

Perspectives on Reconciliation and Indigenous Rights

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of discourses of the movement for national reconciliation prevailing within the Australian socio-political context since the inception of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1991, to the national apology delivered by the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on 13th February 2008. It provides an framework for the various discourses of reconciliation, by exploring and analysing the accrued meanings to such terms such as 'genuine', substantive or 'true' reconciliation; the Howard's Government's 'practical reconciliation' and the Rudd government's great attempt at 'symbolic' reconciliation in the national apology to Indigenous Australians.

In the changing political context in Australia today this paper revisits the debates on reconciliation, and endeavours to locate the movement solidly within a human rights framework that includes first nation rights. This requires an examination of the roots of the reconciliation movement including community attitudes to reconciliation and the nature of the peoples' movement as well as the differing perspectives of policy makers, politicians and of course, Indigenous peoples. It asks crucial questions about the progress of reconciliation and the type of reconciliation mainstream Australians will accept. In truth therefore, was the 'National Apology' a grand symbolic gesture by mainstream Australia to maintain the status quo and divert our eyes from the more searching questions of the 'unfinished business' of 'substantive' reconciliation which encompasses first nations rights for Indigenous peoples.

Introduction

Reconciliation is the contemporary name for the quest for justice for Aboriginal people in Australia within a policy based framework that extends to the early 20th Century. As a policy, reconciliation has been generally supported by the majority of Australians (Newspoll, 2000; Irving Saulwick & Associates 2000), yet its meaning, purpose and modes of implementation in the current context is often under contestation.

This paper provides an overview of discourses of the movement for national reconciliation prevailing within the Australian socio-political context since the inception of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1991 (herein the Council or CAR), to the national apology delivered by the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on 13th February 2008. It provides an framework for the various discourses of reconciliation, by exploring and analysing the accrued meanings to such terms such as 'genuine', substantive or 'true' reconciliation; the Howard's Government's 'practical reconciliation' and the Rudd government's great attempt at 'symbolic' reconciliation in the national apology to Indigenous Australians. The question that arises in many minds

– both Indigenous and non- Indigenous is “After sorry, what?” The national apology was a long awaited and necessary step on the path to genuine reconciliation. It wasn’t the end of that journey. It was a significant milestone, strong in its symbolism and pathos, timely in its delivery, yet insufficient to put to rest the unfinished business that for many Aboriginal peoples constitutes substantive reconciliation.

In the changing political context in Australia today there is an opportunity to revisit the debates on reconciliation and perhaps reshape them to reflect new voices and understandings and to place the movement solidly within a human rights framework that includes first nation rights. This requires us to examine the roots of the reconciliation movement including community attitudes to reconciliation and the nature of the peoples’ movement as well as the differing perspectives of policy makers, politicians and of course, Indigenous peoples.

In examining the pertinent issues of the reconciliation movement the importance of a rights framework is clear from the start. Issues such as the stolen generations, a national apology, just compensation for past injustices and Indigenous people being able to determine their own futures, all point to this need for specific first nations rights that are embedded in national legislation. In September 2007 the United Nations signed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (herein the Declaration). Australia, together with New Zealand, Canada and the United States were the four countries to oppose the signing of this Declaration. The Australian Government has reversed this decision, but there are many unanswered questions regarding its genuine commitment to reconciliation.

Therefore, despite the Apology, it appears that a rights based agenda is not central to the reconciliation debates today. Hence questions arise as to the real purpose of the policy of reconciliation. Is the policy of reconciliation and the notion of a ‘peoples movement’ that is a key feature no more than a normative discourse? A grand symbolic gesture by mainstream Australia to maintain the status quo and divert our eyes from the more searching questions of the ‘unfinished business’ of ‘substantive’ reconciliation which encompasses the human rights agenda noted above. Was the national apology merely a symbolic act – an ‘all care, but no responsibility’ type of an apology? These are some of the issues under discussion in this paper.

