
How Well Do We Know Each Other?

Mick Dodson's speech to the ANU Reconciliation Lecture
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Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.

My first duty is to acknowledge the traditional owners. My greetings to all you and, in particular, I pay my respects to your elders and thank you Matilda for your welcome to country.

As you probably know I have identified the education of our children as the central, thematic issue of my term as Australian of the Year.

Education is fundamental to improving every aspect of the circumstances of every family and community in this country. It underpins our concept of ourselves, our health, our participation in the workplace, our productivity: it shapes our place in the world.

Education is equally fundamental to achieving a deep reconciliation between Indigenous and other Australians.

In reflecting on where we are now - what we have already done and what remains to be done to take reconciliation forward - I thought of the story of the young boy who went off to his first day at school.

When his Mum came to pick him up, she was naturally concerned that his first day had been a good, positive experience. It had been. He was perfectly happy and relaxed. He had clearly enjoyed it.

The problem came the next day. When his Dad woke him up to get ready for day two, the boy was amazed: "But I've already been to school!"

Now before you get the idea that I think our progress towards reconciliation has, metaphorically speaking, only reached day two - that we have only turned over one page - I should make it clear that this story is not about numbers.

To me it is about understanding: it is about perspective.

Tonight I would like us to consider how we - Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians - understand each other, our perspective on each other, how much we really know about each other - and how that affects our progress towards reconciliation.

Before approaching this, I should make two preliminary points.

The first is about what 'reconciliation' actually means. The second is about the time frame in which we place its achievement.

The term 'reconciliation' has many implications. Its use in parliamentary speeches has been analysed to carry nine separate meanings . For my purpose tonight, it is sufficient for us to consider the broad division between material reconciliation and inter-personal reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Of course, they are closely inter-related, but they have sufficient differences to speak sensibly about them as distinct issues.

Where there remain great material inequalities of life experience and a gross differential in life expectancy - it will naturally take a substantial time to reconcile those inequities.

The COAG National Indigenous Reform Agreement, integral to the Australian Government's strategy of Closing the Gap on Indigenous disadvantage, identifies targets for closing the life expectancy gap, halving the infant mortality rate, equalising access to early childhood education, halving the year 12 attainment rate and halving the gap in employment outcomes.

The shortest time-line to achieve any one of these targets is a decade. The longest is the more baggy concept of a 'generation'. And several of the targets are not about achieving equality but merely a 50% reduction of the present levels of inequality.

No Indigenous parent - no Australian parent - should be asked to reconcile themselves to a lower life expectancy or a lower level of potential achievement for their children. Equality is the base-line of any meaningful sense of material reconciliation. And that will take a considerable amount of time.

But at least with the Closing the Gap targets, we know roughly where we stand. The targets have tangible, measureable end-points. They form, if you like, the skeletal structure of reconciliation. Building the soft tissue of reconciliation - reshaping the inter-personal relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians - is just as critical: but it is a less tangible, more amorphous endeavour.

Where past treatment of Indigenous people has caused great emotional hurt and distrust, it is more difficult to measure the degree of damage and the degree to which that inter-generational damage has been repaired.

Where the approach of other Australians towards Indigenous Australians has been marked by patronising stereotypes of inferiority or helplessness, whether benign or malignant, it is difficult to know the degree to which these notions continue to impede genuine, intimate acceptance and respect.

In this field of inter-personal reconciliation our essential task is to build the social tissue of understanding, trust and respect that will unify Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

I believe we have already taken many important steps towards this unity.

You can trace through the headline events - the Redfern Park speech, the Sea of Hands, the bridge walks - right through to the recent formal Apology to the Stolen Generations made by the Prime Minister. Each is a marker and a catalyst of a new relationship founded on equality and respect.

Beyond these headline events is the solid background work carried forward in local councils, schools, workplaces, industry groups and community organisations. Substantial, structured contributions have been made through Reconciliation Action Plans.

Government departments at the federal and state levels have signed up to Reconciliation Action Plans. They have been joined by corporations like ANZ and Qantas, national sporting codes such as the NRL, NGOs like the Fred Hollows Foundation and World Vision, Indigenous organisations, schools and philanthropic bodies. I am particularly pleased to note that the Australian National University will launch our Reconciliation Action Plan on 30 July.

All this is positive. The concept of reconciliation is broadly accepted. The fruits of reconciliation, based on respect and trust, are strongly desired. We have moved from important gestures and statements of principle to action - to community and institutional engagement - to make a material difference and to build a new relationship.

But I still think of that boy's notion of what it means to "go to school".

