



# Daring to speak the truth: de-constructing and re-constructing reconciliation

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## Abstract

Reconciliation has been on the political agenda in Australia since the early 1990s and is now planted firmly in the public conscience. Australia celebrates reconciliation every year; political leaders talk often about reconciliation; schools teach reconciliation. Yet, if you take as performance indicators the gap in life expectancy, or the increasingly disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in prison, one has to question whether Australia is walking further away from the work that is needed to heal and achieve true reconciliation. In this paper we will draw on our experiences of working within church and education contexts and critically engage with the challenges and limitations of reconciliation as we have encountered them. We suggest that it is necessary to talk about reconciliation in terms of a human

rights agenda and make explicit the connections between reconciliation and policy and practices. As Lowitja O'Donoghue has said, "we must accept the truth of our history – it is the truth that will set us free".<sup>1</sup> But how do we dare to speak the truth when the dominant political discourse focuses on the perceived success of reconciliation?

**Keywords:** Reconciliation, human rights, Indigenous policy, Northern Territory Intervention.

## Introduction

Reconciliation has been on the national agenda in Australia since the 1990s following on from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991). In the 25 years since that report was published reconciliation has become part of the national consciousness. It is in the Australian curriculum (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2016), a week is dedicated to reconciliation every year; many organisations have developed reconciliation action plans; and many fruitful and healing relationships have been developed. However, alongside all of that, for

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<sup>1</sup> See Tabbart. (2005). *Rights and Reconciliation*. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Council.

many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people their health and wellbeing remains compromised. A recent study in Victoria showed that 97% of Aboriginal people experienced racism daily (Ferdinand, Paradies, & Kelaher, 2013). Mental health organisation Beyond Blue also recognised the impact that racism continues to have on Aboriginal people, and in response launched a media campaign specifically addressing racism against Indigenous people (Beyond Blue, 2014).

Racism and the ongoing impact of colonisation on Aboriginal health and wellbeing is well recognised (Bourassa, Blind, Dietrich, & Oleson, 2015; Paradies, 2016; Sherwood, 2009, 2013). The colonising framework has resulted in a monocultural health system (Saggers, Walter, & Gray, 2011) based on a western scientific view of health (Garneau & Pepin, 2015; Sherwood, 2013) which continues to result in “frameworks of trauma, pain, grief, loss and poor health status” (Sherwood, 2009, p. 25). This has real implications for the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) developed a National Indigenous Reform Agreement which included significant health targets such as closing the life expectancy gap by 2030 (Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee, 2016, p. 5). Despite this focus on improving health outcomes it is telling that in 2016, the Close the Gap Steering Committee, which represents a coalition of non-government health agencies, and the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner have called for an inquiry into racism and institutional racism in health care settings, particularly in hospitals, and its contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health inequality (Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee, 2016). Clearly current policy and funding regimes are failing to address root causes of health disparities.

Perhaps most telling of all, despite 25 years of reconciliation and 339 recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the rate of imprisonment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has doubled. It is now almost 28% of the prison population, even though Aboriginal people comprise less than 3%

of the total population (Rattan & Mountain, 2016).

We posit that one of the key failings of reconciliation, to date, is that it encourages relationships that avoid engaging in the pain of our past and which continue the colonising power relationships that cause so much harm. As Lowitja O’Donoghue has said, “we must accept the truth of our history – it is the truth that will set us free” (cited in Tabbart, 2005). It is, however, difficult to accept the truth in an environment where the dominant political discourse focuses on the perceived success of reconciliation and remains resistant to accepting the more difficult aspects of Australian history. In this paper we will critically engage with the national reconciliation narrative and its development. In doing so, we will interrogate tensions between policies and legislation currently employed and a reconciliation framework.

The authors’ analysis of reconciliation in this paper is informed by praxis, particularly their work together in church and education organisations and more generally from the lived experience of being a married couple from different cultures. Graeme Mundine identifies as Bundjalung (Northern NSW) and Gabrielle Russell-Mundine identifies as White, English/Australian. The ‘we’ in this paper represents our shared position and has been arrived at through ongoing reflection and dialogue about our experiences together, and separately, in this space.

## The National Narrative

Every nation has its narrative, about itself and about its relationship with others. As Razack says:

Nations are constructed symbolically in language and that all language constitutes rather than reflects reality...every storyline has an internal coherence (Razack, 2000, pp. 183-186).

