

Referendum education must start without delay

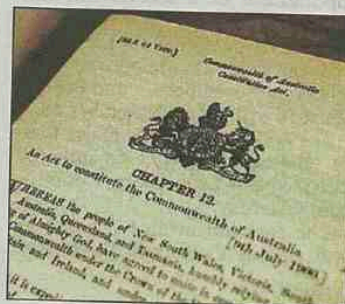
Opinion

Paul Kildea

In the space of a few days, Julia Gillard has committed to referendums on constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and recognition of local government. She has stressed the need for open community discussion but, if history is a guide, public debate will soon become polarised and confused, dashing any chances of success and leaving voters dissatisfied.

Our last attempt at constitutional change in 1999 was typical of Australian referendums. Even after years of debate about the republic, half of Australians said they didn't know enough to make an informed vote. This had a lot to do with the overblown and misleading claims made by both sides, leaving people short-changed and disillusioned with the process. Many people understandably voted "no" in frustration.

Fortunately, this need not be the case. The answer is to involve citizens early in a process that enables them to



Debate is needed for informed votes.

make meaningful contributions, and gives them the tools to do so.

First, it is crucial to involve the public in deciding what sort of proposal should be put to a referendum. This might seem obvious but, under our constitution, the responsibility for deciding which reforms should be voted on rests solely with federal Parliament. This has led many governments to spring referendums on voters at the last minute, almost always resulting in a decisive "no" vote.

When it comes to recognising

indigenous Australians or local government in the constitution, there are a number of options for reform. If the public are to feel any ownership over the process, they need to be given a say on which option should proceed to a vote.

Second, the government and the expert panel must provide people with meaningful opportunities to participate in the process.

We need to think beyond big-ticket items like the 1998 Constitutional Convention. This left ordinary citizens on the outer, feeling like their input didn't count. Instead, the government should provide a variety of forums for citizens to participate, and signal how their input will feed into the decision-making process. When it comes to political engagement, one size does not fit all.

Targeted consultations, particularly with a diverse range of indigenous leaders and community groups, must be central to the process.

More broadly, holding public meetings will also be important, but they tend to attract the most confident and vocal citizens, while exclud-

ing people who can't make them due to disability, caring duties or other responsibilities.

To ensure that the process is inclusive, the government should therefore draw on a wide variety of options in its policy toolkit, including written submissions, interactive online forums and recent innovations like citizens' juries and deliberative polls.

And sometimes it pays to think outside the box — some of the most popular participation tools before the 1999 referendum were preamble-writing competitions, which attracted hundreds of entries.

Lastly, introducing an effective program of public education will be critical to the success of our national conversation.

Too often, governments are guilty of doing "too little, too late" in their attempts to educate the public about complex referendum issues.

The main source of voter information is usually the "Yes/No" pamphlet, which typically contains few basic facts about the proposed reform and is posted to voters only a few weeks before polling day.

Education must start early — if the government delays it until a firm proposal has been determined, it will be too late. It makes sense to start educating people from the beginning, even if that is years before the referendum.

The Gillard government has an opportunity to learn from past failures and put in place the conditions for an inclusive, constructive public debate on constitutional reform. Of course, there would still be no guarantee that the referendum would end in success.

But genuine community discussion will almost certainly improve the chances of a "yes" vote, as people will be more comfortable about voting for change if they feel a sense of ownership over the process. And whatever the outcome, all Australians will be able to say that they cast an informed vote and made a real contribution on two issues of national importance.

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