From a Treaty to Reconciliation

The call for a treaty between black and white Australians was the priority long before the enactment of the policy of Reconciliation. Despite the efforts of the Aboriginal Treaty Committee, formed in 1975 and Aboriginal affairs strategists of the Hawke Labor Government to popularise the idea of a treaty by 1988, political pragmatism won the day and any thoughts of a treaty were sidelined for more politically palatable terms such as a 'compact' or a 'makarrata' and finally, reconciliation. Political imperatives in mineral rich states such as West Australia affirmed the legal inability to fulfil the call for a treaty in the lead-up to the Bicentenary. There was a parallel attempt by the National Aboriginal Conference (NAC), an Aboriginal advisory body to the Federal government, to gain support for the idea of a 'makarrata' – a less politically volatile word than treaty. 'Makarrata' is a term used in Arnhem Land to signify the end of a dispute between communities and the resumption of normal relations (Nettheim 2001).

In June 1988 Prime Minister Hawke reaffirmed a commitment to a “treaty or compact”, adding that the term was less important than the sentiment, (Hawke 1988, p. 4) when he accepted the Barunga Statement painted by the people of North-Eastern Arnhem Land. In his speech he emphasised the need for extensive consultation with Aboriginal people in working towards “a sense of reconciliation” (Burrige 1999, p. 5). The treaty idea receded and reconciliation became the acceptable alternative in government circles.

The need for a commitment to action and greater direction in Indigenous issues came from Commissioner Elliott Johnston's *Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1991). The shocking revelations of this Royal Commission Report into the number of Aboriginal people who had died in custody in the 1980s and the circumstances of their lives which have led them to be in prison cells, provided the backdrop to the introduction of the policy into the Federal Parliament and the creation of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.

The report devoted a chapter to the need for a reconciliation policy and made the following recommendation.

Recommendation 339:

That all political leaders and their parties recognise that reconciliation between the Aboriginal and non Aboriginal communities in Australia must be achieved if community division, discord and injustice to Aboriginal people are to be avoided. To this end the Commission recommends that political leaders use their best endeavours to ensure bipartisan public support for the process of Reconciliation and that the urgency and necessity of the process be acknowledged (Johnston 1991).

There was a positive air of cooperation in parliament when Robert Tickner, then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, in his speech introducing the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Bill, in 1991, spoke of “the building of bridges of understanding between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal Australians”. In the parliamentary debates on the Bill both Liberal and Labor members noted the urgency of a better future for Indigenous Australians and of the aspiration that the Council would provide the leadership “so that the whole community might take a fresh look at itself, its history and its hope for the future”, (Michael Wooldridge, the Shadow Minister for Aboriginal Affairs). He added: “It is my sincere hope that this...Bill that has been a product of Government and Opposition cooperation -and, dare I say it bipartisanship- will turn out to give us the win we need in Aboriginal Affairs (Wooldridge 1991, cited in Hansard, p. 4827).

The debates for Reconciliation were substantially enhanced by Paul Keating’s speech in December 1992 at the launch of the United Nations Year of Indigenous People. In what has been termed as the most significant speech ever made by an Australian Prime Minister on Indigenous issues, Mr Keating spoke of the need for recognition:

Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing...We brought the diseases and the alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice – and our failure to imagine these things being done to us (Keating, cited in Meade, *SMH*, 11 December 1992, p. 1).

In making such a speech Keating gave further strength to the Government’s position on reconciliation. Further, in claiming the June 1992 High Court ‘Mabo’ decision on native title as “an historic turning point, the basis of a new relationship between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians” (p. 1), he signalled that there was a real connection between land rights and reconciliation.

The creation of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was supported by all sides of politics and by many in the wider community. The expectation was that in ten years the nation would be able to reach real resolutions of many of the issues affecting Indigenous Australians. It was unclear however, in these early days, the extent to which an Indigenous right framework was part of the process of reconciliation.

Defining Reconciliation

In the official context, Aboriginal reconciliation emerged as a policy endorsed by Federal and State Parliaments, bipartisan in nature, following on from previous policies such as assimilation, integration, and self-determination.

It may also be seen as an attempt at a populist movement emerging from the work of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR), formed in 1991 to support the new policy, that is, populist in the sense that the work the Council was designed to reach the everyday Australian citizen to educate them about the meanings of reconciliation.

The dynamics of the discourses of reconciliation illustrate the multitude of meanings and interpretations accrued to the term. The representations and agendas vary according to prevailing political ideology as well as individual belief.

