

THE 3rd ANNUAL ANU RECONCILIATION LECTURE

Presented by The National Centre for Indigenous Studies, The National Institute of Social Sciences & Law and Reconciliation Australia

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Parliament House, Canberra, May 30, 2006

Good evening ladies and gentlemen.

First of all I want to thank the traditional owners of the land on which we gather tonight.

I also thank Ian Chubb, the Vice Chancellor of the ANU and Jackie Huggins and Mark Leibler, the co-chairs of Reconciliation Australia, an organization doing some very good work in this area.

And I welcome all of you, our parliamentary and indigenous leaders and many others who care passionately about reconciliation.

I am humbled and honoured to have been asked to deliver this third annual lecture on a subject of this importance.

I am optimistic about the future. But I'm also angry. I will explain why shortly .

I have divided my address into three sections.

The first deals with the role of the media as it relates to reconciliation.

This won't sit easily with some of you. But, the times call for some straight talking.

The second part outlines what I think is a very reasonable basis for optimism about the future.

And, the last part suggests some ways to tackle the problems. I don't claim that these are new. But they seem to me to reflect the best of contemporary thinking. By the people with the guts and insight that are needed.

This is a distinguished gathering – the people here tonight are intelligent, talented and hard working. We represent a cross section of this country's intellectual, political, corporate and public service leadership.

Some in this room run this country. Some run large corporations. Some are leaders of indigenous communities and organisations.

We wield enormous power. We have the capacity to bring about change. We know that reconciliation is far from accomplished. We share the strongest conviction that this is unacceptable.

We have both the will and the wherewithal.

But on the test of reconciliation we are failures. The past decade, the so-called new dawn, hasn't produced much.

I'm angry about this, irritated and frustrated. We are still playing the blame game. Forget about blame. If we want someone to blame, start here in this room.

Blame, like guilt and anger doesn't get us far. In fact, it is a good way to get nowhere.

What are needed are some radical new ideas. And a lot more honesty from all sides.

There must be new incentives to succeed. We have got to be much better at learning from failure. And much more accountable for results.

I know that not everything is bleak. Some progress has occurred.

Millions of Australians now see reconciliation as a national priority. But the success stories are few in number. And even some of those are ephemeral.

I don't think we have anything like the capacity we need to be successful. We haven't been able to use the positives and build on them. We have to accept that reconciliation must have a strong economic basis.

Without completely new approaches to education and employment, I think we can forget it.

I recently visited the community of Titjikala near Alice Springs with a group of corporate leaders - CEO's of very large companies.

This wasn't my first visit to a remote community but it was for most of the group.

There is always the danger that when someone visits a community for the first time, they are outraged, depressed and shocked.

They vow to do something, form a committee, or write a cheque, become frustrated when things aren't fast tracked, lose interest and then move on to the next cause.

But I think I can speak for our tour group when I say that the visit was inspirational.

Titjikala is one model of what can be achieved with education and employment. The sort of grass roots enterprise big business can support.

Titjikala created a modest tourism project which non indigenous people can visit for an authentic experience.

The project has been running for 2 years. It employs 40 people and the village nearby of about 300 people supports modest commerce including an arts centre.

Violence and alcohol abuse are not unknown but are not prevalent. Health and education is better than in many communities, children seem to be happy and exuberant.

Many people work, very few receive "sit down money". The community makes all the decisions about how its run.

The tourism enterprise is growing at a rate that the community can handle.

Titjikala is not nirvana, far from it. But it's far from a hellhole.

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In accepting your invitation to speak tonight, I thought about two questions.

Why I am here? And what can I add that hasn't already been said?

My role in the media has given me a privileged position from which to observe reconciliation and to meet people directly involved in the issues.

I can't do anything about the past but I believe I can do something about the future.

I've been a journalist, an editor and an executive for Australia's largest media company for over 40 years.

I've seen up close many of the world's major stories and biggest tragedies in those four decades.

No tragedy I've witnessed is bigger than Australia's inability to confront the problems facing indigenous people.