In Australia, the national narrative about Aboriginal people is deeply entrenched and contemptuous (Dodson, 2007b, p. 25). It casts Aboriginal people as vulnerable, incapable, inferior, exotic, primitive and sexually deviant (Dodson, 2007b, p. 22; Moreton-Robinson, 1999, p. 29; Reynolds, 2005, pp. 175-187; Sherwood,

2009). The narrative has its roots in European colonisation and the attendant philosophies and practices which have developed over centuries, well before the British invaded Australia.

For example, the *Doctrine of Discovery* (Miller, 2010) is the name given to the coherent framework of colonisation and dominance over Indigenous peoples, lands and resources devised by the Catholic Church, which led to centuries of destruction and ethnocide across many Indigenous lands (Miller, 2010; Special Rapporteur, 2010). The *Doctrine of Discovery* has its origins in the Crusades to recover the Holy Lands. Its intrinsic philosophy was exemplified in 1240 by Pope Innocent IV who legitimised the Christian invasion of the lands of the so called infidels by characterising the Crusades as “Just Wars” fought for the defence of Christianity (Miller, 2010). The *Doctrine of Discovery* was further developed in 1455 by Pope Nicholas V who issued the Papal Bull *Romanus Pontifex*. This explicit manifesto of colonisation aimed to legitimise Portugal’s push to conquer lands in West Africa, later extending to Spain as they moved into “new” lands (Miller, 2010).

The *Doctrine of Discovery* was also drawn on by the British and French to justify their colonising activities and meant that the British were acutely attuned to seeing lands as “empty” and non-Christian peoples as pagans ready to be Christianised and civilised. The British understanding of Aboriginal peoples was also derived from the changes in philosophy and thinking that were prevalent in Europe coming out of the Enlightenment (Martin, 2003; Reynolds, 1996, 1998). As Ladson-Billings points out:

Enlightenment notions of science (and later law) did not work independent of prevailing discourses of racial and class superiority. This discourse of Enlightenment science allowed the dominant culture to define, distance, and objectify the other (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 259).

Our point here is not to present a comprehensive historical analysis of colonisation. Rather, we aim to highlight that the British were enculturated with a colonising worldview which inevitably informed their attitudes towards Australia’s First Peoples and which did not recognise their

humanity, let alone their sovereignty. A clear example of this is the thinking that led to the protection era when White people were convinced that Aboriginal people were destined for extinction.

The Australian blacks are moving rapidly on into the eternal darkness in which all savage and inferior races are surely destined to disappear. All efforts to preserve them, though credible to our humanity, is a poor complement to our knowledge of those inexorable laws whose operations are as apparent as our own existence (Meston [later Protector of Aborigines in South Queensland], quoted in Reynolds, 1998, p. 101).

Aboriginal people have been subjected to these attitudes which have been embedded in various policies over the past two hundred years and have morphed from protection to assimilation and integration (Reynolds, 2005) and now to reconciliation.

However, despite the positive connotations of the official reconciliation dialogue (Reconciliation Australia, n.d.) we contend that the language and intent of reconciliation has much in common with the language and intent of assimilation and protectionism. As Dodson says “the benign use of government language – mainstream services, practical reconciliation, mutual obligations, responsibilities in the real Economy – cloaks a sinister destination for Australian nation building” (Dodson, 2007b, p. 23).

For reconciliation to be effective and authentic it must be embedded in all aspects of Australian nation building and government business. However, recent government policies, such as the Northern Territory Emergency Response (the Intervention) and arguments to close remote communities in Western Australia, are racist, privilege mainstream norms and reinforce negative stereotypes about Aboriginal people. They rely on what Dodson calls “the cancer of settler hostility to Indigenous peoples that bubbles beneath the surface of Australian civil society” (Dodson, 2007b, p. 25). There is a fundamental disconnect between espoused values of reconciliation and the more insidious values infused into the national narrative.

To appreciate where Australia is in relation to reconciliation it is important to understand its origins in terms of policy.

## A History of Reconciliation

The 1991 Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991) explained that Aboriginal disadvantage was a product of the history of dispossession of Aboriginal people in Australia. The Royal Commission recommended that all political leaders and their parties recognise that reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous communities in Australia must be achieved if community division, discord and injustice to Aboriginal people is to be avoided. Consequently, in September 1991, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) was established via an Act of Parliament with the object of promoting a process of reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the wider Australian community.

