

Reconciliation: Fact or fiction?

By Gary Foley

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All around us today we find lip service being paid to the notion of reconciliation, with literally hundreds of groups being established to promote this non-indigenous concept. Whilst it is admirable that significant sections of the broader community now seem keen on the idea, Aboriginal people can be forgiven for sometimes regarding this new-found interest both superficial and belated. Belated because much harm has been caused in Aboriginal communities since the first voices of indigenous protest were noted in mainstream media in the 1930s. Superficial because too often the fine sentiments expressed by white public officials are not backed up with a detailed knowledge of either history or the issues important to the indigenous peoples. The question necessarily arises, "How can genuine reconciliation be achieved without an acknowledgment of the crimes of the past?"

The question is not posed to induce guilt. Rather it is intended to challenge the belief that significant historical truths can be swept under the carpet in the rush for a swift resolution of an unpalatable past. Today the overwhelming majority of Australians have absolutely nothing to fear from this process because they were personally not directly involved in the dispossession and subsequent subjugation of Aboriginal people. The only people that have reason to fear the process are those who were or are involved. In the same way that the architects of Nazi German policies and the white racist Apartheid regime of South Africa are still alive and held to be accountable for their acts, so too are the architects, instrumentalities and officials who committed crimes

against Australian indigenous people still in our midst today. Why are these Australian racists not held accountable in the same way Nazis and Afrikaners are?

When the new Republic of South Africa at the end of apartheid decided it needed to confront the ghosts of the past they opted for the much more meaningful concept of a Truth And Reconciliation Council, rather than a mere Reconciliation council. It was an acknowledgment of the practical reality that you cannot reconcile a brutal history without firstly publicly facing up to the truth of that history and identifying those responsible for the worst abuses and making them accountable for their actions. Only when all society is prepared to accept the truth of their own history, no matter how barbaric, can the wounds of the past begin to heal. Whilst it may be said that the SA Truth & Reconciliation Commission was not a great success, they at least made an attempt to face their history which led to a far more frank understanding and assessment of their past than has yet happened here. In Australia, somehow the proponents of reconciliation seem to believe we can achieve their goal without serious self-examination.

The concept of Reconciliation become so mainstream that a proposed NSW Reconciliation Convention, being held during August 1999, is being sponsored by such diverse groups as the NSW Dept of Education and Training, the Local Government Superannuation Scheme, BHP and the NSW Reconciliation Committee. Full registration fees for the convention range from 'Corporate' at \$350 to 'Concession' at \$95. Many eminent speakers are to perform including, Hazel Hawke, Evelyn Scott, Bob Carr, Kerry Chikarovski, Gatjil Djerrkura and, last but not least, Mr Ray Martin.

Mr Martin's inclusion might seem curious to those who have observed the parade of anti-Aboriginal stories that for years graced the screen during the TV show A Current Affair, of which Mr Martin was high profile host. But then, in this post-modern notion of Reconciliation it

seems anything is possible. Mr Martin it turns out is also a member of the National Council of Aboriginal Reconciliation (NCAR), a fact that in itself not only brings the credibility of the Council into question, but also highlights the many contradictions that surround the body. Many Koori community members were agog about a year ago when it was reported that Mr Martin, having discovered an obscure family member who may have been Aboriginal, declared that he was now identifying as an Aboriginal. This is an example of the extent to which history is trivialised under the current Australian operating notion of Reconciliation.

What is even more problematic about the function of the national Council of Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) is their declaration, that, 'We are developing documents of reconciliation between Australia's first peoples and those who came later.'

Really?

Many Koori activists would like to know, who gave a government appointed Aboriginal Reconciliation Council the authority to be negotiating anything on behalf of all indigenous groups in Australia? This situation is of concern to the many indigenous people who were not consulted about whether reconciliation should even be on the agenda, and whom the members of the CAR do not represent. It also reminds us that the CAR is not something that was either created or wanted by Aboriginal people.

It must be remembered that reconciliation, both as a concept and official national committee, was in the beginning an idea that came from white bureaucrats and politicians. According to the CAR's own information sheet,

Establishment of a formal and ongoing reconciliation process

between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians was the final recommendation of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. In response, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was established under the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991 with the unanimous support of Federal Parliament.