So, where do the media sit in all of this?

In our business we uncover injustice. We bring important issues to public attention. We hold people to account. And, we can be very tough on hypocrisy, dishonesty and incompetence.

Newspapers today don't just report, they campaign on matters of significant public interest.

They do this to bring about change. In attitudes and behaviour. In public policy and the law. Hopefully to the benefit of Australians.

The media can raise awareness and campaign on the moral, social and economic value of reconciliation. But the media cannot make it happen.

From the widest perspective, our newspapers and I think the media in general strongly support the principles of reconciliation.

But our editors retain the right to report on day-to-day events as they see them.

Editorials and columnists express opinions. But our news pages are there to report what happens. To get to the truth of the matter.

Last week one of our reporters was denied access to Wadeye by the leaders of that community.

They didn't want him to report what was happening. This is unacceptable. And, frankly, it's in no ones interest.

It is hard to see how anything can be achieved if access is restricted to information that is self evidently in the wider public interest.

Day in and day out we fight politicians and the courts for access to information. Indigenous affairs are no different.

Indigenous leaders can't expect more sympathetic treatment in this respect than we give a politician, a captain of industry, a celebrity, the head of a charity or a football club.

One obstacle facing indigenous Australians is that Aboriginal issues are often the subject of negative media reports.

Additionally, many Australians don't engage with the indigenous struggle because, broadly speaking, it doesn't affect their lives day to day.

What they do see, courtesy of the media, is usually negative.

Some of you may blame this on the media. But let's examine some facts.

In recent weeks political leaders argued whether events at Wadeye warranted another talkfest.

One argued that it was time to put the media debate to one side and work on practical solutions.

But this isn't just an armchair media debate. Gangs took control of the streets of Wadeye. Women and children fled to the bush in fear of their lives. There has been talk of resettling these people as refugees in our own country.

Another few police were sent to Wadeye to help restore law and order. At the same time Australia sent 1300 troops to East Timor.

I'm no expert on the relative scale of the two conflicts. But Wadeye needs more than 4 or 5 police. Similar sized towns have many more.

As we all know, the reports from Wadeye followed the revelations by Alice Springs Crown Prosecutor Nanette Rogers.

Ms Rogers revealed details about rapes of infants and children. Including the case of an indigenous petrol sniffer, who anally raped a 6 year old girl while he drowned her.

The media's job is to expose what's really going on. Australia can only confront and deal with these intractable issues if we look at the cold hard facts of failure.

Murder, rape, drunkenness, drug abuse, domestic violence, civil disorder, trauma, apathy, despair, imprisonment and suicide. They are all at levels many times higher among indigenous people than they are in the non-indigenous population.

Health, education and housing are a shambles. Unemployment is high; there are few jobs and few prospects of meaningful work.

Traditional lands are tied up in communal ownership. Traditional culture can discourage private home ownership or meaningful economic benefits being derived from this land.

You know the statistics better than I do. You work at the coalface trying to ease the fear and hopelessness.

But it all boils down to a few facts. And, they are as shocking now as they ever were, certainly to me.

- Indigenous people will die 15-20 years sooner than non indigenous Australians;
- They are 7-10 times more likely to be murdered or commit suicide than their non-indigenous peers;
- Worst of all, indigenous children are up to 6 times more likely to die as babies than non-indigenous infants.

Jackie Huggins is on the record saying with good reason:

“Australians have heard these numbers so many times before they’re numb to the human significance”.

Jackie, I believe in one important sense that you are wrong.

The rape and murder of the 6 year old girl and the later, separate events at Wadeye, received front page coverage and led television and radio news bulletins.

Why? Because, we are not numb.

We are outraged. Journalists and editors are appalled. As are millions of Australians who consume their reports.

There is strong evidence that there has been an epidemic of child sex abuse in remote communities for years. Media coverage has been sporadic but by no means absent.

Some may argue that describing it as an epidemic is simply a media beat-up. But it's not. These crimes are occurring far too frequently.