CAR was expected to “achieve” reconciliation in ten years to coincide with the Centenary of Federation in 2001 and was expected to address eight key issues:

- a greater understanding of the importance of land and sea in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies;
- better relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and the wider community;
- recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage are a valued part of the Australian heritage;
- a sense for all Australians of a shared ownership of our history;
- a greater awareness of the causes of disadvantage that prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples from achieving fair and proper standards in health, housing, employment and education;
- a greater community response to addressing the underlying causes of the unacceptably high levels of custody for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples;

greater opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to control their destinies;

agreement on whether the process of reconciliation would be advanced by a document or documents of reconciliation.

In the years that followed the establishment of CAR there were some key moments that suggest some progress towards achieving some of these aims and others which highlighted the inconsistency between rhetoric and practice.

In 1992, in the Mabo judgement, the High Court held that native title existed for all Indigenous people in Australia prior to the establishment of the British Colony of New South Wales (Museum of Australian Democracy, n.d.). Recognising that Indigenous people in Australia had a prior title to land taken by the Crown since Cook's declaration of possession in 1770, the Court held that this title exists today in any portion of land where it has not legally been extinguished (Museum of Australian Democracy, n.d.). As a result of this decision, the Commonwealth *Native Title Act 1993* was enacted.

Later in 1992, launching the 1993 International Year for the World's Indigenous Peoples, Prime Minister Paul Keating gave the *Redfern speech* (Keating, 1992). As well as setting out the agenda for reconciliation it was the first time that an Australian Prime Minister had identified that non-Indigenous Australians were responsible for past injustices. Patrick Dodson, the chair of CAR said that Paul Keating's address was important because:

[I]t was about leadership, principle and courage... He placed before Australians the truths of our past and the sad reality of our contemporary society. He laid down the challenge for our future, as a nation united and at peace with its soul (Dodson, 2007a).

A change of Government in 1996, led by Prime Minister John Howard, brought a change of policy and attitude towards Aboriginal people. Howard's tenure as Prime Minister was a challenge to the reconciliation movement and “reasserted the centrality of Whiteness in the nation-space and narrowing the space afforded to non-White people by privileging the interests of the ‘mainstream’” (Elder, Ellis, & Pratt, 2004, p. 212). Shortly after he became Prime Minister a

critical test of his leadership in this regard arose. In 1996, following on from the Mabo judgement, came the Wik decision that sought to clarify the relationship of native title to pastoral leases. Pastoral leases are a form of land tenure unique to Australia created by the British Colonial Office in response to the massive land grab by squatters in the 1830s and 1840s. The British authorities explicitly stated the leases did not grant squatters exclusive tenure, but that the land was owned on behalf of the Australian public by government. The High Court found in the Wik decision that pastoral leases did not extinguish native title, the two could co-exist, but in the event of a dispute native title rights were subordinate to the rights of the pastoralist (Bachelard, 1997, p. 59; Racism No Way, n.d.).

Despite the High Court clearly stating that pastoralist rights overrode native title in the event of a dispute, John Howard felt that the “Wik decision pushed the pendulum too far in the Aboriginal direction” (Bachelard, 1997, p. 71; Howard, 1997) and devised a “10 point plan” to amend the *Native Title Act*, which he said would bring clarity. In particular, the 10 point plan allowed for extinguishment of native title forever if it was inconsistent with the rights of pastoralists. The plan also sought to abolish the right to negotiate on pastoral leases. Rather than clarity, it brought division and anger and “threatened to dispossess Aboriginal people of their common law rights in a way that has not happened since the early days of white settlement” (Bachelard, 1997, p. 70). In a speech to pastoralists at Longreach in Queensland Howard said:

I can understand the fear in the community that people who have no connection at all with your land can come from a distant part of Australia and say, well years and years ago my relatives, or my ancestors, or my friends, or other members of my tribe had a connection with this property, and therefore I've got some right to come on to your property and to exercise my traditional access rights. Well under the amendments that we are framing that can't happen. Unless someone has a current physical connection with the land...And if any of those rights are to exist, those rights must be exercised at all times with complete respect for, and in complete deference to the rights of the pastoralists who own and operate the property (Gray, 1999, p. 84).

Not only did this position evoke the familiar narrative of *terra nullius* it also denied the reality and consequences for Aboriginal people of “death, dispossession, displacement, removal, relocation and resettlement” (Gray, 1999, p. 85).

