

SUSTAINING THE RECONCILIATION PROCESS¹

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INTRODUCTION

The National Reconciliation Workshop 2005 aims to consider and endorse a plan of action for positively engaging Indigenous peoples and the wider community in the lead up to the National Reconciliation Convention 2007, and beyond.

This paper considers issues relevant to sustaining the reconciliation process into the future. In doing so it:

- Examines the reconciliation process in the lead-up and subsequent to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's (CAR) final report 2000;
- Identifies key lessons learnt; and
- Clarifies issues to consider in planning the next steps towards the 2007 Convention.

The starting point for this discussion is the existing strategy for sustaining the reconciliation process produced by CAR in 2000. CAR's strategy set out measures under six themes:

- Leadership
- Education
- People's Movement
- Protocol and Ceremony
- Symbols of reconciliation
- Formal recognition of the documents of reconciliation.

Progress has been made in all of these areas, however, in general this has been patchy and in some respects minimal. Importantly, the structural change necessary to support these strategies-which are heavily influenced by government leadership and support-has been ad hoc and advances lack confirmed commitment into the future. Divergences between Indigenous policy directions adopted by governments and the agenda set out by CAR have served to block progress in areas of disagreement and to undermine efforts to sustain the reconciliation process in the broader community

Outside of government, some key sectors have independently developed innovative projects that have sought to critically examine and respond to

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structural issues of national concern. When assessing their effectiveness, it is understood that strategies addressing structural change take considerable time (in many cases, generations) to realise.

A significant amount of the progress that has been made has addressed symbolic and celebratory aspects:

- Inclusion in educational curriculum's of reconciliation themes;
- Celebration of dates, events and joint actions through the people's movement;
- The inclusion of appropriate Indigenous ceremony in official and community events;
- The establishment and promotion of symbols of reconciliation.

The public movement showed significant progress through leadership by reconciliation groups, involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people from the wider community, local councils and other sectors and levels of government.

Since the strategy was adopted, what has become clear is that a critical element in sustaining reconciliation has been the existence of individuals and organisations with the ability to motivate others to take up activities and initiatives in support of reconciliation. These are the enablers of reconciliation.

What has been less clear is how this critical enabling sector has been affected by other factors, such as support structures and resources, political processes and the broader Indigenous policy debate. A critical task is to understand how this sector is impacted in order to determine how to progress its role in sustaining the reconciliation process.

The following sections reflect on evidence and experience of ways in which reconciliation activity has developed; the lessons learnt from the past; and raise issues to consider for the future. Discussion throughout is divided into the two key themes of:

Public Engagement and Structural Change

1. THE RECONCILIATION PROCESS 1990-2005

1.1 1990-1996: Building a movement for change

Public Engagement

This period established relationships between the movement and major sectors within the community, eg Youth and school groups, faith groups, local and state governments, local and regional associations, NGOs, etc.

The public movement was heavily supported by CAR through the provision of resources (print, video) and programs such as 'Australians for Reconciliation', which provided states and territories with consultants whose role was to engage the public (eg. events, consultations, agreement-making and

to facilitate the establishment of local reconciliation groups and state peak bodies).

Political bipartisanship on reconciliation over the period and Federal Government initiatives such as Prime Minister Paul Keating's 'Redfern speech', provided encouragement for positive public engagement.

Despite this, some in the Indigenous community remained opposed to or sceptical of the reconciliation process.

Structural Change

This period established relationships between the movement and major state and national sectors, and furnished similar outcomes to the public engagement building phase. By virtue of CAR's statutory role, options were explored and many strategic documents were drafted and distributed. Many of these documents were the result of joint collaboration between CAR and the relevant sector.

The movement broadly enjoyed bipartisan support.

Significant Indigenous reports on a Social Justice Package were produced in 1995 in response to negotiations between Indigenous leaderships and the federal government over native title. These reports outlined an agenda for structural change.

Other significant reports and inquiries during the period included the release of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, The Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission's (HREOC) Social Justice and Native Title Reports and the establishment of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families.

1.2 1997-2000: Peak activity

Public Engagement

A time of uncertainty with a change of Federal Government, and expectation as CAR's ten year legislative term drew to a close. The foundations laid during the 'building phase' helped to stimulate increased activity.

