

WHAT IS RECONCILIATION?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their supporters have used the word 'reconciliation' since at least the 1960's, as they have worked for recognition and social justice.

The final recommendation of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was:

...that all political leaders and 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 bi-partisan public support for the process of reconciliation and that the urgency and necessity of the process be acknowledged.

As the Royal Commission observed, the process of reconciliation will have as a principal focus the education of wider community Australians about the cultures of Australia's indigenous peoples and the causes of division, discord and continuing injustice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is also about responding to today's challenges with a view to making things better in the future.

This educative process is a foundation for long term change. The Council seeks to find ways in which acknowledgment of our history can turn into a commitment for a better future.

The Royal Commission concluded:

And in the end, perhaps together, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, the situation can be reached where this ancient, subtly creative Aboriginal culture exists in friendship alongside the non-Aboriginal culture. Such an achievement would be a matter of pride not only for all Australians but for all humankind.

RECONCILIATION AT MANY LEVELS

If it is to succeed, reconciliation must work at different levels—through all spheres of government—Federal, State and Local—and in all communities. Reconciliation must also operate in all sectors, private and public.

It is important also to think about reconciliation in smaller, practical, localised terms and to work from there. The reference in the Council's legislation to local community action reflects this approach. The community focus is essential if reconciliation is to make a difference in the daily lives of all Australians, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

peoples. It is the opportunity of our time to shape the quality of race relationships between indigenous Australians and the wider community for today and tomorrow.

Many Australians are working hard to improve relationships as well as our capacity to work together as equals. Here are just a few examples of what some energetic Australians have done:

◆ Rotary District 9630 in South Queensland joined with Hopevale Aboriginal community of the Cape York Peninsula to raise more than \$25,000 to buy a new four-wheel-

drive vehicle for the local health program and to foster indigenous arts and crafts.

◆ The Aboriginal peoples and the wider community of Katherine, Northern Territory, joined to support an Aboriginal-initiated development for the town. The proposed site for the Mimi Aboriginal Cultural Centre was opposed by the NT Government, which favoured a shopping complex, but a meeting of townspeople unanimously voted in favour of the cultural centre.

◆ The Oaks Historical Society, near Picton, just outside Sydney, has joined with the local Aboriginal community to examine the indigenous history of the area, and the important Aboriginal sites in the region. The Society has opened a permanent exhibition—'Parallel Paths'—which tells the story of the area from the perspectives of Aboriginal people and other locals.

The Council for Aboriginal

Reconciliation is encouraging the various sectors of Australian society to take up the challenge and the opportunity of time provided to us as Australians by the Federal Parliament to find ways forward that can solve the causes of discord and disharmony between us, not just for those matters of the past but so that the future is one we can completely say has been constructed by our best efforts at race relations.

Australian Picture Library/Michael Lee



Kata Tjuta (the Olgas) in the Uluru National Park, Northern Territory.

LILY'S DAUGHTER

A LIFE OF HOPE



Lois O'Donoghue was taken from her mother at a very early age. She has spent years working for a united and equitable Australia.

Lois O'Donoghue CBE AM, a member of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, has lived a life of tenacious service. Here, the 1984 Australian of the Year tells her story.

I was born at the property 'Granite Downs' at Indulkana in South Australia. My mother was a Yunkunytjatjara woman. My father, an Irish station manager, I never knew.

When I was two I was taken away from my mother and placed in the United Aborigines' Mission at Quorn. It was called the Colbrook Home for Half-Caste Children.

My name, Lowitja, became 'Lois'. My brother and three of my sisters also were

brought into the home. It was a time when white society thought this was the only way to cope with children like us.

The impact of taking a child from a mother is far more complex, more profound, than many imagine.

This was the fate of many other light-skinned Aboriginal children and in the mission some sense of family developed amongst us children.

We weren't allowed to speak our own language or to ask questions about our origins or our parents. But new children were constantly being brought in and, in secret, we asked about our families. I found out my mother was called 'Lily'.

The constant stream of new children coming in enabled us to maintain our

Pitjantjatjara language among ourselves and to reinforce our ties with our country and our own people.

When I was 29 and working as a welfare officer and nursing sister with the South Australian Department of Aboriginal Affairs I went to Coober Pedy. In a supermarket I heard someone say 'That's Lily's daughter'.

It turned out that in the group were my mother's sister and my mother's brother and they had seen the family resemblance. They told me she was at Oodnadatta.