Numerous inquests, health conferences, government reports and so on have uncovered these problems over many years.

It is news again right now. But it is not new. And it is all the more shocking because it is not new.

To paraphrase the words of one of our best reporters on indigenous affairs, Rosemary Neill, the violence and sexual abuse in indigenous communities deserves a more sophisticated and honest debate.

We need to examine the neglect, indifference and political correctness by governments, indigenous agencies and the legal system. All have failed to stem the incidence of these crimes.

Censorship that tries to keep these crimes hidden should also get the blow torch of public scrutiny.

The old argument that media coverage of these crimes only reinforces negative stereotypes of indigenous Australians, doesn't wash.

The sensitivities of Aboriginal traditions need to be respected, but there are lives at stake.

We need to get at the truth and give the problem its real name. Unvarnished and unembroidered. Cold, hard and horrible.

An absurdly lenient sentence for an indigenous crime – because the act is acceptable in traditional culture - shows a judiciary completely out of touch.

Not only with the expectations of white Australians but with all Australians. And it's especially out of touch with the rights of indigenous women and children.

But I now want to talk about the basis of my optimism.

From our standpoint the Australian population roughly divides into three groups on the issue of reconciliation.

The first group is firmly committed to the cause. They have marched over bridges. They have signed sorry books. They think progress stalled when Mr Howard was elected, flowered briefly during the Sydney Olympics and the centenary of Federation and then faded again.

Some in this group are preoccupied with the white political struggle for the high moral ground and on why the Prime Minister won't say sorry.

They are ideologically fanatical – they believe the white man is totally responsible for the black fellas' despondency, deprivation and dependency.

These ideas help no one, least of all those they claim to support or represent.

At the other end of the spectrum there's a group which is totally unsympathetic to the indigenous cause. They believe the stereotypes. They're not sorry.

They resent the money spent on Aboriginal welfare. Politically they are a huge liability to the government and the reconciliation movement.

Between these two groups, there is a third. This middle group includes those who want progress, who recognise and acknowledge the sins of the past and are willing to say sorry.

But, this group is more interested in what is being done about the problems.

They abhor the violence and abuse and the deplorable living standards.

But, their compassion and common sense coalesces into broad support for what is now known as "practical reconciliation".

That is, getting the town water running and keeping staff in the medical centre.

These people see reconciliation as a two-way street, where both sides accept a mutual obligation to work together to achieve the outcomes.

But, in the meantime, they are also concerned about interest rates, tax cuts and petrol prices, about Kylie, Schappelle and how the Magpies are travelling this season.

That said, I believe this middle group is now the largest and is growing, attracting converts from the first group and even some from the second.

This in part is why I am optimistic.

Sue Gordon produced a ground breaking report into violence in indigenous communities for the Western Australian government four years ago. In part it says:

The response to this problem by both indigenous and non-indigenous people has largely been a failure to act decisively.

The reasons for this appear to include a reluctance to face the full magnitude of the problem, shame and fear of racial stereotyping, a fear of white authority, a lack of resources, racism, apathy and indifference, ignorance and incompetence.

The Gordon report says we don't need more surveys of indigenous violence, we need better evaluation of existing programs and a change in attitudes and behaviour where, and I quote, "indigenous people take responsibility for preventing violence".

The Gordon report was an important one. But, four years on we are still working out what to do about it.

Meanwhile, events of recent weeks have refocussed attention on indigenous issues in the worst possible way.

But, I believe that a new hope is emerging.

A strong, new philosophy is being shared among people most likely to make a difference. People who didn't always share similar ideas. Or didn't agree on the best way to implement them.

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In getting to this point, it is possible to identify some seminal moments that I think still have lessons for us.

One was Paul Keating's Redfern speech in 1992. In it, he articulated some visionary thinking and a tentative roadmap for some courageous steps. He used the office of Prime Minister to lead from the front.