Patrick Dodson, the chairman of CAR at the time said the government’s plan was “equivalent to the poisoning of waterholes, and was all about extinguishing title” (Dodson cited in Bachelard, 1997, p. 106). This vitriolic attack on Indigenous rights by the government was clearly not in the spirit or intent of reconciliation.

On a different note, in 1997, the *Bringing Them Home* report was handed down. This was the *Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, established under the Keating government but reported on under the Howard government. Its terms of reference included tracing the laws, policies and practices which led to the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, as well as looking into current laws, policies and practices and issues such as compensation (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997). The inquiry found that conditions for the stolen children were hard with only basic education provided. It was found that excessive physical punishments were common and children were at risk of sexual abuse. The inquiry also found that while some did find happiness in their new home or institution, people who were separated from their families were not better off. There was loss of heritage and significant impact on those left behind (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997).

One of the key recommendations arising from this inquiry was that acknowledgement of past practices was necessary and that parliaments, churches and other agencies must apologise for their role in devising and implementing the policies. Many state governments and churches did so but John Howard refused to apologise on behalf of the Federal Parliament. In 1999, the Federal Parliament passed Howard’s “motion of reconciliation” which allowed Howard to hold steadfast to his position:

I have frequently said, and I will say it again today, that present generations of Australians cannot be held accountable, and we should not seek to hold them accountable, for the errors and misdeeds of

earlier generations. Nor should we ever forget that many people who were involved in some of the practices which caused hurt and trauma felt at the time that those practices were properly based. To apply retrospectively the standards of today in relation to their behaviour does some of those people who were sincere an immense injustice, and I think that is understood by most people within the Australian community (Howard, 1999).

Howard continued to refuse to apologise to the Stolen Generations until he lost government in 2007. It fell to the new Labor government to make the apology on behalf of the Parliament, which Kevin Rudd did as one of his first acts as Prime Minister in February 2008 (Rudd, 2007).

Meanwhile, CAR ceased operations in 2000 and Reconciliation Australia was established in its place to promote reconciliation by building relationships, respect and trust between the wider Australian community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Reconciliation Australia, n.d.). Reconciliation Australia claims that it will “inspire and enable all Australians to contribute to reconciliation and break down stereotypes and discrimination” (Reconciliation Australia, n.d.).

We have taken this very brief and selective sojourn into recent history as a reminder that even while reconciliation was ostensibly being established as a national narrative the underlying discourse was unchanged and undisturbed (Dodson, 2007b; Hinkson, 2007). Despite some positive steps forward, such as the Mabo and Wik decisions, the Redfern Speech and the Apology, the federal government was acting in ways to undermine both the spirit and genuine practice of reconciliation (Dodson, 2007b; Howard, 1999) and was essentially stifling its effectiveness.

## Reconciliation or Ongoing Colonisation?

Twenty five years after reconciliation entered the national narrative we assert the narrative of reconciliation – building relationships, respect and breaking down stereotypes, has failed to disrupt the more pervasive underlying narrative of Aboriginal people as problematic and racially inferior. Reconciliation can be seen as an element of the politics of distraction that divert attention from “deep decolonizing movements and push us towards a state agenda of co-option and

assimilation” (Corntassel, 2012, p. 91). Our analysis, and experience, of reconciliation is that it creates a space which has effectively silenced dissent and more challenging dialogue around racism, dispossession and ongoing colonialism. We experience reconciliation as a movement for White people to be “nice” to Aboriginal people and conform to the state centred “illusion of inclusion” (Corntassel, 2012, p. 92) without causing major disruption. As Bhabha (1983, p. 23) says:

the objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.

We contend that this era of reconciliation is not only reminiscent of protectionism and assimilation, but does, as Bhabha suggests, continue the colonial discourse. The 2007, Northern Territory Emergency Response, which we shall refer to as the Intervention, is a case in point. The Intervention was ostensibly aimed at addressing child abuse as identified in the *Little Children are Sacred* report, an inquiry commissioned by the Northern Territory government (Wild & Anderson, 2007). John Howard (2007), taking advantage of federal jurisdiction over the Northern Territory, launched the Intervention, without warning or consultation, with these words:

We are dealing with children of the tenderest age who have been exposed to the most terrible abuse, from the time of their birth, virtually. And any semblance of maintaining the innocence of childhood is a myth in so many of these communities.

And we feel very strongly that action of this kind is needed. It is interventionist. It does push aside the role of the Territory to some degree. I accept that. But what matters more: the constitutional niceties, or the care and protection of young children?

