

## **Reconciliation U-turn shows leader's true colours**

By Noel Pearson

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Paul Kelly and Dennis Shanahan reported on the front page of *The Australian* yesterday that Kevin Rudd will not be pursuing a constitutional referendum on reconciliation if he wins government.

The constitutional referendum on reconciliation was the first pledge of the 2007 federal election campaign, made by Prime Minister John Howard at the Sydney Institute on the eve of the campaign.

On that very evening Rudd and the Opposition spokeswoman on indigenous affairs and reconciliation, Jenny Macklin, issued a statement as follows: "Federal Labor notes the Prime Minister's announcement tonight on constitutional recognition of indigenous Australians.

"Constitutional recognition of indigenous Australians has been long-held federal Labor policy, and this was affirmed at the ALP national conference in Sydney earlier this year.

"Obviously, we will need to examine the detail of Howard's proposal with particular regard to its legal and constitutional implications.

"Nevertheless, federal Labor offers bipartisan support to a commitment for constitutional recognition, regardless of the outcomes of the federal election.

"A referendum will succeed if it has strong public support, and bipartisan leadership and, in the spirit of the 1967 referendum, federal Labor offers this support."

Rudd's very first me-too policy pledge of the 2007 federal election was thrown into the dustbin two days before he hopes to become Australia's prime minister.

This is a disgraceful and heartless abandonment of a policy promise that has been the subject of a bipartisan commitment for the past six weeks.

I was pleased that the commitment to reconciliation through such an ambitious policy – amending the national Constitution of Australia – had secured support from the Coalition and Labor at the very beginning of the campaign.

Rudd has now reneged on the commitment he made on October 11. It shows a flagrant contempt for indigenous policy.

There are those who might think Rudd needs to secure the foundations for a second term of office by not championing unpopular issues such as those concerning indigenous people and who will place their hopes in the idea that it may be the subject of a second or third-term agenda under the ALP.

There are two problems that make this hope forlorn for those who desire a proper settlement of the indigenous question.

First, we will end up with the Bob Hawke scenario. Hawke came from a less conservative position than Rudd and had greater ambitions for indigenous people – including a treaty – but at the end of four terms as prime minister all he had to show were tears of regret at having not done more.

Are we supposed to wait for another couple of terms before Rudd feels that he has the guts to deal with this issue?

Second, we have a unique opportunity at this point in history, because Australia's most conservative political leader, John Winston Howard, has finally taken a step towards reconciliation. Now is the time for Australians interested in progress to capitalise on the opportunity to get this issue right for all time. When you've got conservative Australia in the cart, you need to act.

In Rudd's and Macklin's joint statement, issued a few hours after Howard's reconciliation speech, they

offered “bipartisan support to a commitment for constitutional recognition, regardless of the outcomes of the federal election”. According to Kelly and Shanahan, Rudd said this week that he is “unlikely to pursue Mr Howard’s plan for a reconciliation preamble to the Constitution if he were elected” and that “a referendum on Aboriginal reconciliation [and] a separate Aboriginal treaty ... would not occur in the first term of a Rudd Labor government, if at all”.

This statement directly contradicts Rudd’s and Macklin’s promise. It is not possible to argue that Labor under Rudd retains a commitment to indigenous constitutional recognition, and that Rudd has merely rejected the Prime Minister’s time frame – a bill in Parliament within 100 days and a referendum within 18 months – as unrealistic. If you are not committed to pursue a policy in your first term, you are not committed at all. As Rudd pointed out when Shanahan asked whether we would see action from Labor on the republic during the second term of a Rudd government: “You have to get elected to have a second term.”

What has transpired is surely a first for Australia: a party leader who is highly likely to become prime minister breaks his first election promise just before the polling booths open.

It comes as no surprise that indigenous Australians are the victims of this disrespect. I have had long experience with Rudd’s political cynicism and opportunism when we argued bitterly over the Goss government’s Aboriginal land legislation in 1991 and over Paul Keating’s Native Title Act in 1993. I regret that Rudd has not changed from what I have long considered his innately contemptuous view of indigenous people and indigenous policy.

I am conscious my criticism of Rudd on the eve of the election will result in an acrimonious relationship with an incoming Labor federal government, but I will not stand silent while an election contender reneges so flagrantly on a commitment he made on day one of the campaign.

To me this issue is more important than Rudd’s ambitions.

For this betrayal, I dread a Rudd prime ministership.

*Noel Pearson is Director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership.*