The Council's research illustrated that, on the whole, Indigenous Australians were more united in what reconciliation meant than the mainstream community (Newspoll 2000, Irving Saulwick and Assoc 2000). Politicians, policy makers, church groups, political lobbyists, the media and academics and many ordinary citizens have had different perspectives on what constitutes reconciliation. Terms such as 'practical' reconciliation; 'symbolic' reconciliation; 'genuine' reconciliation; 'true' reconciliation; 'substantive' reconciliation; 'soft' reconciliation and 'hard' reconciliation were and are used to help in defining the term.

Many of the contestations related to the extent of support for the rights based 'hard/substantive' issues of reconciliation as opposed to the 'soft', more symbolic type of reconciliation.

This framework represents the varying views on reconciliation:

and cultural rights (Johns and Brunton 1999). In this mode reconciliation affirms the status quo and is seen as a normative discourse (Pratt, Elder and Ellis 2000). The aspiration is to see Aboriginal people adopt mainstream cultural values and lifestyles. This focus is seen as part of an assimilationist agenda which does not allow for the rights of Indigenous peoples to be recognised.

The words of Professor Mick Dodson responding to Prime Minister Howard's speech espousing practical reconciliation, at Corroboree 2000 are telling:

.... don't be distracted by notions of practical Reconciliation, because they mean practically nothing. Now although issues of health, housing and education of indigenous Australians are of course of key concern to us as a nation, they are not issues that are at the very heart or the very soul of Reconciliation. But they are, to put it quite simply and plainly, the entitlements every Australian should enjoy... Reconciliation is about deeper things, to do with nation, soul and spirit. Reconciliation is about the blood and flesh of the lives we must lead together, and not the nuts and bolts of the entitlements as citizens we should enjoy (Dodson, M., 27 May 2000).

These comments emphasise the importance of the symbolic elements of reconciliation as much as the need to address the disadvantages Indigenous peoples face which should be addressed as part of any nation's regime of dealing with marginalised peoples.

The varying interpretations of meanings of reconciliation were evident in the Sydney Bridge Walk May 2000 when well over 250,000 people walked across the Harbour Bridge as many thousands of others did in cities throughout Australia. It was hailed as a great triumph for reconciliation. Capitalising on the huge crowd, many Aboriginal leaders saw the walk as a mandate for a treaty. Interestingly, the mainstream media saw it differently, as a subsequent editorial in *The Australian* stated:

'ATSIC Chairman Geoff Clarke used the Sydney Harbour walk to claim a mandate for a treaty. He was wrong. People walked for reconciliation' (*The Australian*, 8 December 2000, p. 12).

To many, walking for reconciliation was different from walking for a treaty. Similarly, when Cathy Freeman lit the Olympic flame and won the 400 metres final at the Sydney

Olympic Games in September 2000, it was a 'triumph' for reconciliation. Anne Summers claimed in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the choice of Cathy Freeman to light the Olympic cauldron 'redefined Australia to the rest of the world' (Summers 2000, p. 12).

Herein lies the deep paradox of reconciliation. If reconciliation is not about a treaty – with all of its concomitant repercussions (compensation, social justice, a charter of rights, land rights and self determination) – then can it be called substantive or authentic? In essence, mainstream Australia must ask the question, is reconciliation to be merely symbolic expression of nationhood or are there more complex realities we must face as a nation before we are truly reconciled?

Reconciliation and Indigenous Rights

There were contestations even in the early days of the reconciliation movement as to what it could achieve as can be seen from the following:

“[Many Aborigines] do not want to dismiss Reconciliation entirely in case it works, but...fear it will become a gigantic talk-fest delaying still further national land rights, compensation for land lost and other Aboriginal aspirations”(Jopson, as cited in Kelly 1993, p. 10).

The Aboriginal Provisional Government, a body created in 1990 by Aboriginal activists such as Michael Mansell, had no illusions that reconciliation would deny a rights based agenda. “The APG believes that the whole Reconciliation process is vague and meaningless and simply a waste of taxpayers’ money... [it] sees that the promotion of reconciliation will simply be holding back moves toward real self-determination” (Kelly 1993, p. 12).

Further evidence of the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives on reconciliation came from focus group research conducted with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by Irving Saulwick and Associates in May 2000. According to the research findings:

[Aboriginal people] are profoundly cynical about government and about most people in high places. Many are also cynical about the reconciliation process. They say that they

have heard it all before, and yet their lives or their prospects have not significantly been improved (Irving Saulwick & Associates 2000, p. 8).

