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Federal politicians in town for parliamentary hearing on indigenous Australians

BY MYLES PETERSON

Four federal representatives were in Shepparton yesterday for a parliamentary hearing into the recognition of indigenous Australians.

Liberal Party MP Julian Leaser joined Labor Senator Patrick Dodson and MP Warren Snowdon, along with independent MP Cathy McGowan for the consultation.

All four sit on the committee on constitutional recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and were at Rumbalara Football Netball Club to hear from locals.

Yorta Yorta elder Paul Briggs was among those who took the opportunity to address the committee.



Senator Patrick Dodson and MP Warren Snowdon at yesterday's session.

In November, following a nationwide consultation tour, the committee will hand down its recommendations to the federal parliament on legislative recognition, constitutional change and a treaty with Australia's first nations.

Mr Dodson said the process required consensus to achieve substantial recognition for Australia's indigenous peoples.

"You need to get the work right and you need to get popular support," he said.

“Eight out of 44 attempts to change the constitution have only ever been successful. It’s not something we want to rush into quickly.”

But there was a strong precedent for change in the 1967 referendum, according to Mr Dodson.



Politicians (from left) Julian Leeser, Cathy McGowan, committee secretary Julia Morris, Senator Patrick Dodson and MP Warren Snowdon.

“The most successful referendum was to recognise Aboriginal people,” he said.

“Here at the Rumbalara Football Club, I’m looking on the wall and I see some of these famous people, Mr Cooper, Mr Nicholls, the Briggs family, people like that who have all been fighting for a long time for recognition and for justice.”

Should Labor win the next federal election, Mr Dodson said his party would move quickly to legislate an indigenous voice to speak to the federal parliament.

“If Labor were to get into government then we certainly would be looking seriously at a legislative response,” he said.

Mr Leeser, a relative newcomer to the federal parliament, paid homage to the achievements of notable Shepparton figures.

“It’s great to be in Shepparton, in the home of William Cooper, a huge figure in the history of indigenous Australia and the history of this particular space,” he said.

Mr Leeser said the committee was about collegiate, not partisan politics.

“There are some things you have to have a bi-partisan position on and there’s a range of views on this particular topic,” he said.

“This committee is not going to be about what we can’t agree on. It’s what we can agree on.”

Ms McGowan said the voting public rarely got an insight into the parliamentary committee process.

“On many of the committees that I work, people work well together,” she said.

“When people watch question time, they think that’s all parliament is.

“In fact the committees, of which there are a lot...work really well together.”

All agreed the issues of a treaty, constitutional and legislative recognition for indigenous Australians could not be solved without collaboration.

“What’s very clear is that there’s a lot of genuine goodwill.

“It’s very clear people’s minds have shifted — and shifted significantly, I think — over the last decade,” Mr Snowdon said.

“If we can concentrate the minds of people on what is and what was, then I think we can get a better picture of how people can address things like treaties and constitutional recognition, because we don’t want to polarise the discussion here.

“We want people to come together,” he said.

The committee will hand down its finding to the federal parliament in November.