

Can Australia Afford Not to be Reconciled?

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Acknowledgements:

Gadigal people of the Eora Nation

Dean and other distinguished guests

History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again. Maya Angelou

“All they seemed to want was for us to be gone.” Thus wrote James Cook on the 29th April 1770 as he travelled up the east coast of the continent that he had recently named New South Wales.

But as the great navigator Cook was well aware **the likelihood of this aspiration of the Eora peoples ever being achieved** was as likely as the moon falling from the sky. Cook understood that once the reports from Joseph Banks **on the abundance of natural wealth that was so apparent on the east coast of this great South Land** were disseminated within the centres of political and commercial power **back in Great Britain**, there would be the inevitable rush by those with the power and resources **to plan its future exploitation.**

As the Native peoples watched the progress of his barque Endeavour make its way up the eastern seaboard, **they would have no doubt wondered at the strangeness of the vessel and its people.** But it's very unlikely that they gave much consideration to **the political and commercial opportunities such an encounter might have presented for them as the Traditional Owners of these vast estates.**

This then was the beginning of the basis of an unequal relationship that has existed between our peoples to this very day.

Within a decade the Government of Great Britain had asserted its colonial imperative over the lands, rivers and seas of the Eastern side of the continent, **and within another three decades** had completed the task by proclaiming the establishment of the Swan River Colony on the land of the Noongars on **the West Coast of the newly named Australia.**

The rest, as they say, is history. And quite frankly I'm somewhat fed up with continually **having to recite to the people of this country the litany of our oppression since Cook sailed by in 1770.**

The Prime Minister has in recent days announced that there will be a process of consultation and discussion in the lead up to a referendum, which will ask the nation's voters whether **there should be constitutional recognition for Indigenous people incorporated into the Australian Constitution.**

I welcome the announcement.

It offers the nation **an opportunity** to take matters that are addressed **in the United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Rights and cement them into our domestic law**. It's a way that Indigenous peoples' rights and interests can be enshrined within our Constitution in a way **that is beyond symbolic**, as the preamble option would be, **and actually recognise and embrace the rich and vibrant nature of our Indigenous Cultures while ensuring that our rights and interests are forever protected and guaranteed in the Nation's guiding document**.

As ever, the devil will be in the details, **and in this case**, in whether the bipartisanship promised on the day of the Prime Minister's announcement **will be maintained up to polling day**. I would strongly counsel that the referendum be held on a day **not connected to a General Election**, which would destroy any bipartisan position that is clearly critical to a positive outcome for Indigenous and all Australians.

Perhaps the vote should be held on or near the anniversary of the 1967 Referendum, 26th May, so as to symbolically take the resounding demand of that earlier generation **"for a just relationship between our peoples"** to its next logical step – a proper recognition of the Indigenous people of Australia as the First Peoples, **and acknowledgement of our culture, our languages and our economies within the Australian Constitution**.

If this process is done with an open heart and recognition that this is a matter of justice, **not special benefit**, then what the Prime Minister has described as a once-in-a-fifty-year opportunity can become the first page in the promised **"next chapter of new history of this great nation."**

If we face our history with courage, and if we pledge the integrity of our improving relationship firmly within our Constitution, **then a real dialogue between us can proceed secure in the knowledge of our *shared* commitment to the nation and its future**. Not incidentally, we can also address the task of ensuring that **education, economic and health outcomes for Indigenous people reach parity with all other Australians**.

There is much work to be done and there are tasks aplenty for all of us. **It cannot be left to governments alone** to determine the solutions to the problems confronting our communities and people. **In that model resides** further paternalism, assimilation and welfarism, **when what we all want is well-being**.

There is, if you will pardon the expression, a place at the coal face for all who choose to engage and there is no rational justification for any Australian to stand out as observers in this journey of dialogue that stands before us – **every Australian has something to contribute!** Patience, humility, trust and love are required in equal measure. And then **we need a very large dollop of courage**. This is the pathway to true reconciliation, and **the Prime Minister's announcement is a very important step along that path**.

To paraphrase George Washington:

"Reconciliation is a plant of slow growth, and must undergo and withstand the shocks of adversity before it is entitled to the appellation."

There have been enough Royal Commissions, enough coroners' findings, enough documented massacres and surely enough statistics relating to the second-class social outcomes for the Indigenous peoples of this country over the past two centuries to illuminate and inform even the most disengaged people within the nation.