Thus a Royal Commission that cost \$50million and was established by the Hawke government spawned yet another government-sponsored agency, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR). The Hawke government was more than happy to create the Council because it diverted community attention from the miserable failure of the Royal Commission as well as the back down by Hawke on his 1983 promise of 'national uniform Land Rights legislation modelled on the NT Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1974'.

Consequently energy that Koori activists might have put into challenging and exposing the Hawke government's hypocrisy was dissipated by irrelevant debate about reconciliation.

So, if we begin to regard both the notion and the government agency of Reconciliation to be essentially a cynical ploy by lawyers, politicians and bureaucrats to divert public attention from the important fundamental issues that need to be resolved, then we can start to understand widespread indigenous community suspicion and antipathy about the concept

. But it is important to appreciate that Koori community resistance is not a rejection of those genuine expressions of contrition from within the white community. Indeed, many Koori communities are beginning to notice improved relations with their local white counterparts but still feel that the interest is superficial. We should remember that in 1967 despite 90% of the Australian electorate voting YES in the famous Referendum, there remained for many years a lingering racist streak that enabled policies such as "assimilation" and forcible removal of

indigenous children to continue many years after the Referendum. Therefore many Kooris today feel that we should not get too excited about reconciliation as it is a concept that will deliver as little in terms of land and economic justice to Aboriginal peoples as what the Referendum did.

Again, history clearly shows, the momentary meaningful changes that did occur in the 1970s came about as a direct result of the political activism of young Kooris in south east Australia who, under the banner of "Black Power", held a series of major demonstrations and created the famous 1972 Aboriginal Embassy. Indigenous communities know that in the past real change has come only through direct political agitation, rather than the more contrived, government sponsored, superficial manifestations like 'Reconciliation Conventions' where politicians (black and white) grandstand and express meaningless platitudes.

Koori disaffection also stems from frustration with state and federal government departments creating token indigenous agencies to pay lip service to 'reconciliation'. Furthermore, eminent NSW Koori community health worker, Lola McNaughton, in an address delivered to the Reconciliation Plenary Session of the NSW Health Care Complaints Commission, pointed out that more than just cosmetic changes were needed before public health officials were capable of intellectually coming to terms with what reconciliation means in a practical sense. She said that to properly express 'the experience and causative factors and wider sociological reasons for the current ill health of Aboriginal people' it was necessary to create a new word 'to adequately define the underlying issues which need to be addressed in any reconciliation dialogue' The word was "Socio-somatic illness" which means,

those physical ailments, bodily disorders and psychological or mental conditions which impair the health of Aboriginal people and the well-being of Aboriginal communities resulting directly or indirectly from

biological disadvantage; economic deprivation; racism; assimilationist legislation, policies and practices; unemployment; lack of housing; dispossession, alienation from land; forced separation from parents, children, families and communities; and other traumas, which impinged upon Aboriginal people since dispossession.

The problem is that the majority of people who promote reconciliation don't appear to be interested in talking about these socio-somatic problems, or as they were called by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, "underlying issues". Yet this is not such a difficult thing for white Australians to understand if it happens to others, in fact they call the same syndrome in their society, "post-traumatic stress". Furthermore, Australians seem to have no problem accepting that victims of the European Holocaust have extensive, ongoing psychological problems, which span generations, yet when symptoms of the same nation trauma arise in Koori peoples they are either laughed at or gaoled. In other words, victims of the Australian Holocaust face denial on the part of the perpetrating society that it ever happened. Thus explaining the popular talkback radio sport in Australia of, "blaming the victims".

These background historical issues remain at the heart of ongoing Aboriginal suffering in Australia today, but barely rate a mention in the voluminous material available from the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. Yet without a basic comprehension of why issues such as Aboriginal sovereignty, self-determination and economic independence are important, it cannot be said that one understands the history and situation of indigenous Australians today.

The sad truth is that very few of the well-intentioned non-indigenous Australians who support Reconciliation have ever considered the issues mentioned above. This necessarily casts a shadow (no pun intended) over the present reconciliation process. The official Council of Aboriginal Reconciliation agenda is for 'Documents of Reconciliation' to

be acknowledged within the Constitution by the year 2001 when the Council's tenure runs out. But the fact remains that any piece of paper would be meaningless unless Australia as a nation confronts and comes to terms with its own history. Any document of fine sentiments which does not have underpinning it a conscious awareness of history and a willingness to ensure that history does not repeat itself will be a meaningless, empty historical gesture.

