

Reconciliation failing, say senators

Meaghan Shaw
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The year-long inquiry found the Government's "practical reconciliation" approach was failing, with indicators showing indigenous disadvantage was not improving in many areas.

There was a sense the momentum that flowed from massive public support, expressed in the "bridge walks" of 2000, was being lost.

"People are becoming disheartened and reconciliation is slipping off the national agenda," the report said.

While there had been progress in recent years by all levels of government - including the Council of Australian Government trials in seven indigenous communities - progress was slow in setting targets and evaluation processes to reveal how effectively indigenous disadvantage was being tackled.

The Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee, which was dominated by non-Government members, made 20 recommendations. It called for the Government to adopt all the recommendations - not just the "practical reconciliation" aspects - made in the final report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 2000, which looked at the issue for a decade.

The committee supported the council's suggestion for constitutional amendments, including one to allow Parliament to make special laws in favour of a particular racial group.

It also called for a national reconciliation convention every four years.

Australian Democrats' Senator Aden Ridgeway told Parliament that the Government's "practical reconciliation" approach only offered a Band-Aid solution and failed to foster the nation-building required for reconciliation. In a dissenting report, Government senators accepted the need for some "symbolic" reconciliation measures. They also fully endorsed the recommendation for a preamble to the constitution recognising indigenous peoples as Australia's first peoples.

Indigenous Affairs Minister Amanda Vanstone said that spending on the area was at

an all-time high and the Government was getting results.

Reconciliation Australia backed the report, saying it identified the need