The outcomes of the engagement between our peoples are beyond dispute. Many of our Indigenous people remain in poverty and live in Third World circumstances, our young men are over-represented in the jails of the nation, and the capacity of our communities to participate fully in the economic life of this country are continually subjugated to the interests of third parties – either through legislation or political expedience.

In that light, the reconciliation process is seen by many of our young Indigenous people **as just a new framework for assimilation.** The strategy for assimilation of our peoples is not a mistake made by low-level bureaucrats on behalf of successive governments who didn't know better. It was and continues to be a deliberate act orchestrated at the highest levels in our society, and no amount of moral posturing can hide that reality. This Assimilation I talk of has not been evidenced by equality, but by further control, incarceration and subjugation to norms and values without our consent.

Think about it. Right now, **today,** some of our greatest living artists, philosophers, spiritual leaders and their families remain subject **to the racially inspired Northern Territory National Emergency Response – The Intervention.** Against that backdrop, any notion of reconciled peoples **is a farcical concept.**

As long as even one such regime of social oppression remains in place in this country, we remain a subjugated people. As long as a Parliament is able to remove some of our most basics rights on a political whim, we remain a subjugated people. If governments, newly elected, retain those same impediments to justice when all the evidence available tells them that the programmes and strategies emanating from the oppression are failing to deliver the asserted outcomes, **then reconciliation is no longer a national aspiration. It is a ruse to disguise our continued subjugation.**

In fact, **what remains is simply a manifestation of non-Indigenous peoples impatience with their own inability to come to terms with the scale of the effort required to truly reconcile the nation.**

For many of our mainstream leaders, **political emasculation and land theft was the intent,** and the inaction by the Northern Territory Government on the recommendations of the *Children are Sacred* report **was a subterfuge for the real agenda of a government that was under siege, on a range of fronts and was desperate for a distraction.**

No matter what the intent, **the outcome has been a further breakdown in the stability of our remote communities,** and a vast expansion of bureaucratic intrusion into the lives of our people. The removal of resources for the sustaining of our homeland communities has resulted in population drifts into centralised communities – in the Northern Territory **they are described as Growth Towns** – which themselves are under siege from the impositions of the

Intervention. **These towns are expected to soak up additional pressures with no additional infrastructure investments – and guess who ends up suffering most as a result of that?**

There are now limited prospects for a market economy along traditional Western imperatives. Whatever does exist is open to opportunistic individuals and not necessarily transformative of the poverty and dependence that exists amongst the majority. To establish such a commercial environment will not automatically benefit the Aboriginal populations, but those with capital to invest. Any serious consideration of the emerging economies that are concerned with ‘caring for country’ or the environment has little consideration about the models of financing necessary for engagement in such areas.

The Northern Territory is simply the front line, the first cab off the rank in this latest assimilation push against Aboriginal people. In other regions in the country, our people understand that Closing the Gap may come to mean Closing the Door on our culture, our languages and our right to be uniquely the nation’s First Peoples, with all the attendant rights and responsibilities that go with that status.

We’ve seen the rooms full of balloons labelled “Constitutional Change,” “Congress of the First Peoples” and “Reconciliation,” but there is little evidence that former Prime Minister Rudd’s promise at the time of the National Apology for the Stolen Generations has begun. Remember what he said, “A future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great nation...”

With the referendum outcome of 1967, we as a nation supposedly set out on a quest for what is our true humanity. We thought we were taking the first steps towards confronting the truth of our history. **But we failed to understand what Maya Angelou was saying when she said:**

“History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.”

As a nation, we in fact chose not to face our past with courage. Rather, we invested heavily, expensively, shockingly in so-called solutions that further entrenched the assimilation paradigm of the previous 170 odd years. **The referendum 43 years ago turned out not to be much of a step forward at all.**

Programmes were designed and delivered for our people **as though we were still mendicants in our own land.** Departments with benign titles were created to replace the old “welfare, native protector agencies,” but still the anchor of subjugation prevented us **from moving out into the deep channels where the fish are plentiful, and where we could determine our own fate and destinies based on access to an equitable share of the resources being enjoyed by the settler society.**

And then, along came John Howard, who as Prime Minister always considered **the notion of reconciliation to be a personal matter.** For Howard, the resolution of practical matters regarding health, housing and education would ultimately **deliver national outcomes from governments,** and thus reconciliation would be achieved.

It was this attitude that made me despair for national reconciliation ever being achieved.