It took three months until I managed to get there, with my eldest

sister, Eileen. Our mother had heard that I was coming and had been waiting along the road every day for weeks, from first light in the morning until dark.

For me, the meeting was a little bit of an anticlimax because it was Eileen, her first born, whom she was not expecting, that she was so overjoyed to see.

While we were in Oodnadatta our mother proudly introduced us to everyone in the town, but she carefully steered us away from the camp where she was living. She realised we'd been brought up differently and didn't want us to see her poor conditions.

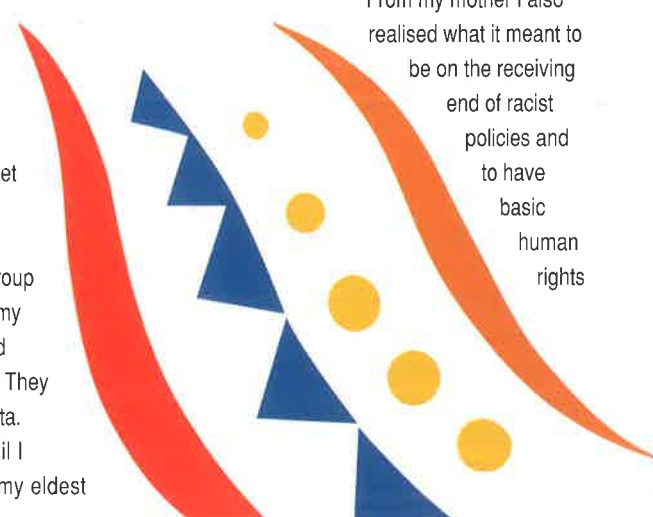
Later, I was able to take my mother south to visit my brothers and sisters and her grandchildren.

These are precious memories.

I learnt many things from this contact with my mother. I learnt what hope and patience means—how she had never given up hope of seeing her children again.

I also learnt what kinship means to Aboriginal people—how in traditional society everyone has a place and a relationship with all other members of the group. These relationships help ensure that everyone is looked after. These sorts of values still prevail in Aboriginal society.

From my mother I also realised what it meant to be on the receiving end of racist policies and to have basic human rights



denied—like even the right to raise one's own children.

My time at the mission, however, had opened my eyes to other things. I realised I had some ability and I wanted to do something with my life.

The positive side of being in the home was that children like us had learnt discipline and skills which enabled us to fight our way through the white system later in our lives.

Along with many other Aboriginal girls at that time, I was expected to go into domestic service. I had higher aspirations and wanted to become a nurse.

Premier and the matron of the hospital. I spoke in Adelaide Town Hall. Remember, this was the year 1953—still 14 years before the 1967 referendum and any proper recognition of Aboriginal rights.

It was my youth and inner strength that gave me the confidence to take this stance.

As a result of all the publicity, the matron of Royal Adelaide Hospital admitted me to continue my nursing training and I graduated as a charge nurse and stayed another 10 years.

In this period of my life, I realised that there were principles worth fighting for and that it was worth the energy to put up a good

I try to confront difficult situations with logic and humour.

As other people in leadership roles acknowledge, it is often lonely at the top. It seems people get the idea that you're 'untouchable', 'out-of-reach' or not a totally real person.

For me, the support of my own people has always given me strength. It is very important to me that people know they can contact me and that I am still a 'real person'.

My role as Chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) has been the most important I've yet taken on. There has been a lot of criticism of ATSIC, maybe some that is valid. However, I see it as the best opportunity that has been presented to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in my lifetime to have a say in our destinies.

As a member of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, I am working for a united and just Australia which values our heritage and recognises what we have contributed to this nation, and what we can and do contribute.

Reconciliation is for the benefit of all Australians, therefore it needs to be undertaken by both indigenous Australians and the wider community. An Australia that really appreciates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and an Australia that could work together, would be a lovely place to live.

Australian Picture Library/Jonathan Marks



Country typical of the outback near Innamincka, South Australia.

I did my initial nursing training at the South Coast District Hospital at Victor Harbour in South Australia.

It was good, but I encountered my first major obstacle when I was denied entry to the Royal Adelaide Hospital to further my training. The reason I was denied entry was that I was Aboriginal.

This was my take-off point. I was not prepared to accept this set-back.

