

# Early British settlement 'all bad' for indigenous Australians: Tony Abbott

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Tony Abbott during his visit to North East Arnhem Land last week. *Photo: Alex Ellinghausen*

The arrival of British settlers in Australia was "all bad" for indigenous Australians, Prime Minister Tony Abbott has declared, as the federal government prepares to set the timeline for a referendum on indigenous recognition in the constitution.

Mr Abbott has told British newspaper *The Telegraph* that "we have not entirely come to terms with this side of the Australian reality" and that recognising Aboriginal people in the constitution would address a "discomfort in our national character".

The Prime Minister made the comments during his visit to Arnhem Land last week, which was to make good on an election commitment to spend at least one week a year in a remote community. His visit was cut short after counter-terrorism raids in Sydney and Brisbane.

He told the newspaper that the arrival of British settlers was devastating for Aborigines.

"Initially the impact [of British settlement] was all bad - disease, dispossession, discrimination, at times wanton murder," he said.

"While justice was colour-blind, there was still the enormous discrimination. There was not a lot of official respect in the early days. There was even less popular respect."

The language is the strongest heard from Mr Abbott in advocating for constitutional recognition.

Last week, Mr Abbott said the 2016 federal election was [not an appropriate time](#) to hold a referendum because constitutional recognition should be a bipartisan measure that could suffer if held during a partisan campaign.

Instead, 2017 is shaping up as the most likely option.

"This is, I think, an appropriate way of saying to Aboriginal people, you should be and are first class citizens of your own country," Mr Abbott told *The Telegraph*.

"Indigenous people's concerns every so often should be front and centre in the minds of our national leaders because they are, after all, the first Australians.

"They were, to our discredit, ignored and at times mistreated for much of the first couple of centuries of our national existence."

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