

Presentation by Professor Mick Dodson
For the Public Lecture Series 2007

Whatever Happened to Reconciliation?

20 June 2007

Good Evening Ladies and Gentlemen:

My first duty is to acknowledge that we are on the ancestral lands of the Wurundjeri people. My greetings to all of the Wurundjeri and, in particular, I pay my respects to your elders. It is great to be on your traditional country.

Thank you also to Raimond Gaita who in my opinion is one of Australia's very great thinkers. He challenges us to not only think but to do. Though, what I think we really desperately need are some very great Australian listeners – particularly among our politicians. You never hear anyone talk about our great listeners!

The overarching title of this public lecture series asks the question; 'Whatever happened to Reconciliation?' I was told by the organisers that I should feel free to give my address its own individual title but I'm really just as happy to stick with the one given.

Because it's a question I hear quite often and I suspect that the various speakers taking part in the lecture series will come at it from all sorts of different perspectives. As was the case with Peter Sutton last week. And I think it's important that I deal with it very directly, particularly as I understand I am the only Aboriginal speaker in the series.

But also because I am a director of Reconciliation Australia which perhaps offers me a broader, more everyday experience of what's happened to reconciliation than other commentators whose views may be based more on perceptions or assumptions.

I'll be showing some audio visual material on and off during my presentation to provide a bit of that down to earth experience to you also.

And I'm hoping your own views on the status of reconciliation may change in the course of the next hour or so.

The fact is that I often hear or read of people saying that reconciliation is dead. And I've got to say I find it deeply irritating and a bit of a cop out.

Just because the political argy bargy around reconciliation doesn't appear on the front page of the newspaper as often as it did a decade ago – just because a term that should be easily understood can be so misunderstood – this does not mean that reconciliation has been lost.

I believe in reconciliation and what it can deliver for my people, and for this country. And I am here this evening to speak to you about hope and possibility in a way that should challenge and inspire you to be part of the national movement for reconciliation.

I wonder how those people that say reconciliation is dead have responded to the enormous publicity we've just had around the 40th anniversary of the 1967 referendum – saturation coverage in the media and extensive promotion in all sorts of unexpected places ... throughout Qantas in-flight entertainment, at AFL and NRL matches across the country. Reconciliation has even been picked up as the theme of the upcoming Powderfinger/Silverchair tour, the biggest Australia has seen in decades.

What that tells me is that this country is ready to embrace reconciliation and ready for change, like it was 40 years ago. And although government is clearly lagging, I believe we are well placed now, with all that we've learned from failure and increasingly from success, to realise the vision of equality of all those Australians who voted YES in 1967.

Too many messages in the media today give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (and the community generally) a false and damaging impression that all Indigenous people are failures. Believing this false impression, and the one that says reconciliation is dead, plays into the hands of those who do not care.

I want the best for our people and our nation – too many seem to forget or ignore that when they are critical of reconciliation or indeed the situation of disadvantage that confronts Indigenous Australians.

The particular work I do with Reconciliation Australia focuses on Indigenous success and I've said a number of times now that it's changed my view of the world. What Indigenous people are achieving and how they do what they do has come to inform everything I stand for and everything Reconciliation Australia stands for in promoting the wellbeing of our people, and relationships between us all as Australians.

Success is now our guiding light as it must be for all Australians who want to see it replicated across the country. We identify success in key areas, particularly in Indigenous governance, in education, and in banking and financial services. We work to understand that success and we use the evidence to educate the community, and to influence government and industry policy.

What's all that got to do with the future of reconciliation?

Everything!

There are very few examples of success that don't involve partnerships between Indigenous people and the rest of the community – corporations, government agencies, sporting codes, community organisations etc. And I can tell you this because I've seen how these partnerships are operating across the Australian community and how they represent the future for reconciliation.

The 1967 Referendum didn't achieve the great promise of equality. But the anniversary year is an ideal time to reflect on how, working hand in hand as Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, we are able to move our nation forward.

After all, the referendum process may have finished in the parliament and with a vice-regal signature on the paper that changed the Constitution.

But the real work was done in kitchens, camps and community halls. There are so many stories of conversations that took place in all our cities and towns. This didn't start like any other movement for constitutional change, just because a government wanted it to.

Quite the opposite. It started because enough of the Australian people wanted it.

It is my belief reconciliation will be achieved in an everyday way, in the everyday places of our cities and towns. Like the 1967 referendum, it doesn't begin and end in the corridors of power - the referendum stories tell us that's not where justice flourishes, nor, indeed, where change begins.

Like the referendum reconciliation must be, without letting government off the hook, a grassroots movement.

But the fact that out there in the community, people are getting on with the business of reconciliation doesn't mean we shouldn't hold our leaders accountable for what is their responsibility.

At the referendum anniversary event in Canberra last month, the Prime Minister said, and I quote:

"... this same spirit is inspiring more and more of our people and companies to the cause of Reconciliation; a very Australian, bottom-up, do it yourself Reconciliation. Not in a way that absolves government of its responsibilities. But in a positive way that affirms this as a cause that begins with people."

The Opposition Leader went a bit further by saying:

"Let the nation now resolve to transform reconciliation into an Australian reality in an enduring spirit of reciprocal partnership."

And let it never be said when those who come after us gather again forty years from now, that our generation failed to seize the day."

Leaders in all sectors must support and encourage us to take responsibility for extending pockets of success by demonstrating their trust, and their respect in us and what we do.

I know from my international work and from what we are learning in Australia about good Indigenous governance that confidence gives Indigenous peoples remarkable strength to overcome disadvantage.

