

# No deadline set for vote on First People recognition

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**The freshly appointed co-chair of the body charged with achieving indigenous constitutional recognition, Pat Anderson, has said there are “a range of options on the table” as she backed away from committing to next May, the 40th anniversary of the 1967 referendum on Aboriginal rights, as a deadline.**

Ms Anderson, a prominent health and justice campaigner, was yesterday tapped to step up from her position as a member of the 16-person Referendum Council, filling the gap left by the recent departure of Labor Senate nominee Pat Dodson.

Ms Anderson will join Melbourne lawyer and Reconciliation heavyweight Mark Liebler in steering a series of indigenous consultations and broader conventions to prepare a written recommendation for bipartisan consideration, expected to be delivered by June.

Speaking to *The Australian* after the announcement, Ms Anderson said: “I have these horrible attacks of idealism from time to time, despite all my bitter experience in the field.

“This is an opportunity to change the relationship; it’s a good time to deal with what Patrick Dodson has called unfinished business. It’s a moment when society can reflect on itself and decide how it sees itself. I urge all Australians to find out as much as they can about what the (referendum) options are.”

She said while it was important to hold any referendum “in as timely a fashion as we can, because we don’t want to leach out enthusiasm for the process”, she was not wedded to a proposal that it be on May 27 next year, the anniversary of the vote that changed certain race discrimination powers in the Constitution and let Aborigines for the first time be counted on the census.

Bill Shorten has expressed hope that a referendum to write First Australians into the Constitution can be held then, and Malcolm Turnbull has indicated his support for the ambition.

Ms Anderson said nothing would be precluded from consideration as to what form constitutional recognition should take, “including if Aboriginal people say they don’t want a referendum and they want a treaty, then we’ll tell the PM that”.

She noted that constitutional recognition and a treaty were “not mutually exclusive” and said she was encouraged by the Victorian government’s recent agreement to begin talking about a treaty: “If a treaty is going to happen, Victoria is most likely for a range of reasons, including the fact there is a very strong Aboriginal community there.

“But it is the task of the Referendum Council to give a report. The view from government and others is that they are saying they want to know what Aboriginal people reckon. And thinking Australians have said, ask the indigenous community. We have no control over what they do with that information, so there’s a degree of wait and see about what happens.”

Ms Anderson has held senior roles in indigenous organisations, was awarded an AO for services to the indigenous community in health and justice and was co-author of the 2007 Little Children Are Sacred report.

Yesterday’s announcement came as the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples held a leadership meeting in Canberra and called on government to work more closely with it.