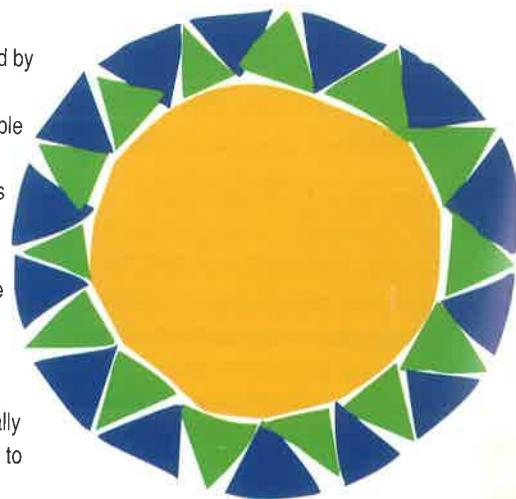
I joined the Aboriginal Advancement League (the only organisation involved in Aboriginal rights at that time). I lobbied members of Parliament. I confronted the

fight, if necessary, both for me as an individual and for all people disadvantaged by the attitudes of others.

Since then, I have worked for my people as a nurse and as an administrator. I have worked with many Aboriginal organisations and have been an adviser to both Commonwealth and State governments.

Like other members of my race, I have experienced discrimination and frustration. I have developed different ways of coping.

I think I've always had a fairly positive attitude and the only times I've ever felt really angry is when I think about what happened to my mother.



BEYOND MABO *a personal view*

By Ray Martin



Ray Martin, a member of the Council.

Y'know, a black mate of mine reckons all this Mabo madness is just... the storm before the calm!

In the midst of last year's radio-inspired fear campaign against Mabo I found myself thinking about Rosie—my first Aboriginal contact! And I wondered if my frail old grandma would have frog-marched Hugh Morgan, Marshall Perron and Geoffrey Blainey to the bathroom sink and washed their mouths out with soap for saying cruel and ignorant things about Aborigines.

Grandma stood less than five foot in woollen-stockinged feet. An illiterate, working-class battler and mother of 12 bush kids. Grandma didn't like swearing or stupidity. Or ignorance. Grandma went to Mass every day she could. She believed in 'doing unto others'.

As for Rosie, well I don't know what she believed. She never said much. As a kid I used to think it was because she had no teeth. Blacks didn't get upper plates in Gunnedah. In fact, they didn't get much. Except abuse, Grandma used to say.

Still, I could never figure out how, even without teeth, Rosie could talk to Grandma and Auntie Annie. And my mum. She'd dip ginger-nut biscuits into her milky tea and drink from the saucer, when she dropped-in to Grandma's place. She was always

dropping-in to Grandma's. (Mum used to refer to Rosie as 'the poor ol' thing', even though she was a bit younger than Mum.)

Rosie would mumble softly and smile a lot. I liked her. Rosie was the first Aboriginal person I ever spoke to. First I can recall anyway. And, like I said, she didn't REALLY speak to me. Only the older women in my family. Especially Grandma.

I think Grandma had met her at Mass, years before. At St Mary's Cathedral as they grandiosely called the Catholic church in Gunnedah. The nuns had taken Rosie under their wing—beaten the other Christian do-gooders in the battle for souls. Especially black souls.

Mind you, one of the Welfare Departments was in there, too. They'd managed to find Rosie a little fibro house up towards The Lookout.

Rosie took pride in keeping it neat and tidy. Like herself. She lived there with her son, who later joined the Airforce and went away. Rosie missed him terribly.

Rosie always seemed to wear a floral-print, cotton frock. And she always read Grandma the letters from her son, whenever he wrote.

I remember vividly one year, when we were all visiting Grandma's for one of those Catholic holidays. (We always visited Grandma for Catholic holidays or when Dad was between jobs.) A wayward, kid-cousin of mine made some blatantly racist crack about Rosie. I remember Grandma frog-marched the kid to the verandah bathroom and threatened to wash her blubbering mouth out with soap! Nobody every repeated the felony. Not to my knowledge and never when Grandma was within ear-shot. Everybody respected Grandma's Irish temper.

Over the next 40 years I met a lot of Rosie's people. Poets and protesters. Shearers and songwriters. Ditch-diggers and doctors. Some lazy people. A few good ratbags. The occasional drunk—just like the rest of the Aussie population.

I met one old black fella from Broome who had once been chained to a boab tree for three days. That's while the local copper rounded up three other bush blacks, suspected of cattle duffing in the Kimberley.

In Leonora I saw the local sergeant put a tiny black girl into the back of his landrover. She was crippled with appendicitis. Her distressed father, who had been carrying her in his arms, was left behind to walk the two miles through the red dust to the District Hospital.

