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Leadership

BHP chief Andrew Mackenzie leads business backing for Indigenous voice to parliament

By **Patrick Durkin**

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BHP chief executive Andrew Mackenzie will throw his support behind a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous "voice" to parliament on Thursday in a landmark speech designed to build support from the business community.

Mr Mackenzie has been meeting Indigenous leaders and advisers before his speech to the Committee for Economic Development of Australia on Thursday where he will back the proposal, which originated from the 2017 [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#).

"We endorse the call for empowerment in the Uluru Statement from the Heart and we believe the constitution should be amended, so that the voice of Indigenous Australia can be heard," he is expected to declare.





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Insiders said BHP had been weighing up for some time how best to engage with the issue and would use the speech to take a leadership role to "speak out for constitutional recognition and lend BHP's voice to the conversation".

CEDA chief executive Melinda Cilento, also a director and co-chair of Reconciliation Australia, said Mr Mackenzie's intervention was significant given Labor leader Bill Shorten has promised a referendum on the voice issue before a [republican plebiscite](#), which he has pledged in the first term of a Shorten government.

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"The CEO of BHP, Andrew Mackenzie, has announced that BHP will support a referendum on the voice to parliament."

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but she said a committed group of business leaders have long supported the push, including from Chief Executive Women who have travelled to the Garma festival, including Romilly Madew, Nicola Wakefield Evans and outgoing chair of the BHP Foundation Karen Wood.

Advisory body

The proposal for a constitutionally enshrined voice was recommended by the federal government's Referendum Council in the Uluru Statement from the Heart in 2017, driven by Indigenous leaders including Noel Pearson and professor Megan Davis, the *Financial Review's* [2018 Woman of Influence](#).



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THE DETAILS OF HOW A FIRST NATIONS VOICE SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED IN THE CONSTITUTION

was not detailed in the Uluru statement but is expected to constitute an advisory body with elected Indigenous Australians to give input on government policy.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has rejected the idea, claiming that the body would constitute a "third chamber". The government has said it is "carefully considering" a report on the implementation of the voice by a bipartisan joint select committee, which recommended more work was needed.

"Bill Shorten can't even explain to the Australian people how a voice to parliament will work and what their role and powers will be so how can he expect the Australian people to vote for it," a spokesman for Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion said.

But the Business Council of Australia has also got behind the push and are calling for a referendum within 12 months of the federal election.



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holding up long overdue constitutional recognition, the BHP said in their submission to the committee.

EY Oceania CEO Tony Johnson is the first of the big four accounting firms to also publicly support the voice push.

"It sends a strong signal about the value businesses put on their relationship with Indigenous Australia and that that future is Indigenous led," he said.



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