And I see how confidence grows when people and their cultures are treated with respect.

In education, for example, what is the common element of every successful model where Indigenous kids are finishing school and dreaming of a brighter future for themselves?

What are we seeing at Kalkaringi and Thursday Island and Gumala Mirnuwarni?

We're seeing:

- intense community involvement
- local decision making
- locally controlled resources; and
- respectful support by non-Indigenous parts of the community.

If we want this kind of reconciliation success story replicated, we need to understand that there are no systematised, centralised solutions. There are simply no silver bullets.

And when we recognise the ingredients of success in education, and provide the national framework for it to grow and flourish, we expose ourselves to a much broader plan for success.

Because, as I have said on numerous occasions before, when you improve education you improve life choices. When you improve housing you improve health, you improve employment you improve wellbeing, and so on.

The strategies I'm talking about don't need to be invented.

They're covered in countless reports and studies from within our own country including the Roadmap for Reconciliation launched in the Year 2000. There are also countless others from around the world that we must not ignore.

We have all the evidence we need to show us how best to get the results we're looking for. What we need is a path through all the historic, attitudinal, political layers that obstruct the passage from knowledge to outcome.

This level of commitment comes at a price but let's stop pretending that there's ever been an investment in Indigenous Australia sufficient to make the kind of progress we are talking about today.

Let's stop pretending that there has ever been an investment based on need.

Based on a vision of success.

And it's time we started telling the Australian people about the economics around not investing in this national effort because if we don't do it now, the cost will skyrocket out of our reach.

This is the future of reconciliation and it has to involve all Australians in closing the unacceptable 17 year gap in life expectancy.

So let us now be prepared to focus ourselves on this task, and to be measured and accountable on the success of our efforts.

Ladies and Gentlemen;

Reconciliation Australia has been commemorating the referendum anniversary not only by looking back, but with an ambitious forward-looking agenda that involves both community education and community engagement.

Reconcile.org.au is a new interactive website developed to generate a frank, national conversation about reconciliation. It features high profile and everyday Australians talking personally about reconciliation, asking the tough (and sometimes the dumb) questions, breaking stereotypes and telling their own stories.

The site, and the ad campaign around it, was developed pro bono for Reconciliation Australia by the country's top advertising agency Saatchi and Saatchi. They've given us close to a million dollars in pro bono support already and they tell us they're with us for the long haul.

And the ads have been run free of charge by media across the country. The site will grow in coming months as top-line Australian musicians like Powderfinger and Silverchair, John Butler, Kev Carmody, Troy Cassar-Daley and Claire Bowditch and Deborah Conway, come online talking about reconciliation and inviting young Australians to upload their ideas to an online gallery of music, images and words.

It's the kind of profile for reconciliation we've been lacking in the last seven or so years, the space our mates from Saatchi refer to as the zeitgeist, space we know we have to share with all sorts of other issues like climate change.

Along with claiming the zeitgeist, Reconciliation Australia is also using the referendum anniversary to leverage some serious influence by signing up organisations in all sectors to Reconciliation Action Plans. The overarching objective of the program is closing the life expectancy gap through all the many and varied ways required, and it's structured to turn good intentions into action.

We have government departments at the federal and state level signed up, big corporations like ANZ and Qantas, sporting codes like the AFL and NRL, NGOs like the Fred Hollows Foundation and World Vision, Indigenous organisations, schools and philanthropic bodies.

Reconciliation Australia, for its part, is a small, non-government not-for-profit but we're using this program to coordinate a sea change in reconciliation activity.

We are not registering Reconciliation Action Plans unless they meet specific criteria:

- They have to include specific, measurable targets. They don't have to be big targets, but they have to be specific, and
- Development of the plans has to include consultation with Indigenous stakeholders, whether they are staff, clients or part of the local community.

Ladies and gentlemen, in 2007, we know what reconciliation looks like in many different contexts.

We have the ingredients to replicate it because we've seen it in action in local councils, schools and workplaces, industry groups and community organisations. We know that it involves respect and honesty and partnership.

The Reconciliation Action Plan program was launched in July last year and there are now around 100 of them being developed around the country. They are an inspiring demonstration of the maturing of the reconciliation process over the last ten years.

Organisations across different sectors understand now the mix of changes in practices and relationships necessary to get better outcomes and they are prepared to make these changes.

Other countries have made significant inroads in closing the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizens and we will too if all sectors are prepared to take consistent, long term, properly resourced action like the organisations who are literally queuing up to develop measurable, action oriented plans.

Australians today can make the referendum result of 40 years ago so much more meaningful if we draw on lessons we've learned about the ingredients of success in reconciliation.

A critical mass of Reconciliation Action Plans will make it impossible for others to say they don't know what reconciliation means or how to get involved.

So one answer to tonight's big question— whatever happened to reconciliation — is this:

It's a movement that's moved beyond being about fine words and is now about taking action.

It's got beyond being recognised as a moral issue to being recognised as an economic one also — the opportunity costs of not making progress are frightening and the Australian business sector knows this and wants something done about it.

Reconciliation has got beyond being an issue of the left and a tad exclusive in the people it attracts, to being an issue that engages a broad range of Australians, as it must, whatever sector they're from, whatever political persuasion.

This is what's happened to reconciliation. This is what needed to happen to reconciliation. And I urge all of you here tonight to get the information about Reconciliation Action Plans off the Reconciliation Australia website, be part of the conversation through reconcile.org.au and take what you learn back to your colleagues and your communities.

Make sure all of them are part of the future of reconciliation.

Not just as spectators or commentators, not just as critics.

But as active participants.