So it was that, in October 1997, I wrote to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs in the Howard Government, John Herron, and **declined reappointment to the Chairmanship of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, which I had chaired for the previous six years.**

In my letter to the Minister I said, “... **it has been extremely worrying to have watched the present government actively pulling apart the delicate threads of reconciliation that many Australians have been weaving into a beautiful garment.**”

Remember that reconciliation was a process initiated by the federal Parliament, with the support of all parties. **My issue wasn't with Parliament's good intentions. My immense personal despair was with the direction that the government of the day was taking the reconciliation process. Howard politicised the opportunity for national reconciliation something Keating was conscious of avoiding.**

So at the end of 1997, safe in the embrace of my own Yawuru world back in my hometown of Broome, I had time to reflect on people's inability to understand what Gandhi and Martin Luther King had instinctively understood: **that while the battle for peace and justice might have a local or regional context, the impact of that battle has global consequences. In other words, we cannot stand in our own land and demand truth and justice when others in the world are being denied the same outcomes.**

Our world is confronted with the consequences of our failed stewardship – just look at the crisis of global warming and climate change, where our nearest neighbours in the Pacific are literally seeing their sovereign Island states disappearing beneath rising oceans. Or consider the disparity between a minority of the Earth's people who control the majority of the wealth and resources on this planet, and those people whose lives are lived on the low-water mark of overwhelming poverty.

Our responsibilities as Australians – who have great resources and great wealth compared with many other nations – **cannot be ignored.**

For two centuries Australians have managed to deforest vast tracts of our landscape, we have mismanaged our woodlands by converting them into acre upon acre of grain fields and pastoral lands to the extent that soils have been destroyed, native vegetation decimated and river systems taken to the brink of environmental bankruptcy. **And yet we still debate the validity or otherwise of what are clearly unsustainable land and water uses.**

The damage that we have imposed on the continent since the arrival of the First Fleet can in some instances be rehabilitated by changing farming and pastoral practices. Clever landscaping and vigorous replanting of trees and native grasses and vegetation will halt the erosion of our plains, and it is even possible to give life back to river systems. **Some water would help!** That, and good management and clever use of technology, **none of which have to come at the expense of the economic bottom line.**

But if, **in twenty-two decades of European intervention**, we have managed to destroy or damage almost every forest, almost every river and almost the entire landscape of the island continent of Australia, **perhaps it is time to ask ourselves how the Aboriginal peoples managed**

to maintain the balance between sustaining our societies, feeding our people and living within our lands, sea and waters without destroying another species of bird, fish or animal for millennia.

Perhaps instead of our colonising visitors focussing on the concept of *terra nullius* (no one's land) as a way of stealing our lives, **there should have been a greater focus on the notion *aut disce aut discede* – either learn or leave!**

And yet it's not too late, there is still time to learn. The great opportunity that exists for not just Australia, but for the industrialised world more generally is to look to the way that Indigenous cultures and spirituality were used to manage our environment, our land, seas and waters, for generation upon generation.

Indigenous knowledge systems need to be incorporated into our pastoral, farming, land and sea management practices **to ensure we use this century to restore our ecosystems, and improve the balance sheet of our cultural and natural resource assets.** We need to start thinking less about nation states, and **more about nature states.**

To achieve this, Indigenous people must be incorporated into planning and decision-making about future land, sea and river management regimes. The whole philosophy of how nations use and sustain their resources needs to be underpinned by Indigenous peoples' cultural and spiritual relationship to our environment, and our perspectives on what constitutes a successful society. **Indeed, a successful economy.**

The Global Financial Crisis exposed the flaws of an unbridled capitalist system allowed to run rampant in the world. What must be learnt from that experience **is that we cannot continue to live on this planet, with its finite resources, in an unsustainable manner.** Just as importantly, we cannot continue to ignore the great potential that **resides in the wisdom, culture, spirituality and knowledge of value systems that have sustained Indigenous communities for millennia.**

We as a nation have the capacity, the ingenuity and wealth to work with our neighbours to deal with the consequences of our own industrialisation and consumption. Australia is looked to by other nations and peoples for assistance and guidance in managing the consequences of globalisation and climate change.

As a mature country, **it is only just that we should provide that leadership.** It is ultimately to our benefit to ensure that those who share our region and our planet are able to live as global citizens, with respect and dignity that isn't dependent merely on having vast natural resources that generate great material wealth.

But first we must truly reconcile with the Indigenous peoples of this Nation so that we are freed from the past arguments and open to learn from the wisdom and richness of the peoples whose diverse cultures are greater than what the colonisers flags symbolised when placed upon their sacred lands and waters.