This cynicism is again illustrated by several other comments made in research conducted by BurrIDGE and cited in other papers, that some Aboriginal people saw Reconciliation as “a hoax” and a lot of “false pretences” (BurrIDGE 2003, p.69). Another unrelated example serves to illustrate the disillusionment with what a conservative government would achieve on Reconciliation:

Aboriginal people are still forced to hold much of their contact history with white people locked away inside of themselves. The best parallel which describes that hidden history is to say it that it has been trapped like a bunch of angry hornets inside a Pandora’s box. There is a big lock on the outside of this box that white people have slapped a label on called ‘Reconciliation’. (Wright 1997, p. x)

In these quotes there is a feeling of frustration and resentment that reconciliation is really in the hands of white governments and bureaucracies which promise much but fail to deliver on the rights based issues:

If Reconciliation [means] ... we’ve dispossessed all of us of our land and our sacred areas, our sacred sites and teaching Aboriginal kids to don’t listen to that and continue on listening to the white man and accept his bright idea of role models, ambassadors, white education and leave behind all what that child has inherited from his whole way of life. Now, if that’s the case then Reconciliation - there’s no room for me in there (BurrIDGE 2003, p.70).

In the eyes of these Indigenous activists, reconciliation may work to silence the more strident Indigenous voices. Gary Foley, a veteran of the 1972 Aboriginal Tent Embassy, cast doubt on the effectiveness of the Council’s work:

The Council has produced vast quantities of propaganda promoting its message, but virtually none of these videos, newsletters and other media productions were produced by indigenous people....This means that the greater part of the annual budget of CAR...ends up in the pay packets and pockets of non-indigenous people....just another branch of the Aboriginal industry with white people, as usual, gaining most of the tangible benefits (Foley 1999, p. 4).

The movement to recognise the unique status of Indigenous peoples and their rights as prior owners, not just custodians, is an international one. It forms the very basis of all other negotiations between first nations peoples and colonisers. Reconciliation, in this

context, depends on proper recognition of the status of Aboriginal peoples either in terms of a treaty, constitutional changes, a bill of rights – these are universally accepted concepts applied in most countries where Indigenous populations exist. Australia does not have such a Bill of Rights (Tully 1997, p. 5).

Former Aboriginal Senator Aden Ridgeway in a speech to the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva in 2001 noted the importance of a rights based framework for reconciliation rather than mere rhetoric:

‘... when it comes to the harder issues associated with recognising and giving effect to the broader and fundamental implications of Reconciliation, only a minority of Australians are prepared to countenance real equality....In other words, non Indigenous Australians are keen to embrace the rhetoric of reconciliation, so long as it doesn't require them to take effective action to share the country's abundant resources and political power. Most are not prepared to make any significant adjustments in how they live their lives, or how they see their future' (Ridgeway 2001, p. 2).

The long campaign to have these rights recognised by the United Nations achieved success in September 2007. One hundred and forty four nations signed the Declaration. Australia was one of the four dissenting nations while eleven abstained. Les Malezer, the chairperson of the Indigenous Peoples Caucus that had been campaigning for the Declaration noted:

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms many rights already contained in international human rights treaties, but rights which have been denied to the Indigenous Peoples. As Indigenous Peoples we now see a guarantee that our rights to self determination, to our lands and territories, to our cultural identities, to our own representation and to our values and beliefs will be respected at the international level.

The Declaration is a framework for States to link and integrate with the Indigenous Peoples, to initiate new and positive relations but this time without exclusion, without discrimination and without exploitation.

They are rights which are seen by Indigenous Peoples as essential to our successful survival, dignity and well-being, and to maintain our strong cultural and spiritual relationship with mother earth and nature (Malezer, 13 Sept., 2007 <http://www.iwgia.org/sw248.asp>).

Australian lawyers and human rights activists are strong advocates of the Declaration and urged the Australian government to reverse the previous government's action and sign the declaration as Canada has now done.

The Human Rights Law Resource Centre (HRLRC) and the Indigenous Law Centre (ILC) lobbied the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd in May 2008 in a letter endorsed by over 100 organisations throughout Australia. The letter stated in part:

A human rights framework, as envisaged by the Declaration, will serve as an invaluable guide to the development of appropriately adapted policies for Indigenous communities. Importantly, it will promote the participation and engagement of Indigenous peoples in the political process and in matters which directly affect them. A human rights framework, as envisaged by the Declaration, will serve as an invaluable guide to the development of appropriately adapted policies for Indigenous communities. Importantly, it will promote the participation and engagement of Indigenous peoples in the political process and in matters which directly affect them.