- Local reconciliation groups were active and supported in the main (financial and in kind support, particularly from local governments or associations). Their activities included symbolic achievements (eg. Indigenous road signs, stolen generations memorials); relationship building (eg. social activities involving Indigenous locals and the wider community); community resource projects (eg. writing local Indigenous dictionaries, developing historical timelines); and reconciliation events (eg. flag raising ceremonies, national reconciliation week celebrations).
- Similarly, State Reconciliation Committees (known now as State

Peak Bodies) were active, financially supported (particularly by state governments and, when formal collaboration was desired, by the CAR).

- CAR's 'Australians for Reconciliation' program was in high demand responding to public requests for resources and consultations.
- There was an increasing intersection of key Indigenous policy issues and reconciliation, particularly in relation to the 'sorry debate', 'stolen generations' and native title. Independent, self-starting groups formed around these key issues, stimulating further activity and public debate. These included Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) and the National Sorry Day Committee. Campaigns such as the Sea of Hands mobilised unprecedented public interest and support.
- The media were alert to reconciliation styled news/stories, particularly towards the end of 2000 as the formal CAR process approached conclusion.
- Major sectors were delivering their own contribution consistent with the activities of local reconciliation groups.
- Knowledge of and/or engagement with reconciliation by the wider public were limited.

In 2000, the 'Walks for Reconciliation' in major cities and towns across the country engaged an unprecedented amount of Australians (active reconciliation supporters and others) to publicly demonstrate their support for a reconciled nation.

Structural Change

Key state and national sectors were considering/launching their own in-house strategies and symbolic measures (eg. Declarations and Statements for Reconciliation were launched, reconciliation committees were formed, events such as National Reconciliation Week, NAIDOC and Sorry Day were celebrated with enthusiasm, schools developed Indigenous/reconciliation curriculum etc).

The National Reconciliation Convention-which included hundreds of state, regional, local and sectoral consultations-was held in 1997 with over 2000 people in attendance. The outcomes provided structural change analysis and recommendations.

CAR's ten-year term came to a close at the end of 2000. Its Final Report contained recommendations, including draft legislation that would bring significant structural change to Indigenous affairs and the reconciliation movement. It also produced a Roadmap to Reconciliation (containing several strategies for future action) and founded 'Reconciliation Australia' to carry on its work.

During the period, Indigenous affairs policy issues dominated public debate about reconciliation. The release of HREOC's 'Bringing Them Home'

report in 1997 sparked a divisive national debate, particularly in relation to the government's rejection of the recommendation for a national apology, as did the 1998 Native Title Act Amendments in response to the High Court's Wik decision. The Social Justice Commissioner's Social Justice Reports and Native Title Reports provided significant documentation and recommendations to government on these and other issues.

In 1999, amidst controversy, the government failed to gain support for a referendum to insert a Preamble to the Constitution recognising Indigenous Peoples.

1.3 2001-2004: Sustaining activity

Public Engagement

This period saw varied results in the public movement. While some areas maintained/heightened their activity, most were challenged to move forward with strength. Many local groups and state peak bodies lost their momentum. Many sectors downsized their activities and the wider public 'moved on'.

Was this inevitable? Suggested reasons for this lessened activity include:

- Competing interests in other social justice issues such as September 11, refugees and asylum seekers, East Timor, Bali bombing, the war in Iraq were regarded as higher priorities.
- Political disappointment resulting from the lack of priority shown to reconciliation by the Federal and state Governments. The federal government rejected many of CAR's final recommendations and pursued an Indigenous policy strategy in conflict with the recommendations.
- Reconciliation Australia's structure, budget and human resource capacity could not replicate the achievements of CAR, and its focus shifted to structural change on a national level. National public engagement had ended; resources were depleted and the major public support structure-the 'Australians for Reconciliation' program and its state consultants-were no longer supporting the national movement.
- Less media attention and 'good news stories' and an increasingly polarised public debate.
- Many local reconciliation groups lost financial and logistical support. This affected their capacity for promotion, publicity, public outreach, meetings, projects and events.
- Many state peak bodies also lost major financial and logistical support, with similar impacts to LRGs. This challenged them operationally, primarily.