The Intervention encompassed a range of measures including income management by quarantining 50% of welfare payments; the compulsory takeover of community land on five year leases; alcohol and pornography restrictions; licensing of community stores and law

enforcement measures ('concerned Australians', 2010).

The issues that plagued Aboriginal communities were not new and were the result of long term neglect by policy makers. As Behrendt (2007, p. 15) says, this was the “national emergency that was sitting neglected for over thirty years”. However, characterising the Intervention as an emergency and linking it to the protection of children tapped into deeply held mainstream perceptions about the inability of Aboriginal people to protect and raise their children; the same perceptions that were prevalent and used to justify removing children during the stolen generations era. As Havnen described:

[I]t demonised all Aboriginal men and women. Men were painted as violent drunks, paedophiles and consumers of pornography, and women as passive helpless victims (Havnen, 2013).

Linking Intervention activities to preventing child abuse also made it very difficult to advocate against it. Those who did were dismissed as supporting child abuse and were seen as part of the problem (Behrendt, 2007, p. 17). There was little mention of the fact that the legislation required to implement this policy did not refer to children (Behrendt, 2007, p. 15).

The impact on those people who have now lived under the Intervention and its successor policy Stronger Futures for almost ten years, has been devastating and shows how effectively the narrative of the “incapable”, “degenerate” Aborigine continues on. Northern Territory Aboriginal communities have been harmed in many ways as the following quote highlights:

Do you all know what a lorrkon is? It is a hollow log. We use logs for coffins. Since the Intervention and since this new policy has come in that is all we are seeing. We are seeing hollow people walking around. This place is definitely different from the place it was before the Intervention Mr Oliver, Malabam Health Board (Harris, 2012, p. 33).

The Intervention narrative is also supported by the use of statistics:

The Intervention could not exist without the production of this heightened sense of risk-without this statistically mediated and managed moral panic which exploits genuine public

concern about child neglect and abuse (Morris & Lattas, 2010, p. 3).

Morris and Lattas (2010) claim that statistics have become:

part of a governmental apparatus that confronts Indigenous people, that interpolates and problematizes them by mirroring them back in ways that reinforce mainstream critiques and judgements that nowadays focus not on race but on poor cultural practices (p. 3).

Space does not permit us to delve into the many ways that Aboriginal people are problematised and mainstream critiques and judgements reinforced. However, a few recent exemplars are provided below to demonstrate the continued double speak and attendant impacts that have occurred since the reconciliation agenda was adopted.

In 2013, Adam Goodes, former Australian of the year and well known Australian Rules Footballer, was called an “ape” by a teenage spectator, was subsequently booed and demonised for cultural expressions on field, and then, as an ambassador for a retail chain was racially vilified (McKenny, 2015). It is no coincidence that these experiences increased in intensity after Goodes had used his position to speak out against racism and discrimination of Aboriginal people. However, public commentators persisted in denying that the booing was racist, but claimed it was because of Goode’s own behaviour, in particular for “dobbing” in the teenager who called him an “ape” (Sheehan, 2015; see also Adam Goodes, n.d.).

In 2014, half a billion dollars were cut from the federal government’s Indigenous budget resulting in 150 programs being reduced to five funding areas under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration, 2016, p. 4). Over half the programs funded in 2015 were run by non-Indigenous organisations (Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration, 2016, p. 109). The impact of the funding changes, including an onerous tendering process, were the subject of a senate inquiry which acknowledged that the process had created uncertainty, was rushed with a lack of consultation and had resulted in funding gaps

(Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration, 2016, p. 60). Not only do these cuts undermine the government's supposed commitment to reconciliation, it also undermines its espoused commitment to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

In 2015, Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who appointed himself “not just the prime minister but the prime minister for Aboriginal affairs” (Maley, 2013), supported the Western Australia government's move to withdraw services and effectively close remote Aboriginal communities (Kagi, 2014). His view was that Aboriginal people living in remote communities were making a “life style” choice that should not be funded by the government (Medhora, 2015). In saying this, Abbott constructed Aboriginal people living in their homelands as a selfish burden on tax payers. There were many protest demonstrations in large Australian cities to highlight the issue of community closures. In Melbourne, the *Herald Sun* reported protestors as a “selfish rabble” (Watson, 2015), serving to sideline and down play the issues protestors were seeking to highlight. The media seemed more concerned with reporting on the inconvenience of protest demonstrations on daily city life than the issues raised by the proposed closure of the communities (Pearce, 2015).