Australia must join the consensus of the international community on the fundamental freedoms and human rights of Indigenous peoples.....

The HRLRC and ILC consider that the previous Australian Government's opposition to the Declaration was based on a number of ill-conceived perceptions about the Declaration. This view is shared by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, which considers that the previous Australian Government's reasoning for opposing the Declaration has no sound base and does not interpret the Declaration consistently with international law. (HRLRC and ILC,2008).

On 3rd of April, 2009 Jenny Macklin, the Minister for Indigenous affairs declared the federal government's support for the Declaration noting that "The Declaration gives us new impetus to work together in trust and good faith to advance human rights and close the gap between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians." (Macklin 2009).

Community Perceptions and a People's Movement for Reconciliation?

From its inception the Council understood the important role of communities at the grassroots level in the reconciliation process. In the words of Patrick Dodson:

While I've spoken of reconciliation in national and sectoral terms, it's important not to lose sight of the fact that reconciliation is basically a grassroots process. It's about people living and working together, and solving problems in local communities. The Council has heard many stories about

people working together to improve community relations (Dodson, P, 1992, p. 3).

The Council conducted social research into community attitudes and awareness of reconciliation as a baseline for raising awareness of the need for reconciliation amongst mainstream Australia.

In the build up to the Reconciliation Convention in May 1997, the Council launched its *Renewal of the Nation* strategy to empower local communities to set up reconciliation networks. Over 100 meetings, involving more than 10,000 people took place all around the country in the year prior to the Convention (CAR 1997b). A resource package was distributed to help facilitate the meetings. The aim was to discuss ways of advancing reconciliation in the local community. National surveys were conducted on what reconciliation meant to ordinary Australians.

However, the election of the Howard Liberal Government in 1996 changed the political landscape. The ascent of Pauline Hanson to federal parliament and the creation of the One Nation party added a divisive element to the federal scene and debates on reconciliation became much more adversarial (Hanson 1996; Burrige 1999; Gomersall, Davidson, and Ho 2000; Huggins, 2002).

Prime Minister Howard's refusal to say sorry for past injustices at the National Reconciliation Convention in May 1997; the passions aroused by the High Court Wik native title decision in 1998 that gave Aboriginal people native title over leasehold land, and the federal government's attempt to negate that decision through the 10 point Wik plan, resulted in a further polarisation of views.

The passions aroused on both sides of the debates render reconciliation as an 'instrument of struggle' – much like the South African struggle for justice. In this context the people's movement was important in mobilising local groups to maintain the struggle for reconciliation at the grass roots level at a time when both political parties began to temper their policies to accommodate the growing negative sentiment in the community on Indigenous policy.

From the research it was apparent that even though the Council did make people more aware of reconciliation, there was some ambivalence to it amongst ordinary Australians. In the words of a 1996 report prepared for the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation by Sweeney and Associates, *Unfinished Business*. “The concept of reconciliation throws out a challenge to the wider community. It evokes both hopes and fears” (p. 3). Hope in that “Spontaneous reactions to reconciliation ... generally result in a positive interpretation, encapsulated in words like: recognition, acknowledgment (prior occupation, loss); co-existence; harmony; unity (not perpetuating ‘them and us’); acceptance: sharing (of both cultures); consultation (between all parties) (p. 3).

Fears because “For some, support for reconciliation may not always be based on goodwill but fears about a society becoming degraded by divisions and hatred” (Sweeney & Associates 1996, p. 3). This idea of fear can work as a barrier to reconciliation. Indeed the report lists fear, apathy and ignorance as the barriers to reconciliation (p. 4). “I live in a suburban area, there isn’t any need for reconciliation because everyone minds their own business” (CAR, undated, p. 53). These views are affirmed by two other polls conducted for CAR in 2000. The first by Newspoll noted concerns about a rights based agenda (Newspoll, 2000) and the second reinforced the lack of awareness:

The abstract idea of reconciliation is widely supported. However once people look at the subject in depth their reaction is a mixture of hope, hostility, confusion and boredom (Irving Saulwick & Associates, 2000, pp. 18).