Structural Change

It was hoped that structural change documents, including the Documents of Reconciliation, produced in the peak period would sustain the major sectors, particularly those produced by state government agencies. However, the states saw a decrease in activity and were challenged to see through their commitments without the steam of a resourced national body to power it.

Interestingly, regional and locally based groups had always been independently resourced by securing working partnerships within their area of concern. However, with the decrease of national and state activity, they too found it difficult to maintain local enthusiasm.

On a national level, activity varied.

Reconciliation Australia began its task in a measured fashion, reassessing its position in light of its budget and human resource capacities. As a result its primary focus shifted to structural change on a national level.

Innovative projects which sought to critically examine and respond to structural issues of national concern were delivered by a variety of key organisations, including projects related to:

- Treaty
- Financial literacy
- Indigenous Governance
- Indigenous leadership
- Health and nutrition

In contrast, many documents from 1991-2000 that sought to bring structural change appeared to be, at best, put on hold and at worst, put to pasture. There was no meaningful federal or state government response to CARs final report, the Bringing Them Home Report, HREOC's Social Justice and Native Title reports and the report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, all of which sought to deliver key reconciliation outcomes, or at least, informed and necessary dialogue.

The Government's 'practical reconciliation' approach resulted in a shift away from engagement with rights-based reconciliation issues and shifted debate towards a narrow focus on Indigenous disadvantage. This has also been accompanied by the failure of the Government to involve and seek the support of Indigenous stakeholders for the significant policy changes that occurred during the period.

Initiatives such as the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) whole-of-government trials have provided new models for Indigenous service delivery; however, these are yet to be properly evaluated.

1.4 2005: Review and rebuilding

Public Engagement

Indigenous affairs - and therefore the reconciliation movement - are in a time of considerable change. See below and 3.1a.

Public activity may best be described as similar to 2001-2004.

Structural Change

Indigenous affairs-and therefore the reconciliation movement-are at a time of considerable change particularly as a result of the abolishment of ATSIC, and the introduction of an advisory National Indigenous Council, and mainstreaming strategies based on mutual obligation and shared responsibility principles.

Finer points of the government structures are yet to be clarified and the reforms tested for their appropriateness and effectiveness in the practical sense.

Indigenous leaders have responded to the government's restructure of Indigenous affairs in part through existing and informally convened Indigenous bodies such as the 'Indigenous Leaders Forum' (financially assisted by Reconciliation Australia and AIATSIS).

The activities described in 1.3 remain relevant.

2. LESSONS FROM THE PAST

2.1 Public Engagement

- Formal processes, structures and resourcing have been essential in strengthening public engagement.
- Political environment is also critical-bipartisanship has stimulated progress while politicisation and polarisation of the issues has been counter-productive. National leadership is important.
- Where state and local government support has occurred, their engagement helped to increase public activity.
- Genuine engagement with Indigenous communities and organisations is critical to success. This needs to include non-Indigenous recognition of and support for Indigenous aspirations and goals.
- While locally based activity has suffered with decreased support, it has continued to produce positive and constructive outcomes.
- There has been limited engagement of the broader community which in part may be due to confusion/lack of agreement on what reconciliation means to them, or what active role they might play.

2.2 Structural Change

- The Indigenous affairs administration and policy environment has significantly influenced and is integral to the reconciliation process.
- The political environment has been critical in setting the tone for reconciliation-bipartisanship has stimulated progress while the politicisation and polarisation of issues has been counter-productive. National and state political leadership is important.
- Sectors that introduce strategies - that affect their principles of practice-enjoy marked and measurable success.
- Indigenous structures representing and supported by the Indigenous community and with the ability to engage with Government and other sectors have been critical in negotiating agreed goals and achieving positive outcomes.
- Appropriate formal structures and processes for identifying and achieving goals and monitoring outcomes (such as the COAG initiatives) are required.
- Formal processes and bodies at the national level have been important in driving structural change.
- Structural change needs to engage with and stimulate a broad-based reconciliation movement.