In many country towns I saw blacks banned from pubs and clubs and council swimming pools.

I interviewed Laurie Oakes' father-in-law who told me how, in the thirties, he'd seen a cattle station manager take a horse-whip to black women because they'd forgotten to water his vegetables.

Evonne Goolgong told me how she'd been called 'a nigger' by gentrified women opponents. Evonne also recalled how her mother would hide the children, if a strange car came into the street. Her mother always worried that 'the Inspector would take the kids away'. And they often did!

Lois O'Donoghue is the boss of ATSIC, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. She's on the short list to become the Governor-General after Bill Hayden. Lois, along with her sisters and brothers, WAS taken away, by 'Bible bashers' in South Australia! Their mother grieved for 30 years until Lois finally tracked her down.

Professor Fred Hollows showed me rampant blindness amongst our black people. The result of gross neglect. Diabetes. Deaths in custody. Infant mortality. Malnutrition. The sorry shopping-list of abuse goes on.

So, let's not lose this chance with Mabo. The chance to do the decent thing. At long last.

And let's do it for Rosie's sake!

It'd be a bit embarrassing if my little, ol' Grandma had to come back and frog-march us all out to the back bathroom! After all, she's been gone for 30 years—buried in the Gunnedah cemetery, not far from Rosie.

The Council has identified eight key issues which it believes are crucial to reconciliation

KEY ISSUE 1

LAND AND SEA

What can you see in the sunset?

The sun sets over an Australian ocean, casting a golden sheaf of light in a widening arc towards the beach. What do you see?

Do you see a beautiful scene that you would like to paint? Do you see a piece of valuable real estate? Do you remember your childhood holidays?

It is clear that you could consider many things in the sunset. It would depend, perhaps, on your mood, or your family or cultural background.

There is nothing more important to the being of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait

Islander person than the land and the sea; their traditional country where their ancestors have lived for countless generations. For reconciliation to occur, the broad Australian community needs to accept this special relationship.

This is not to say that other Australians don't care about the land. Of course, we all care about the country, particularly if our livelihood depends on it, like farmers. Many farmers would have experienced the pain of loss: loss of stock, even loss of their land.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians also experience loss, but in a different way.

When this continent was colonised by the British, beginning in 1788, it was populated by diverse groups of indigenous peoples who lived by complex laws in specific, well-defined areas.

They knew their land intimately, be it a small pocket of land on the east coast, or a vast stretch of desert country in central Australia.

According to indigenous religious beliefs, long before colonisation, ancestral human and animal beings moulded the landscapes and their populations, and established ways in which life could be sustained, often in inhospitable environments.

When these spiritual ancestors had performed these tasks, they often became transformed into significant features of the landscape. This is why Aboriginal peoples want to protect their country, particularly sacred sites.

Successive generations have maintained their group identities and connection to land by respecting and continuing the names and activities of the Dreaming through stories, songs, dances and ceremonies.

Generations and generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups have managed their environment with the use of fire, selective hunting, gathering and planting, and control of waterways (by methods such as erecting stone fish traps), as well as with ceremonies, naming rites and practices.

The sea is equally important to coastal or islander indigenous groups. They do not distinguish between the land and sea sections of their country.

Many people think all of this is in the past. But today, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait



Aboriginal people watching the sun set over the land.

Islander peoples retain their traditional links with the land. This means they continue to care for their country through rituals and resource management techniques. Songs and ceremonies are carried out all over Australia.

Even for those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who live in cities and towns, a recognition of the importance of land plays a crucial role in their family relations, community life and sense of justice.

For indigenous Australians, caring for the land is central to their identity—they are obliged to care for it. It is a sacred duty. They were taught by their fathers, mothers and elders about their obligations to the land. From the land the world order and its meaning become intelligible.

The relationship can be compared with a family relationship: for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person to see their land being destroyed or taken away is like a parent watching his or her child being abused.

You can now begin to get a picture of why indigenous peoples talk about 'land rights' so much. If they don't have their land, what do they have? What they have is a rupture in their history, heritage and cultural identity. An essential dimension to what makes an indigenous person complete is lost when their land is taken away and substitutes for their 'country' may not replace this loss.

This doesn't mean Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples want to stop all development. All major mines in the Northern Territory are on Aboriginal land

Alana Harris



Uluru at dawn.



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and Aboriginal groups are involved in large pastoral operations as well as tourist developments.