When we open our hearts and minds to truth and justice with our Indigenous peoples, then the horizons of our courage will inevitably lead us to the strengthening of the relationships with our regional neighbours and those peoples beyond.

Perhaps if we achieve that level of global engagement we will not have our diplomats wandering the world in search of votes at the UN for a few minutes game time on the Security Council!

On the occasion of the National Apology, I warned of the inherent challenges that would confront us all as we moved forward beyond that seemingly impossible hurdle – a mere apology, after all – that, in the end, Parliament found so easy to overcome, and yet whose promise has been so easily forgotten **in the rush to move forward as a nation**.

On the occasion of the National Apology, we gave the world and ourselves a brief glimpse of **who, as a nation, we might yet become**.

Today, I again warn that the journey from this point will be challenging. **We must demand** the courage of our leaders and opinion makers **to imagine a renewed nation**, to be prepared to take and support **the many steps towards a true renaissance**. This must be a renaissance **that is underpinned by Indigenous culture and spirituality, and an Indigenous view of what makes for a successful society and economy**.

The spurious discourse that I alluded to over **symbolism versus practical outcomes**, over **rights versus responsibilities**, and the notion **that a collective or a community is somehow at odds with the rights and aspirations of individuals**, still remains on the lips of many well-intentioned Australians.

I continue to believe that we as a nation should **be capable of developing public policy that recognises the fact that Indigenous society** – which draws on thousands of years of cultural and religious connection to Australian lands – **has survived**. We define what it means to be **resilient**, and resilience lies at the heart of **how we are all going to survive the shocks of this century, and the next**.

We should be capable of creating relationships where the imperatives of Indigenous life are understood and respected by governments and institutionalised as part of good governance.

In this process, faced honestly, we will find the liberating potential **to forge a unique national identity and purpose for all Australians** – one that rises above the tragedy of our colonial and racist history, **and enshrines respect for cultural diversity as a pivotal cornerstone of our nation's existence**.

The place of Aboriginal people in the constitutional and institutional frameworks of our nation has to be approached from the point of understanding **what our greatest fears are about such a discussion and its outcomes**. This should not daunt us. We have seen that Indigenous ceremony and symbols can be incorporated into the Parliament, and that change to institutions is possible.

Once we have confronted our fears, then the process becomes a much simpler process. It becomes clearer that going forward is a purposeful and constructive option for our Nation building contributions.

Looking back, the creators of the original Constitution were men of their time, and they delivered to the new Federation a document reflective of the political and social imperatives of their day. But the writers of the founding document of the nation always imagined and incorporated a capacity for the nation to adapt to new times and changed circumstances.

We haven't done it often. In fact the voters of the Commonwealth of Australia have been highly discerning and considered when offered the opportunity to change our Constitution. Tempered minds and hearts have guided their thinking and their choices.

So it is vital that our dialogue in the lead up to a Constitutional referendum to recognise the Indigenous people, our culture, our languages, our rights and responsibilities, within the Australian Constitution –

it is vital that our dialogue calls upon all of us to come with wise heads, listening hearts, and the courage to confront the fear of our history.

If, as a nation, we are able to conduct ourselves with courage, love and integrity in the dialogue before us, then the nation will be well served and future generations will not be left wondering why our courage was so lacking that we were unable to confront the truth of our history and to deal with that truth accordingly.

Or as the **Dalai Lama** has suggested;

“When we face problems or disagreements we have to arrive at solutions through dialogue. Dialogue is the only appropriate method. One-sided victory is no longer relevant. We must work to resolve conflicts in a spirit of reconciliation and always keep in mind the interests of others. We cannot destroy our neighbours! We cannot ignore their interests! Doing so would ultimately cause us to suffer.”

In answering the question: ‘Can Australia afford not to be Reconciled!’ I leave you with three questions:

1. Who am I? (Are you the person you think you are?) ie what is your essence as a human being and person?
2. What am I meant to do with my life? In this life how do we do justice for others and ourselves?
3. How am I going to do what I am meant to do?

There are no easy answers. The answers will be right for you if you search honestly. In the context of a ‘new partnership’ and ‘new relationships’ this is probably the place to start. Then we can ask it of our country.

It is my belief that we have all suffered long enough.

And in the words of the great Aboriginal songman, Archie Roach “because we have been too far apart”.

In closing and as we break lets listen to the words in the Yiramalay song from **‘City to Red Earth’** of the new and lasting partnership hoped for by these Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students from the Wesley/Fitzroy studio school composed after their first encounters.

Kulia