In that speech, Mr Keating said:

“Down the years there has been no shortage of guilt, but it has not produced the responses we need. Guilt is not a very constructive emotion. I think what we need to do is open our hearts a bit.....and we will see the things which must be done – the practical things.”

For some, these ideals were eradicated with the election of the Howard Government in 1996.

Many indigenous people felt more disenfranchised than ever. They felt they could not work with Mr Howard. The rhetoric became white hot and cooperation stalled.

In 2000 the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation produced a new roadmap and a bold new declaration including an apology. Mr Howard endorsed almost everything but stopped short of the apology.

He expressed a strong desire to move forward. He acknowledged the pain and injustice of the past and the profound disadvantages of the present. He expressed sorrow and regret. And he recognised the spiritual and practical dimensions of reconciliation.

Many people saw all of this as a poor substitute for an apology. But, in hindsight, I think we saw some modest signs that conservative thinking was changing.

But the biggest leaps have occurred in the past two years.

In 2004 Noel Pearson and Patrick Dodson started to articulate - certainly in a way that attracted new interest – the need for indigenous people to become equally responsible for their destiny in practical ways.

Pearson and Dodson called for:

- grass roots indigenous enterprises to replace the reliance on government for services.

And for:

- Indigenous people to realise that policies that compensated for past injustice did not in themselves lead to social improvement.

Noel Pearson said at the time - Aborigines must abandon the leftist notion that social dysfunction is maintained by the history of dispossession.

He went on to say that indigenous parents needed to create demand for primary education. Because this, more than any target set by government, would lead to educational improvement.

Indigenous leaders also called for a new executive body to replace ATSIC. A body to represent indigenous affairs at a national level. With the legitimacy and democratic mandate that can only come from indigenous communities.

These steps were encouraging. But I think the real turning point occurred in late 2004 when Noel Pearson, Patrick Dodson and other leaders met at Port Douglas.

They called for a new dialogue with John Howard based on the concept of mutual obligation.

I know that Pearson and Dodson don't speak for all indigenous people. Nor are they as one on many issues.

But as Paul Kelly wrote at the time, the Pearson-Dodson concord seemed to be a milestone and a turning point.

It recognised that indigenous salvation will come from social and economic progress and not just legal and political acts.

And that rights carry a mutual obligation of responsibilities. And the need to replace passive welfare.

And that reforms won't work if they are imposed. They have to be adopted from within.

Indigenous people must have at least an equal say in the way forward, they must be able to take control of their affairs.

In this approach there is a new form of pragmatism. And a more contemporary form of indigenous leadership.

It seems to me a quite radical new position. One with real prospects of achieving traction. Because, it has its roots in both indigenous and non indigenous culture.

In the 18 months since the Port Douglas meeting, some of these ideas have matured further.

One is that we must end welfare as a right. So that welfare provides a safety net but doesn't automatically lead to dependency.

There is compelling logic that disadvantage will continue if people stay on income support.

It has also been suggested that welfare must come with strings attached. Such as child support but only if children attend school. And, family income support but only if it is not consumed by drugs, alcohol and gambling.

Again, to reference Noel Pearson, welfare reform must be directed at getting people back to work and providing incentives for people to choose work instead of welfare.

Current arrangements work in reverse. And not just for indigenous Australians.

From this promising change in late 2004 these ideas seemed to coalesce in an even more potent form when the Prime Minister addressed the reconciliation workshop this time last year.

The Prime Minister's speech was a watershed.

The late Rick Farley said at the time it was an enormous shift from the Government. As much for its embrace of these new ideas as for the very different language used to deliver it.

Farley said this heralded the emergence of an opportunity that wasn't there before.

So what are the foundations of this new opportunity?

- firstly, that rights carry responsibilities;
- second, that reconciliation is about practical and symbolic achievement – that recognition of symbols must go hand in hand with practical action;

- third, that indigenous people have a special status as the first people of this country;
- that local communities must be given the authority to solve problems at the grass roots;
- and, that past injustice must be recognised because it represents the most blemished chapter in our history

This new opportunity also:

- recognises communal interest and spiritual attachment to the land;
- but that indigenous Australians are able to use their land to create wealth for their communities.

