

Tony Abbott continues to pussyfoot around Indigenous recognition

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[David Marr](#)

The prime minister knows a referendum that failed would be a national disgrace. But his inability to spell out what ‘recognition’ would entail is almost as embarrassing

Three elections have passed since John Howard’s 2007 promise to hold a referendum ‘to formally recognise Indigenous Australians in our constitution’. That hasn’t happened. Tony Abbott is now saying there must be at least one more.

This was the time to say what recognition was all about. But by the end of Tony Abbott’s heartfelt speech to 600 guests gathered at a huge fundraiser for the referendum movement on Thursday night, no one was any the wiser.

“I am prepared to sweat blood on this,” said the prime minister. “This is at least as important as any of the other causes that this government has been prepared to take on. I want this to happen. I want this to happen as quickly as it can.”

But what on Earth was he talking about? He can’t say. His own heart is divided between the high hopes of the Indigenous and the demands of conservative diehards who he seems to think will decide the issue for us all.

“We will get constitutional recognition,” said the prime minister. “And when it comes, I suspect, that it will take the form of a pact – a heartfelt pact – between Indigenous people and conservative Australia.”

In the immense old Carriageworks on the edge of Redfern in Sydney, big names in black and white Australia had turned out for this Recognise bash. There were dancers and smoke and singers and politicians – though not so many faces from the [Coalition](#). The food was great. Everyone was dressed to the nines.

The crowd wanted two things from Abbott: the question and the date. We got nothing on the substance of the referendum and only a suggestion that the 50th anniversary of the May 1967 referendum would be “a richly symbolic time to complete our constitution”.

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No one wants to rush this. The prime minister is proposing more time and yet more consultations until somehow there emerges “a proposal that is, on a realistic assessment of any forces that might be against it, likely to succeed”.

Here's the problem: white Australians are happy to see a few lines of poetry put into the constitution to acknowledge that Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders were here first. That would also please the Indigenous.

But black Australians want more and it's something many countries offer: constitutional protection against racial discrimination. As well as recognition of an ancient culture and prior occupation, they want the discrimination of the past to be acknowledged and a plain guarantee given that it can't happen again.

Canada, New Zealand and South Africa give such guarantees. But conservative Australia – for unpleasant, old and complex reasons – resolutely refuses to allow rights in our constitution. For them this is a matter of supreme ideological importance. Australia is, as a result, about the only democracy on Earth that doesn't have a bill of rights.

Abbott is one of the diehards on rights. He knows the damage they can inflict in a referendum campaign. Last night he repeated the warnings against rights he's been giving Indigenous Australians for years.

“We have to temper our ambitions,” he told the crowd. “Because nothing would set back the cause of our country and the rightful place of Aboriginal people at its heart, than a referendum that failed.”

Referendums are easy to wreck. The diehards might be able to destroy one they believe offers too much. But Indigenous Australians and their supporters can wreck a referendum that offers too little.

Abbott knows mere poetry is not an option. But all he could do in the face of last night's celebrations was pussyfoot around the issue. So did leader of the opposition [Bill Shorten](#).

Embarrassment looms all around. A referendum that failed at the ballot box would be a national disgrace. But it's becoming almost as embarrassing that after all these years of inquiries and consultations and debate about recognition, our leaders can't even say what they're talking about.