Returning to where we began, the Royal Commission into the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. 2016 marks the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the report of this Commission.

Indigenous people are now 27.4% of the prison population, almost double the rate in 1991 (Rattan et al., 2016). There has been a steep increase of 36.2% in the rate of women in prison over the past ten years and as bad as that increase is, the picture painted by the statistics of young people in the justice system is most damning. Indigenous youth account for 59% of people in juvenile detention; they are 26 times more likely to be in detention compared to non-Indigenous children; they are 74% more likely to end up in adult prisons than those who are diverted into alternative forms of rehabilitation (Rattan et al., 2016). This is a tragedy for young people in the system now, but the massive rates of juvenile incarceration and expected trajectory into adult prisons will ensure that the impact of these

detention rates will be felt for generations to come.

Finally, suicide continues as an issue in Indigenous communities. Indigenous people have double the rate of suicide than non-Indigenous people (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2014), a broad statistic which belies the crises and impact of suicide on Indigenous communities. With an average mortality rate about 10 years less than the general population, Indigenous people face continuing health challenges such as hunger (Kunoth-Monks, 2016), cardiovascular disease (including heart attacks and strokes), cancer and injury (including transport accidents and self-harm; ABS, 2014).

We have presented only a snapshot of the many instances which are a challenge to the national reconciliation narrative and which cause us to question who benefits from the reconciliation policy agenda.

## Reconciliation for Whom?

To examine reconciliation we draw on our theological understanding, which indicates that for reconciliation to take place there has to be a recognition of a wrong, there has to be an apology or “repentance” and there has to be an active commitment to ensure it does not happen again. Reconciliation involves “re-conciling” which suggests an existing relationship. There has never been a positive relationship between the non-Indigenous and Indigenous people in this country. In fact there is a “denial of shared humanity” (Hinkson, 2007, p. 289) which continues a divide based on cultural assumptions (Hinkson, 2007). Nor has there been a full recognition of a wrong. While the Apology (Rudd, 2007) in 2008 was directed to the Stolen Generations, there has never been a formal recognition of the broader wrongs. And, if our brief examination of “change” is anything to go by, while aspiring to a positive future the discourse of reconciliation has served to both nurture and mask ongoing injustices and there is no sense of ensuring that these things do not continue.

The bi-annual “reconciliation barometer” conducted by Reconciliation Australia goes some



way towards understanding the dynamics of reconciliation (Reconciliation Australia, 2014). In their survey, 86% of the general population and 96% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population believe the relationship between the two groups is important. Of general respondents, 45% believe prejudice is high, as do 62% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents. About half of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents are more likely to believe Australia is a racist country while about a third of the general community believe this to be so. The barometer also showed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are about three times more likely to have experienced and witnessed racial prejudice in the past six months. Of this group, 31% have experienced verbal abuse, 42% witnessed verbal abuse, and 25% have experienced discrimination from teachers, principals or their employer. The rates for general population respondents are significantly lower on these experiences. More telling is how the two groups trust each other. Only 26% of the general population believe trust is high for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and 39% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents believe their trust is high for non-Indigenous Australians. It is curious that despite generations of atrocities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more trusting even in the face of daily acts of prejudice, discrimination and, in some instances, disbelief. Irrespective of the Apology (Rudd, 2007), the *Bringing them home* report (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997) and the inclusion of the Stolen Generations in the Australian curriculum (ACARA, 2016), still 35% of Australians do not believe, or are unsure, that government policies enabled Aboriginal children to be removed from their families without permission.

Reconciliation Australia's reconciliation barometer casts light on the nexus between individual good will, level of knowledge and government policies and actions that seem to be the greatest barrier to reconciliation. But it seems contradictory to be talking about reconciliation in the face of policies like the Northern Territory Intervention and its successor Stronger Futures, or the increasing incarceration rates, or the stinging racism that many regularly experience.

These are but some of the challenges to reconciliation.

Before leaving this section, we wish to remind the reader that the spring from which reconciliation grew was the sobering inquiry of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and their findings and recommendations (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997). It is our contention that reconciliation will never create meaningful change whilst human rights are undermined. The Royal Commission was never supposed to result in a "feel good" agenda; it was always about social justice, about addressing community division, discord and injustice towards Indigenous people. Division and discord will only subside when the roots of injustice are addressed. But these issues are not easily raised or discussed.