You don't get an education by turning up once, or twice. Learning - as I am increasingly discovering - is a lifelong process.

You build on what you have learnt, and then take it further. It is only now, with some positive experience of reconciliation, that we can really start to put it into proper perspective.

Based on our experience, we can go down deeper. To see what makes it work - and what is still missing. Particularly in the area of how we see each other, what we think about each other - and to examine how this shapes our potential to achieve reconciliation at the deepest, personal level.

Reconciliation Australia has done vital work in this area. We have gone into the community and conducted a national research study designed to measure the distances that still lie between Indigenous and other Australians, to show us where we are close together and where we part company.

The Australian Reconciliation Barometer is the first time that core attitudes, values and understandings of Indigenous and other Australians have been compared. Completed in September 2008 it is designed to be repeated every two years, allowing us to track shifts in our self-images and images of each other.

I say images advisedly. This is not rocket science. It is social science. It is about people and their beliefs. The Reconciliation Barometer measures and compares the perceptions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The findings do not tell us so much who we are, as who we think we are and what we think of each other.

Both as an Indigenous person and as Australian of the Year, I am deeply heartened by the strongly held view shared across our country that the relationship between Indigenous and other Australians is important to Australia's future.

There is a close convergence of thought on this: 100% of Indigenous and 91% of non-Indigenous Australians agree that our relationship is important to our country.

The space for improvement is clear. Across the board, only about half of us agree the current relationship is good; about the same proportion of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians believe the relationship is improving.

Our challenge is to increase those proportions. You can't build a better future unless you believe in it.

In my view the path to realising a more cohesive relationship is through developing more accurate mutual understanding. At this stage, we still really don't know each other.

The most graphic demonstration of this lies in the Barometer's measurement of our perceptions of ourselves - and each other - as Australians.

I would like you to look at the results of the way we, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, rank ourselves in terms of 11 positive qualities:

- Good at sport
- Easy going
- Friendly
- Good humoured
- Family-orientated
- Welcoming
- Proud
- Cooperative
- Hard working
- Respectful
- Disciplined

In these terms there are striking similarities in the way both Indigenous Australian and non-Indigenous Australians see themselves. There is a shared perception of our core national characteristics.

There is a strong convergence of views on 7 of the 11 qualities - with a differential of only 1-10% in the percentage of respondents identifying them.

And in relation to those 7 qualities there was a consistently high percentage of Australians across the board who believe we have these characteristics: over 80% in relation to each characteristic. The differential actually ran from 84% to 96%. We are welcoming, good humoured, friendly, good at sport, proud, easy going and family oriented - that is a very strong, positive, shared image. There is another way of looking at these figures.

If you turned the lights out, and asked Australians to form into various groups based on their perception of the degree to which they possessed these 7 qualities - within a margin of 10% - blackfellas and whitefellas would form one group based on their own perception of their identity.

I would ask you to think about this for a moment. In our perceptions of ourselves there is a far greater shared identity than is commonly understood. At a personal, interior level, in the way we see ourselves - we stand closer than we think. Where there is a more marked difference of self-perception are in the qualities of being Cooperative, Hard-working, Respectful and Disciplined - differences of perception here are in the order of 13 -15%. The most striking discrepancy is in the way we Indigenous peoples see ourselves as being more respectful. People in the national sample rated themselves as being more cooperative and Hard-working. None of us mark ourselves very highly in terms of discipline.

These are the findings when we rate ourselves without comparison.

However, when you turn the lights on, and ask how we see each other, we part company.

It is hardly surprising that each group broadly values itself more generously in terms of its possession of positive characteristics.

You may know Garrison Keillor's radio program A Prairie Home Companion. It is set in Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking and all the children are above average.

There is a Lake Wobegon Effect - in surveys of this kind there is a human tendency to overestimate one's achievements and capabilities when compared to others.

But even allowing for this effect, there is a marked divergence in what we see when we look at ourselves overall and when we compare ourselves.

Once again, we most widely diverge in the way all Australians regard Indigenous people as being less disciplined, hardworking and cooperative.

Again, the major disjuncture between Indigenous people's view of themselves and that of all Australians is in the latter's lack of respect.

These are persistent perceptions and relate, I suspect, to our levels of trust in each other. They are appallingly low across the board.

Only 8% of the national sample believed Indigenous people had a high level of trust in all Australians: only 11% of Indigenous people expressed a high level of trust in all Australians.