3. ISSUES TO CONSIDER

3.1 Public Engagement

- a. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, due to the altered and uncertain Indigenous policy environment, reconciliation supporters are seeking guidance from Indigenous leaders to ascertain which elements of the new government structure they might support or challenge. Groups such as the 'Indigenous Leaders Forum' provide temporary solutions. See also 3.2c.
- b. Strengthening formal structures for the engagement of supporters is essential to building the public movement. Recent figures show that 55% of Australians remain committed to the notion of reconciliation yet are less active/visual as they question the meaningful role they may play.
Reconciliation bodies such as the state peak bodies and local reconciliation groups vary considerably in their capacity to represent and lead community engagement. Amongst other things, this capacity is limited by their financial circumstances.
 - Most active local reconciliation groups have maintained effective networking strategies with a broad section of their local community, which has also assisted their fundraising and general operations.
 - Other independent groups, such as ANTaR, have also operated

- without government financial support, relying heavily on public donations and the work of dedicated volunteers.
- State peak bodies have relied heavily on state governments for their operational existence. Those without state government support have struggled to remain meaningful and active.
- c. Strategies to engage a broad demographic would bring greater meaning to the success of the reconciliation movement, and arguably, underpin political response.
 - d. A formal national event or space, which links to state events, can provide a public focus and mobilisation, offering accessible ways for the public (supporters and others) to show their support. The Walk for Reconciliation was a prime example of this, yet there are current, smaller scale and manageable events that provide similar outcomes such as the Sea of Hands and the bi-annual Vietnamese festival.
 - e. Reconciliation Australia's Pathways and fundraising programs will seek to engage all sectors of the community by asking them to rekindle/begin meaningful projects, and be acknowledged for them.

3.2 Structural Change

- a. The current reforms to Indigenous affairs place considerable expectations on federal, state and local governments to deliver meaningful change to the lives of Indigenous people in the short and longer term. The nature of the reforms has introduced controversy and debate.
- b. The Government's structural reforms based on mutual obligation have highlighted the requirement for Indigenous people to accept responsibility in working to address Indigenous disadvantage. The responses of Indigenous leaders and others have stressed the reciprocal need for governments to meet their responsibilities.
- c. The lack of a national representative Indigenous structure represents an impediment to national progress on reconciliation. It will not be possible to develop the necessary genuine partnership between Indigenous Peoples and the federal government at the national level without such a structure.

"Ultimately, it is about how best to recognize the right of Indigenous people to be Indigenous people within the complexity of our western democratic structure, and to accommodate that, rather than to suppress it." (Patrick Dodson)

"Reconciliation underpins democracy by developing the working relationships necessary for successful implementation." (David Bloomsfield)
- d. Pending the demise of the ATSIC regional council structure, all state, regional and local arrangements for Indigenous service delivery must be clarified. Clarification of how it is proposed to develop relationships, manage partnerships and advance the aspirations of

- Indigenous communities is critical.
- e. The lack of Indigenous input into the changes to Indigenous policy opens the prospect of ongoing controversy and debate that will negatively impact on the reconciliation process during the years ahead.
 - f. Accountability mechanisms in relation to progress on reconciliation are an important tool. This could include the introduction of reconciliation outcomes built into Director General (government agencies) and CEO (private sector) Performance Indicators. This may be similar to the structures that currently exist in the area of Affirmative Action for Women standards.
 - g. The lack of space for a national conversation on the Indigenous rights agenda and with regard to the "unfinished business" agenda of reconciliation as outlined by CAR in its final report recommendations represents an impediment to broader progress on reconciliation.
 - h. Many of the above issues have contributed to a continuing lack of confidence in the reconciliation process by many in the Indigenous community who see their aspirations and perspectives marginalised in political and community debate.
 - i. State governments, major sectors and the wider community must consider how they will work with established state and national bodies (eg Reconciliation Australia, ANTaR, state peak bodies and local reconciliation groups).
 - j. Arguably, there are some sectors in the national landscape that have greater influence over community attitudes than others. These include sectors such as education, faith, local government, Indigenous groups and many NGOs. While resources are pinched or uncertain, strategies that target these sectors should be considered.
 - k. While political leadership and support is critical to progress, reconciliation players must be innovative in their efforts to sustain the movement.