Furthermore, it cannot be demonstrated that a majority in any of the hundreds of indigenous nations, clans, communities and groups support the notion of reconciliation as it currently exists. Neither the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation or the tarnished, Labor-government created Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) can claim to have a mandate to speak on behalf of the majority of Indigenous peoples in Australia, so are thereby not authorised to be negotiating anything with governments about indigenous issues. If there are no nationally representative indigenous bodies, then there should be no negotiations about reconciliation, Native Title or anything else. Governments and their compromised Koori advisers and fellow travellers might sneer at this concept of consultation, but I think you might find it is considered important in indigenous communities.

Another aspect of concern about the Council of Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) is the actual structure of the administration that highlights the control which government exercises over its policies and direction. According to CAR documents the Council is serviced by a Secretariat called the Aboriginal Reconciliation Branch which, '...comprises staff employed under the Public Service Act 1922. The head of the branch is a senior officer of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, at Assistant Secretary level', and he is accountable ultimately to the Prime Minister and parliament. Consequently the powerful Canberra public service have their hands firmly on the steering wheel of the CAR, and these arrangements

probably help explain one of the other major criticisms levelled at the CAR by some Koori activists.

The Council has produced vast quantities of propaganda promoting its message but virtually none of these videos; newsletters, newspapers and other media productions were produced by indigenous people. Therefore the CAR seems to have provided many employment opportunities for non-indigenous writers, producers, printers publishers, public relations people etc. This means that the greater part of the annual budget of CAR (in 1996-97 it was \$4,876,000) ends up in the paypackets and pockets of non-indigenous people, and what is left is largely consumed by Council meetings and administration. Thus at the end of the day the National Committee of Aboriginal Reconciliation is in many ways just another branch of the Aboriginal industry with white people, as usual, gaining most of the tangible benefits.

Koori political activists view all of these problematic aspects of the Council of Aboriginal Reconciliation and its attendant industry of white jobs and committees with concern. Many of these activists consider it to be politically and historically premature to be proposing a document of Reconciliation whilst the vast majority of indigenous people remain in situations of desperate economic, social and political deprivation. According to ongoing statistics the imprisonment rate of Koori people is still the highest among any people on earth; the health statistics continue to be generally appalling; indigenous unemployment rates continue to be the highest in Australia; despite the much-lauded Native Title Act 1994, ninety-nine per cent of dispossessed Aboriginal & Islander people remain today landless refugees in their own country. Given this state of affairs, indigenous activists say, 'Shouldn't we be demonstrating at the Olympics rather than accepting a premature, token gesture of reconciliation?'

In conclusion, I might say that it has not been my intention in this essay

to criticise the individual indigenous members of the CAR and other reconciliation projects. I believe the vast majority of these people are well intentioned and genuinely believe, like me, that ultimately one day indigenous Australians will be able to achieve a meaningful reconciliation with non-indigenous Australians. The difference that might exist between us is that I do not believe reconciliation can be achieved before Aboriginal and Islander people are able to deal with white Australia on equal terms, economically, socially and politically. That day will not come until the question of Aboriginal sovereignty is justly resolved and indigenous people here are given proper reparations and compensation for the land and its wealth of which they were forcibly robbed historically.

Then and only then will indigenous people have the financial independence that will enable them (and only them) to determine their own destinies. That is what genuine reconciliation must be predicated upon, as anything less will not resolve the problems that continue to exist, nor will anything less enable indigenous people to escape the perpetual cycle of white-imposed 'solutions' to our problems. Government inspired and controlled programs such as reconciliation councils are not the way for Aboriginal people to liberate themselves from the ongoing racist oppression by white Australian society and its institutions.

Rather, if Koori activists are to learn anything from their own history, the most successful actions to change the socio-political situation of indigenous Australians have always been attention-grabbing political actions such as the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy or the giant rally in Sydney's Hyde Park during the 1988 Bicentennial "masturbation of the nation". It has only ever been through the dedicated action of indigenous-controlled groups and organisations that political action that produced tangible results has been achieved. Viewed in this context reconciliation is ultimately a long term educational issue rather than the

high-priority item it is on today's agenda, and perhaps what Koori activists should be doing is focussing on the important unresolved political issues like Land Rights, economic independence and self-determination.

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