
We need to have a talk about Reconciliation and what it means



'As a citizen and a sovereign Yawuru woman, the least I should expect is that a prime minister keeps their word': Inala Cooper.

By Inala Cooper

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The history of this country, this continent, is often glossed over by shiny documents like Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs). They can be useful, they can also be useless, but the question of whether Australia has achieved Reconciliation, or is on the way to achieving it, requires more than aspiration to answer.

I don't believe Reconciliation is a destination, that there is necessarily an end point. Rather, it's an ongoing process, something that each community and generation must decide upon. To be reconciled with our past — with White Australia's past (and present) — it is not enough to ask if we are achieving Reconciliation. We must ask if we are achieving justice. And if we are to have justice, Reconciliation is not enough. There must also be a sharing of wealth and power, there must be truth-telling, and there must be a recognition of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander sovereignty.

I was a child when I first heard the word reconciliation, in a different context, at Karella, near Port Fairy. It was here, when I was nine years old and in Grade 4, that I was told to "make my reconciliation". I had found out from my grandparents that reconciliation was another word for confession. I knew what confession was. I'd seen them go into the confessional booth at St Joseph's in Yambuk to tell the priest their sins. You were supposed to keep your sins secret, though; you weren't allowed to tell anyone what was spoken in the confessional booth.

The early 1990s saw me discovering a new interpretation of reconciliation. This was the time when Paul Keating made his famous Redfern speech, St Kilda footballer Nicky Winmar showed the Collingwood cheer squad his skin, and we had the International Year of Indigenous People (1993). Native title legislation was being drafted and my dad,

Mick Dodson, had been invited to contribute, along with other Aboriginal leaders including Marcia Langton, Lowitja O'Donoghue and Noel Pearson.

Dad also worked on two royal commissions: Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987–91), and the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (1995–97). I learned to feel proud when my teachers at school said: “I heard your dad on the radio this morning!” I knew the work he was doing was important, and he helped me grow my strong identity, even from afar.

Keating told Australia that “there is nothing to fear or to lose in the recognition of historical truth”. I was starting to see Reconciliation as a public thing, with a capital ‘R’, no longer confined to church confessionals. Admissions of truth were needed, and I had already learned that apologies should be given freely, without the expectation of a response, let alone forgiveness. God forgave, but that was very different — this was about sovereignty, survival, resistance, justice and rights.



Mick Dodson at the National Museum in Canberra calling on both major parties to address Indigenous affairs issues during the election campaign, 2014.

However, the characterisation of that fight for justice as requiring an act of reconciliation, which has its origins in Christianity, should give us pause to critique the process and the ideology on which it is based — as many Indigenous scholars and activists have done.

Makarrata is the Yolngu Matha term for a peace-making process: the coming together after a struggle. This somewhat aligns with how the word reconciliation is used in

religious contexts, but makarrata has a deeper, more complex meaning. It is a philosophy belonging to the Yolngu through which peace can be maintained.

The word and the gesture translate easily to White Australia. However, there has been a mix-up over how Reconciliation apparently requires a considerable amount of acquiescence (politely eating cupcakes at Reconciliation Week morning tea) and generosity (being expected to give advice and do other work for free) from Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander people.

It is not us who need to do the reconciling. It is those who, to use the Christian vernacular, have sinned, and who continue to sin. The settlers, the colonisers, the invaders, the British, the White Australians: it is they who must listen to us, learn from us and work with us, not only to reconcile but to ensure justice and truth-telling. These must be combined with the sharing of wealth and power and an overhaul of the systems that White Australia has created to keep Indigenous people and communities from flourishing — even, in many ways, from existing.

It is not enough to make admissions without anything then being changed.

Bob Hawke was the first prime minister I heard talk about treaty, land rights and native title. I was 10 in 1988, when Australia was celebrating its bicentenary — 200 years of British invasion/ settlement. Anticipating this event, the theme chosen for the 1987 National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week was “White Australia Has a Black History”.