There were two other things Mr Howard said that were important.

One, that indigenous Australians shared as much of the responsibility as government for reconciliation. And, that if indigenous people accepted this challenge, the rest of Australia must meet them more than half way.

The big difference I believe in all of this was that the Prime Minister was echoing the thinking of many indigenous leaders.

This brings me to the third and final part of this address.

The problems are complex but I think the priorities need to be simplified.

Reconciliation must be about making complexity simple.

For example:

One. Establish a national indigenous leadership body with real power and accountability.

Two. There needs to be true commitment to the reconciliation roadmap.

Three. We need to radically overhaul the administration of indigenous affairs.

Four. Make respect the governing principle of everything that is done.

And. Five. There must be a sound economic basis to Aboriginal life. This is the hardest option. But we know the simplistic approaches don't work.

I will address some of these briefly.

At the reconciliation workshop last year Patrick Dodson said indigenous organisations needed to lift their game in every area in order to negotiate effectively and implement solutions.

There is debate and disagreement about the reasons ATSIC failed. There is also I am told something of an impasse among indigenous leaders about the best way to establish a new, national representative body.

What is clear is there is a need for such a body. Equally, indigenous people appear just as prone to infighting and factionalism as politicians everywhere else.

But, I urge you to reach consensus on this. ATSIC was a monumental failure.

As Jackie Huggins and others have noted:

Real progress won't be achieved unless indigenous people have real decision making power.

A national representative body must have a strong mandate from indigenous people:

- It must be able to develop robust policy;
- Negotiate effectively with government;
- Set new benchmarks for living standards;
- And be plugged into government at the highest level.

This federal government has been in power for 10 years. Some state governments have been in power longer or almost as long.

We are all sick of you blaming each other. Just last week we saw each side in this house taking pot shots and point scoring. This is not good enough.

A truly bipartisan effort – between the major parties, between federal and state government, and with a new indigenous leadership body is needed. A completely different governance model is required.

Most of you know about the Harvard project and the similar study now being undertaken by Reconciliation Australia.

This project shows a direct link between self government and how successful indigenous communities are in overcoming disadvantage.

The more decision making power they have, the more successful they are.

Good governance is a prerequisite for success. The current governance arrangements in both mainstream and indigenous politics aren't getting the job done.

Now to administration. The bureaucracy isn't working.

It is clear that government agencies still don't have the capacity, the capabilities or the cultural sensitivity that is needed.

The federal government spends over \$3 billion a year on indigenous affairs and I suspect that the states and territories combined would at least equal that.

It's hard to get accurate figures but everyone I've spoken to tells me that about 70 cents in the dollar is consumed by administration.

That is, nowhere near enough of the money is getting to the people that need it.

Whether its 70 cents in the dollar or 50, the point is that administration is either bloated, inefficient, results in waste and duplication, or all of the above.

It's possible that much more money is needed. But that won't help if it is administered the same way. Or we simply make the bureaucracy bigger and not better.

Administration from big cities is prone to failure if the people in charge are geographically and culturally remote from the recipients of funding.

And the same goes for the middle men among indigenous people – the so called 'big men' who have enriched themselves on the back of the system. When I talk about bureaucracy I don't talk only of white bureaucracy.

There have been many proposals for reforming the bureaucracy. But it usually gets to conduct the study and write the report. Vested interests get protected.

Maybe we need to get big business involved.

The problems are not dissimilar to those facing an incoming CEO of a very large company that's in a lot of trouble.

The new CEO walks in and sees:

- Chronic underperformance, that is tolerated, even rewarded
- A demoralised culture full of internal politics and power struggles
- Inefficient work practices
- Bloated middle management
- No consensus on planning
- Low levels of accountability and lots of arse covering.
- A dysfunctional board and lousy governance from top to bottom

It's happened before. Big companies on the brink of failure, battered by the media and shareholders.

