

PM calls for more debate on indigenous referendum

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Southern Cross Care chairman Ray Groom at the newly completed Fairway Rise village in Lindisfarne. *Source:* News Corp Australia

Australians should be allowed the time to debate the best way to recognise indigenous people in the Constitution, Tony Abbott declared as he warned against rushing a referendum.

The Prime Minister said he wanted to see more community debate on the question before any further steps, amid warnings that a vigorous “no” case would doom the quest for indigenous recognition. “Yes, we do want to achieve constitutional recognition for indigenous people, but it’s more important to get this right than it is to rush it,” he said.

The comments come as former Tasmanian premier Ray Groom suggests coupling a referendum on recognition with a vote on allowing four-year terms for MPs. Mr Groom, a former Fraser government minister who played a key role in negotiating the second stage of the Kakadu National Park with

the Northern Land Council, argues it could prove a useful tactic to achieve a successful “yes” vote on constitutional recognition.

Mr Groom said a combined referendum that revisited allowing maximum four-year terms “might be worth another attempt”.

“There appears to be increasing support for four-year parliaments,” he said. “It would lead to longer-term thinking by the parliament and government, it may perhaps reduce politicking, would increase business confidence and over time be a cost-saving measure. Like the recognition issue this proposal has considerable merit.

“Posing the two questions together would correct a wrong assist the governance of Australia and improve our Constitution.”

Mr Groom said the lack of recognition of indigenous Australians was a “gaping gap” in the country’s founding document that needed to be addressed.

Adopting a similar position to indigenous advocate Frank Brennan, Mr Groom said he supported a minimalist proposal for change, comprising the removal of section 25 of the Constitution and the inclusion of a passage of acknowledgment before the document’s opening chapter.

The passage would recognise the prior occupation of Australia by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, express respect for their ongoing relationship with their traditional lands and waters, and indicate respect for their heritage, including cultures and languages.