new low for indigenous affairs because we've had decades of bipartisanship and the new shadow minister has decided to make it a partisan issue. This does not help indigenous people."

The Prime Minister has said he wants to hold a referendum on the issue at the next poll.