Experience tells us that such conversations make non-Indigenous people uncomfortable and defensive. They will point to individuals or initiatives that are achieving positive results and in many ways there have been meaningful bridges built and relationships developed. However, those efforts are ultimately diminished and undermined by a lack of engagement with the broader social justice and anti-racism agenda. Put simply, flying an Aboriginal flag, or attending morning tea with the local community during reconciliation week but failing to question the narrative behind public utterances about Aboriginal people; or supporting discriminatory policies through silence and voting for the political party that designs and implements them will not lead to true reconciliation. The authors have had too many conversations with people that are fully invested with the reconciliation movement, yet continue to hold opinions about Aboriginal people that are at best ignorant and at worst, racist.

At an organisational level, a reconciliation action plan can be a positive initiative, but it is only effective when it leads to meaningful engagement with Aboriginal people and ensures Aboriginal people are able to access the same opportunities as others and are working in a culturally safe environment. At the national level, funding an organisation to promote reconciliation, even developing initiatives to "close the gap" in health and education outcomes is only part of the

equation. Actions, intentions and policies must be congruent with a reconciliation agenda. The missing piece in this puzzle is incentive for non-Indigenous people to interrogate the national narrative that continues to cast Aboriginal people as problematic and somehow causing their own misfortune. Government dialogue is “contrived and dishonest” (Dodson, 2007b, p. 26), focusing on practical outcomes in health, housing and employment, rather than outcomes that would recognise the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples, such as treaty and native title (Dodson, 2007b, p. 26). In the current context, there is collusion between the media and the government to continue to present negative, deficit images and knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is thus no wonder that such dialogue would be more palatable to a settler population that is unconsciously and actively enculturated into this negative and harmful view about Aboriginal people. This is what Hattam and Matthews (2012, p. 20) refer to as Australia’s “psychic disorder”, where a repression of memory allows the ignoring or forgetting of whatever makes us uncomfortable (Hattam & Matthews, 2012).

## Conclusion

Our criticism of reconciliation is quite harsh but we are not without hope. As it currently stands reconciliation is premised on state based recognition of indigenous rights and in effect “makes white sovereignty a non-negotiable absolute to which Indigenous people must be reconciled” (Nicholl, 2004, p. 20). To create meaningful change requires a fundamental shift in the way that Australia at the state level as well as at the individual level engages in the work of deconstructing our national narrative and reconstructing the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. As it stands at the moment there is no shared and agreed-upon vision for what a reconciled Australia would look like.

There are tools in place which can help the country to move forward with a human rights based approach to reconciliation and to change the national narrative. Although Australia resisted signing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (DRIP), it has since

been supported. The challenge now, some years after that support was expressed, is to operationalise it and ensure that Australia adheres to its principles at all levels of government and society.

Australia is presently engaged in a public dialogue to change the Australian constitution, which was written at a time when the White Australia Policy was very much alive. This document still retains these underlying principles which must be addressed to enable a progressive document to emerge. While the statistics show that 79% of Australians (Taylor, 2015) support recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Constitution, no one actually knows what form that recognition will take. Despite a detailed report from an expert panel in 2012 (Expert Panel, 2012), neither the current government or opposition has put forward a clear proposition for Australians to vote on. Our concern is that when it actually comes to a referendum the changes will be designed to appeal to the majority of Australians and will be more symbolic than substantial.

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) recommended in 2010 that Australia “...consider the negotiation of a treaty agreement to build a constructive and sustained relationship with Indigenous peoples” (CERD, 2010, p. 14). Whilst recognising that treaties have not prevented similar atrocities and violations of human rights in other countries, Australia can perhaps learn from other places. As Mick Dodson (2008) suggests, “Canada has its centuries-old treaties, and more modern treaties today, and more recently, constitutional recognition of Aboriginal Canadians in the life and history of that nation”. Whilst there is still a conversation to be had amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people about a treaty (or treaties), this discussion is virtually absent amongst the wider community.

In this paper, we aimed to raise some issues about reconciliation and highlight the lack of congruency between espoused values of reconciliation and other more intrusive and diminishing policies and practices that have continued during the past 25 years. We have also argued that these policies are enabled by a pervasive deficit national narrative about

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that persists despite reconciliation efforts. Unless this is recognised and addressed Australia will continue with a dual process that superficially indicates that relationships are improving, while a blind eye is turned to the plight of those who continue to experience disadvantage and exclusion.

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