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Most voters back constitutional change on indigenous recognition



Linda Burney says the treaty debate is 'the squeaky wheel getting the most oil' in indigenous affairs. Picture: Craig Greenhill.

DAVID CROWE, STEPHEN FITZPATRICK THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM July 21, 2016

Voters are ready and willing to approve the recognition of indigenous Australians in the Constitution, according to a new poll that highlights the scope for a bipartisan agreement — and possibly a wider treaty as well.

In a surprise finding, the survey concludes that two-thirds of voters are aware of the debate over constitutional recognition and a clear majority of 60 per cent would vote for the change in a referendum.

The conclusion comes as the first indigenous women elected to federal parliament, incoming Labor MP Linda Burney, declares that the nation's founding document should reflect the "reality of the story of this country" by recognising its first people.

"The main issue is to remove the capacity for the federal government to make laws pertaining to one group of people," Ms Burney said ahead of taking her place in

parliament next month.

The survey by pollster John Scales and his company, JWS Research, taken in the wake of the federal election, found majority support “across the board” for indigenous recognition in the Constitution when it analysed data by age and residence.

“A majority of voters in individual states and territories would vote for this amendment,” says the report, citing support of 59 per cent in NSW, 60 per cent in Queensland and similar levels in other states and territories.

Malcolm Turnbull and Bill Shorten support indigenous recognition but experts have struggled to agree on the wording of the constitutional change. The Prime Minister has warned against an “elaborate” reform that would be hard to pass at a referendum.

Tony Abbott aimed to secure the change at a referendum before May next year, the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum to remove discrimination against Aboriginal people.

The Opposition Leader triggered a storm in the campaign by backing the concept of a treaty with indigenous Australia, a step critics said would weaken support for constitutional recognition.

The JWS research found that opposition to a treaty was low — at 16 per cent — and that some of those who opposed recognition supported a treaty instead.

The results showed that 28 per cent strongly supported a treaty and 30 per cent “somewhat” supported a treaty while 9 per cent strongly opposed and 7 per cent “somewhat” opposed the concept, with the rest undecided.

Support for a treaty was equal between men and women and was slightly higher among younger Australians, but it held relatively steady across major states at 56 per cent in NSW and 62 per cent in Victoria, with other states falling between those figures.

Importantly, the question about the treaty was prefaced with an explanation that noted that treaties had been struck in other countries, including New Zealand, to recognise indigenous peoples’ history and prior occupation of the land, as well as the injustices many had endured.

Critics of a treaty in Australia have questioned what it would achieve, who the formal parties to the agreement would be and who they would represent.

Ms Burney described the treaty debate as “the squeaky wheel getting the most oil” in

indigenous affairs, but said it was nonetheless “real and you can’t ignore it”.