And how do they get fixed?

- By changing the way strategy is planned, agreed and implemented
- By rooting out the under performers and recruiting new talent
- By investing in education and training
- By changing what's expected in terms of behaviour and results
- By taking what works and replicating it

Maybe we should get some retired CEO's who've reinvented major companies to get things moving.

I am not claiming this is a prescription for salvation. Nor am I saying we should run indigenous affairs like a public company.

But I am saying that we need to develop big ideas, make brave decisions and get serious about investment in education and employment. Nothing less will fix what is undoubtedly the biggest problem this country faces.

Big problems require lots of money and very good people doing remarkable things.

I know that diagnosis is easy and solutions are much harder.

But instead of trying to solve everything we should focus on two or three things that will make the biggest difference.

I'd nominate education and employment.

It seems to me we have some clear cut and very tough choices.

We can stay distracted for a while like we are by Wadeye, wait for things to die down, then move on without addressing the real causes.

This is what we normally do. It's the cheapest and easiest because the biggest costs and the hardest work get postponed.

Or we could readopt the assimilation model and move indigenous people into cities and towns. Ask the people of Alice Springs if this works. It doesn't. And it's not acceptable to indigenous people.

Or we can decide to make a long term investment in infrastructure, education and employment.

I'd favour this last option.

I now want to say a few words about respect. Respect is at the core of everything I've talked about.

We all know the best way to solve problems is to fix the cause not the symptom.

This approach won't work on its own in this instance. We also need some quick fixes.

Reconciliation is going to take a long, long time. Addressing only the causes, not dealing with the symptoms and setting unrealistic timetables has been a good way to raise expectations and then dash hopes.

If we put respect at the heart of everything we do, some of our priorities might change.

We would see drug abuse, domestic violence and the most depraved sexual assault for what they are. Crimes.

Wadeye, once thought of as a model for a new way, has failed and may take years to fix.

Right now what it needs is not a study of causes. It needs more police.

Speaking of respect. I believe the federal government needs to upgrade the status of indigenous affairs. Move the ministerial responsibility and the department into the office of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Or give it full status within the Cabinet.

Every day another generation of indigenous people moves closer to an irreversible descent into dependency and despondency.

We need some circuit breakers so we can intervene in the lives of children and steer them on a different course.

One small organisation doing this is the National Aboriginal Sports Corporation or NASCA.

The idea for NASCA came from a simple, inexpensive survey of Aboriginal kids who were asked what they didn't like in their community.

These kids know what's right and wrong; their moral compass is pretty well tuned at a young age. They said the worst things were:

- People drinking and smoking dope;
- New school equipment not being looked after;
- Watching families fighting and hurting each other;
- People killing themselves;
- Boredom;
- White fellas who didn't listen and treated them badly;
- And so on.

So NASCA was formed to run sports programs in which sport is the vehicle that helps the kids learn:

- teamwork and discipline;
- confront and resolve conflict;
- become resilient;

So that they are more likely to

- value and continue their education;
- lead healthier lifestyles;
- experience success and be able to learn from defeat.

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In short, NASCA is about a generational break in the welfare cycle.

It is no coincidence in my view that the success stories I've mentioned – the Titjikala tourism project and the sport for kids programs are based on employment and education.

Let me close with this final thought and thank you for your interest and patience.

I believe the problems are as big and difficult as they've ever been.

But I sense there is a new mood for change that is tentatively being shared by some indigenous leaders and by the most enlightened people in government.

And I sense that more Australians care about these problems and want them fixed than ever before.

Next year on the 40th anniversary of the referendum I think Australia is ready to move up a couple of gears – in both symbolic and practical ways – and radically overhaul and reinvent the way this country approaches reconciliation.

I sense a mood, a momentum that I haven't sensed for a long time.

As the much admired Rick Farley said last year at the reconciliation workshop.

“We just need to get out and do it”.

It starts with all of us, right here in this room. Thank you.

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