

Hunt for indigenous recognition model goes on

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Sources have told *The Australian* the committee is likely to endorse Noel Pearson's proposal for a series of constitutional conventions across the country. *Source: News Corp Australia*

After more than two years of consultations, a parliamentary committee examining recognition for indigenous Australians may not resolve a final referendum proposal by its June 30 deadline.

The cross-party committee, led by indigenous Liberal MP Ken Wyatt and indigenous Labor senator Nova Peris, will meet next week to consider delaying a recommended final referendum model in favour of further consultation.

While some MPs believe the committee must deliver on its mandate to prepare a final set of words, other committee members believe doing so would risk further division among indigenous leaders.

Failing to reach consensus on a finalised referendum bill would be a setback to the recognise campaign, which had been hoping the committee would sign

off on a model to promote for a 2017 vote to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum on indigenous rights.

Sources have told *The Australian* the committee is likely to endorse Noel Pearson's proposal for a series of constitutional conventions across the country and will hold off supporting a final proposal until after a crucial July 6 meeting of indigenous leaders with Tony Abbott and Bill Shorten in Sydney.

Other MPs are understood to want to push ahead with a finalised referendum bill, despite lingering division among indigenous leaders. This would form the basis of the July meeting.

The eight-member parliamentary committee was established in November 2012 to build a strong bipartisan parliamentary consensus around the timing, specific content and wording of a referendum proposal for indigenous constitutional recognition. It has spent the past 2½ years consulting on the best steps to achieving constitutional recognition, building on the work of the independent expert panel on recognition, which began its work in 2010.

The parliamentary committee will meet next week to finalise its report, when recommendations will be "thrashed out" to reach a unanimous position, sources say.

"There is still a lot of water to go under the bridge," one committee member said.

With less than a month until the report is due, the committee chairs last week sent a letter to the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader outlining the "options" under consideration.

The Recognise campaign wants the committee to endorse most of the recommendations made by the expert panel in 2012, including the removal of racist clauses, and the inclusion of a new section on recognition.

It also supports the inclusion of a racial non-discrimination clause — section 116a — which has been described by critics as a one-clause bill of rights, but is supported by most indigenous leaders. Recognise argues that extensive consultation has already taken place, and public sentiment is running overwhelmingly in favour of recognising First Australians in the country's founding document.

The parliamentary committee has also been considering a rival proposal from Mr Pearson, the Cape York leader who wants to recognise indigenous

Australians in a declaration of recognition outside of the Constitution and to establish a new indigenous body to consult on policy matters.

Key leaders, including co-chairman of the expert panel Patrick Dodson and the Prime Minister's indigenous adviser Warren Mundine, oppose elements of Mr Pearson's plan.

Mr Mundine stoked tensions this week, declaring Mr Pearson's plan was "radical" and "dangerous" and could condemn the referendum to the same fate as the 1999 republican vote that was unsuccessful largely because of concern about the proposed model.

"Australian people don't vote for things that are radical," he said.

The deliberations come amid warnings that if the chosen proposal attracts a publicly funded "no" campaign, a successful "yes" vote could be derailed.

Liberal senator Cory Bernardi is prepared to trigger a formal "no" campaign by voting against the referendum bill in parliament.

On Friday, Mr Abbott said achieving constitutional recognition remained a "challenge".

"My priority in this area is to bring the recognition campaign to a point where we can successfully put something to the people. It's very important we get this right.

"It's more important that we get it right than that we rush it."

The other members of the parliamentary committee are Liberals Sarah Henderson and James McGrath, Labor's Stephen Jones and Shayne Neumann, the Nationals' Bridget McKenzie and the Greens' Rachel Siewert.