Only 12% of the national sample believed all Australians had a high level of trust in Indigenous people: a meagre 5% of Indigenous Australians thought all Australians had a high level of trust in Indigenous Australians. Overall only 1 in 10 people feel there is a high level of trust in our relationship.

Despite the strong common belief that the relationship between Indigenous and other Australians is important for our country, the trust necessary to give real substance to a strong, constructive relationship is low.

In tracing the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions that are so critical to the cause of reconciliation the Barometer provides us with important information.

It is fruitless to approach the task on the basis of wishful thinking or 'happy maps' of reconciliation. We need evidence and the ability to track trends in the way we really relate to each other. To understand the other, we need to know what the other thinks.

I said at the outset that - while it is possible to speak of interpersonal and material reconciliation as distinct issues - they are naturally intertwined and have impact on each other. In relation to some of the Barometer's more negative findings, it is useful to consider that inter-play.

The origins and reinforcement of stereotypes are complex. Once established they are extremely difficult to shift or re-shape. Present a person who holds a negative stereotype with contradictory evidence and it will, most often, just bounce off their forehead. New evidence is usually interpreted in conformity with the existing understanding. That is equally true where the negative image is a self-image.

Perhaps the most unexpected and disturbing perception revealed by the Barometer is that Indigenous people considered themselves less hard working than they rated Australians in general: 69 - 61%. It is the only point of comparison that defeats the Lake Wobegon effect.

I believe this perception is directly related to reality.

It reflects the chronic Indigenous experience of exceptionally high rates of unemployment and low rates of participation. The causes are manifold. They include living where there is effectively no employment market, lack of education and - ironically - the perception that Indigenous people are not disciplined or hard working.

This stereotype about is shaped by reality and helps to reinforce that reality.

There is a dynamic interaction between perception and performance.

The way we are seen by others and the way we internalise that view - has the ability to affect material outcomes. The damaging effects of this vicious cycle are most clearly observed in the field of education.

The phenomenon of "stereotype threat" has been demonstrated in research in the USA. It describes the predictably lower performance of black students when taking tests where they were told the purpose of the tests were for comparing their results with those of white students.

When the same tests were given without the students being told that the results were for racial comparison, the performance of black students' was consistently higher. The same effect was observed where women were told that the purpose of testing was to compare their results in mathematics with those of male students.

It was concluded that "the fear that poor performance on a test will confirm a stereotype in the mind of an examiner imposes an anxiety on the test-taker that is difficult to overcome". The anticipated expectation of lower level performance is confirmed in practice.

Other research suggests that the perceived link between effort and the benefit in return has a direct effect on education outcomes. There is a correlation between educational effort and the strength of "the belief that educational effort leads to academic credentials, which in turn leads to gainful employment". Where this chain of connection is perceived to be weak, there is a lower commitment to academic effort.

In plain terms, unless you see that there is a realistic prospect of gainful employment, why bother?

Significantly, this perception of a weak belief in the connection between effort in the school room and employment transcends socio-economic background. Poor educational outcomes were seen to have less to do with poverty than with the strength of racial stereotypes and expectations of success.

I do not want to draw any absolute conclusions from this research - other than to say it should be replicated in Australian circumstances - and to suggest it highlights that the way that we see each other, and the way Indigenous children perceive

themselves and their prospects, has material implications for their educational achievement and employment.

And that the educational achievement of Indigenous children now at school will, in turn, have implications for the way other Australians and their children respond to the questions posed in future national surveys of our attitudes, beliefs and values - such as the Reconciliation Barometer.

Our thoughts give shape to reality. And reality shapes our thoughts.

Reconciliation must advance across the board.

Real progress in Closing the Gap in life expectancy, infant mortality, education and employment outcomes is essential to improving the perceptions that so profoundly affect the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians at a personal level.

When your children die, or fail or fall off schooling at levels that predict their future unemployment and dependence on government programs - and that experience is totally out of kilter with the experience of most other Australians - what is the realistic basis to build trust and understanding?

We must be frank in recognising that the Reconciliation Barometer currently shows a low level of mutual trust - but it also shows us another previously unobserved fact - from which I take courage.

While levels of trust remain low, the national sample shows a higher level of trust in Indigenous Australians than Indigenous people believed existed, and Indigenous people report a higher level of trust in Australians generally than the national sample believed existed. In fact, we have a higher level of trust in each other than we think.

Did we know that about ourselves?

Perhaps we have just started at school. As reconciliation progresses we will learn more about each other. Amongst our first discoveries we now know that we share a great deal more in common as Australians than we previously thought, and that there is a great desire to know more about each other.

On this we can build.