A new commitment was aired by Hawke at this time, after his visit to the festival at Barunga in the Northern Territory — that a treaty would be made to acknowledge the unique rights of all Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander people.

This was not the first time there had been promises, beliefs or hopes of treaties and justice. The Yirrkala bark petitions were the first documents asserting native title prepared by Aboriginal people — the Yolngu of Arnhem Land — and presented to parliament in 1963, in an act of sovereignty intended to create legislative change and constitutional reform. In 1972, the Larrakia people brought their petitions to then prime minister William McMahon, who also rejected them.

Discussions of treaties and land rights were met by some fierce opposition within Hawke’s own party, including from then WA premier Brian Bourke, who supported the mining companies in their public scare campaigns. In the words of Labor MP Linda Burney, it was racist, venomous, ugly and feral. The Opposition said that as soon as they could take office, they would tear up any treaty Hawke dared make with Aboriginal people.

Hawke should have stood his ground. I don’t understand why a leader such as he didn’t do so. Is it all easier said than done? It’s not within my ambitions to enter politics, but as

a citizen, a taxpayer and a sovereign Yawuru woman, the least I should expect is that a prime minister keeps their word.

I remember seeing Hawke on TV, weeping during a press conference, dismayed that his government would not achieve treaty. He expressed his disappointment as he asked his “Aboriginal friends” to understand that “more could not have been done”. Dad was at that press conference, and when the camera panned across to him, I saw a sovereign man looking utterly bereft, an image now etched in my mind.

It cannot be said enough that the systems created by Australia are not broken. Rather, they have been intentionally designed to diminish us, humiliate us, imprison us, get rid of us.

If institutions are serious about Reconciliation and aligning with campaigns such as Racism: It Stops with Me, then they need to be proactive in reviewing their governance, leadership and ways of working. Employment initiatives, for example, must do more than provide entry-level roles for Aboriginal/ Torres Strait Islander people. Look at who is in the boardroom, who makes up the executive, and who occupies other leadership positions, because the lived experiences of those individuals, combined with the history and culture of the organisation, define how things operate. It is not complicated. It starts with respect and humility to both see and admit that Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander people display knowledge and excellence, and ways of knowing, doing and being, which both differ from those of non-Indigenous people and hold extraordinary value.

Bias, both conscious and unconscious, plays a huge role in the application of the concept of merit to individuals, and it is a means of maintaining a safe place from which White people can continue to operate the systems in the way they were designed to operate, which is usually (surprise, surprise) by White privileged men, for White privileged men.

This is not to say that all White people are inherently racist. But nor does a disruption of who holds the power mean that White people lose anything — rather, everyone gains more. White versions of merit are too easily used to evaluate how someone will “fit” instead of broadening the discussion of what Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander people can bring to the table. We are also making our own tables, but that doesn’t mean we don’t belong at the existing ones.

The late Professor Uncle Colin Bourke was a strong and gentle Gamilaroi man who devoted his entire career to Indigenous success in education. In his words to me: “All we need to do is appoint Aboriginal people and support them to succeed. Then we will achieve good outcomes for everyone.”

Having hope, I think, is a sign of optimism, and it can belong both to the privileged and the deprived. My views on hope shifted when I read Munanjahli/South Sea Islander woman Professor Chelsea Watego’s 2021 book *Another Day in the Colony*, written clearly and unapologetically for the mob. Watego is unwavering in her message that we

should not be hopeful but sovereign, for it is through our sovereignty that we remind the colonisers that we are still here, that they didn't succeed.

We who are Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander people identify ourselves as individuals, families and communities in the way we see fit. There are both solo and shared expressions of who we are, and we shall not be forced to pick or choose any one way to be according to others' instructions or expectations. Similarly, we shall not be forced to pick or choose which rights and how much social justice we are afforded. It is not "one or the other" when it comes to treaty and land rights, truth-telling and recognition. We deserve all of our rights, and that means not having to compromise.

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