The people’s movement for reconciliation reached its peak in May 2000 with the march across the Harbour Bridge in Sydney and with smaller, but still significant marches in other capital cities and towns throughout Australia.

Although the activities of the reconciliation networks have been less widespread since 2000, the people's movement can be seen as the most successful aspect of the reconciliation process and the most durable as it still operates with the assistance of the State-based Reconciliation committees and Reconciliation Australia, the body that replaced the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 2001. The NSW Reconciliation

Council is one example of a state government funded body that is continuing to support local reconciliation activities. It is affiliated with over 100 groups throughout NSW from inner Sydney city groups to suburban networks to regional networks located as far west as Broken Hill, to the north at Coffs Harbour and Tweed and to the south at Albury and Bega. Their continued involvement in the reconciliation process is evidenced by the flurry of activity amongst local reconciliation groups after the announcement that the new Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, was to say sorry at the opening of the new Parliament in February 2008. Many communities organised local events and commemorations for the historic national apology. There is some doubt however, whether their activities are sufficient to convince governments to support a rights based platform for reconciliation.

Reconciliation, Rights and the Future

The journey towards a resolution of non-Aboriginal Australia's troubled relationship with its Indigenous peoples and their rights has been convoluted and complex. After many years of neglect the process of reconciling black and white Australians has been placed firmly on the federal government's agenda after the national apology of February, 2008. However, the process still remains the 'unfinished business' of the Australian social and political landscape and while much has been made of the symbolic gesture of a national apology, the test will come in how governments, and communities at all levels, address the level of disadvantage faced by many Indigenous Australians.

For an example which pinpoints the complexities involved in addressing Indigenous disadvantage one needs to look no further than the Howard federal government's intervention in the Northern Territory in June 2007, in response to the *Little Children are Sacred* (Anderson and Wild 2007) report on the high levels of child sexual abuse in remote Indigenous communities. The methods employed in this landmark action again polarised black and white Australians. Aboriginal supporters of the government's actions such as Dr Sue Gordon, head of the Australian Government's National Indigenous Council (that replaced ATSIC in 2004), and Noel Pearson from Cape York emphasized the need for emergency actions. Those who opposed the intervention highlighted the Government's lack of consultation with Aboriginal leaders, the removal of the permit system which restricts entry to Aboriginal lands and the

suspension of the nation's anti-discrimination laws in order to carry out their actions. Suspicion at the motives behind the intervention occurred because of the lack of trust of government authorities – particularly in the Howard government years - and their intentions. How future governments consult and incorporate Indigenous stakeholders into the decision making processes that impact on local communities will be a testing point for the success of reconciliation in the future. The current Federal government's continued support for the intervention has cast doubt as to how genuine it may be in its efforts to consult with and incorporate local Indigenous perspectives in addressing the serious issues which face remote Indigenous communities.

A National Apology

As a symbolic action for Reconciliation, the national apology to Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was an event that captured the nation's imagination at the opening of the 42nd Parliament in Canberra on 13th February 2008. Members of the stolen generations were invited to the nation's capital to witness the event. Screens were erected outside the parliament to accommodate the thousands of people who gathered to watch the proceedings. These gatherings of likeminded Indigenous and non- Indigenous Australians occurred in many communities throughout the nation. They took place in schools, parks, local government halls, lecture rooms and even corporate boardrooms. The apology had cross-party support from the Parliament although five members of the Liberal-National opposition absented themselves from the chamber. The Prime Minister's words emphasised the hurt and sorrow of past policies:

We apologise for the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians.

We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country. For the pain, suffering and hurt of these stolen generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry. To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.

We the parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation.

For the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written.

We today take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians. (Rudd 2008)

The apology resonated with renewed spirit of unity amongst many Australians. While some disagreed and aired their disapproval on talkback radio, the majority of people agreed that it was a positive action. In reality however, the years following the national apology will be crucial in the reconciliation process.

What many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people call the ‘unfinished business’ of reconciliation, those rights based issues of treaty, compensation, self determination and first nations rights, still remain at the crux of dispute about what constitutes reconciliation. Whether this ‘unfinished business’ is incorporated into the national discourse of reconciliation will depend on good leadership and active campaigns to educate the nation that Indigenous Australians deserve full recognition within our rights framework and that this will benefit our sense of nationhood, both symbolically and in real terms.

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