

Indigenous PM ‘could take 40 years’: Wyatt

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Australia’s first Indigenous prime minister is still at university, quietly committed to social equity and “not driven by the past”, according to Ken Wyatt, the first Aboriginal person to be appointed to a Federal cabinet.

Mr Wyatt, who was the first Aboriginal person elected to the House of Representatives, then served as Indigenous Australians minister in the Morrison government, said he was not surprised by a recent Newspoll showing just 23 per cent of Australians believed the nation would have a prime minister with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage “in the foreseeable future”. The figure has fallen eight percentage points since 2013, when Newspoll asked the same question and found 31 per cent thought they would live to see it.

“I think it could take 40 years,” Mr Wyatt said.

This is a conversation the philanthropic Australian Indigenous Education Foundation is invested in, literally. AIEF took out a full-page advertisement in The Australian this week to spark discussion about it. The AIEF brings together the government and private sector to provide scholarship funding for Indigenous students to complete Year 12 or tertiary studies at elite schools.

More than 1000 Indigenous children – including from remote communities and small towns –

have received the opportunities they need to become midwives, doctors, business owners and engineers. Many return to their communities to take jobs that would otherwise have been filled by a non-Aboriginal person. The foundation has never doubted one of its students can be PM.

Mr Wyatt said a capable contender would not emerge soon, in part because of a shift in attitude apparent from the rise of One Nation. The defeat of the Indigenous voice in 2023 had emboldened trolls. “We are in a period where Australia itself is divided on many fronts and that division from competing interests and pressure points has dampened people’s expectations,” Mr Wyatt said.

He predicted the nation’s first Indigenous prime minister was most likely to come from the generation born between 2000 and 2005. He saw that generation as optimistic, highly-educated, capable and not hung up on some of the debates that older Australians were having.

“I think this is where the nation’s first Indigenous prime minister is,” he said. “This person is at university right now, they are in that age group who are much more focused on equity but it is ingrained and not controversial to them, they are not driven by the past and will not judge in the same way generations before them can judge. This is a younger generation much more open to the qualities of an individual regardless of who that individual is.”