Christians know the significant sites in Israel are protected, Muslims know Mecca will always stand. Many indigenous Australians don't live with that kind of certainty about places that are not only very special to them, but are integral to their existence.

It has been difficult for many Australians from the wider community to grasp the way indigenous Australians see land: it is so different to the way they see the world.

But the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has agreed that it is crucial for the broad Australian community to recognise the special relationship that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have with the land and the sea.

There is much more to learn about this special relationship. There are many books and films which explore the relationship. In addition, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups are now offering tourists the chance to learn about their cultures and country first-hand.

Australians have nothing to lose in learning about indigenous views of the land. In fact, they have everything to gain: knowledge which can help us protect and understand the environment better, an appreciation of the cultural history of our country, and a chance for reconciliation.



KEY ISSUE 2 RELATIONSHIPS

Healing relations after years of neglect

Respected Queen's Counsel Elliott Johnston got quite a shock after he was asked to head the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

Many Australians don't know any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. Many of us know about indigenous Australians only through the experiences of others, or through the media.

Elliott Johnston knew broadly about how government policies had affected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

However, he says, 'until I examined the files of the people who died and other material which has come before the Commission and listened to Aboriginal people speaking, I had no conception of the degree of pin-pricking domination, abuse of personal power, utter paternalism, open contempt and total indifference with which so many Aboriginal people were visited on a day to day basis'.

Reflect on the words that Elliott Johnston used: 'pin-pricking domination', 'abuse', 'utter paternalism', 'open contempt'.

They are strong words, and Commissioner Johnston didn't use them lightly.

It is clear that there needs to be better relationships between the wider Australian community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Australia's history is littered with conflict and failed government policies aimed at dealing with 'the Aboriginal problem'. At first Australian governments assumed Aboriginal people would slowly 'die out'.

Then, when this didn't occur they introduced an 'assimilation' policy: In other

words, they tried to make Aboriginal peoples give up their identity and become like the wider community.

This policy failed too, because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were and are intensely proud of their heritage and cultures.

While governments were casting about these policies, indigenous peoples were being hurt. Thousands were taken away from their families, denied their humanity, and their right to make decisions about how they live their lives.

Clearly, this wasn't a good foundation for the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider community.

Often the poor quality of this relationship has had tragic results.

Just a few years ago in Perth, Aboriginal teenager Louis St. John Johnson was the victim of a hit-and-run. Ambulance officers were called to the scene, assumed Louis was intoxicated and took him home, instead of to the hospital.

He suffered from severe injuries and died. Stereotypes can kill.

The Royal Commission recognised that all indigenous peoples and the wider communities must make a fundamental commitment to social change and to genuine and long-term reconciliation.

Reconciliation means healing the ruptured relationships, which led to the kind of pain and loss suffered by Louis St. John Johnson and his family.

When we look at the problems we can often think: 'What can I do? It all seems too

difficult?' But there are practical things people can do to contribute to reconciliation.

Learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the issues that affect them is important. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's Study Circles project allows small, self-managing study groups to learn without the need for teachers or experts.

Community groups and organisations have worked for years in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Their work is a possible guide for people wanting to do something for reconciliation.

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

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Children at Brambuk Cultural Centre in Victoria receive didgeridoo lessons.

Local projects have included:

- ◆ historical societies looking into the history of indigenous peoples in their area;
- ◆ service clubs supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and arts and crafts organisations;
- ◆ schools inviting local indigenous peoples to talk to the students, or even teach them languages;
- ◆ churches have arranged exchange programs with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and ministers.

The Council has launched 'Australians for Reconciliation' which is for anyone who wants to get involved in reconciliation. The project provides practical information about how to get involved and it will put you in touch with other Australians interested in reconciliation.

KEY ISSUE 3

CULTURES *The resilient force of our indigenous cultures*

Aboriginal 'dot' paintings from central Australia have become big sellers both within Australia and on the international art scene, making a significant contribution to our art export trade.

To the wider community these striking Aboriginal paintings seem to be a collection of abstract symbols. To the painters themselves, they are concept maps of country, stories, and even personal and community responsibilities.

Even more surprising is the way these paintings have evolved.

Originally, these works of art were made with sand on the ground. However in the 1970s, Aboriginal artists in central Australia have begun translating these works onto canvas and board using acrylic paints.

Now, the works hang in galleries all over the world.

The history of this art raises an interesting question about culture and heritage. Can traditional culture change in this way and remain 'authentic'? Isn't traditional Aboriginal culture unchanging?

The answer is that culture can be a dynamic force, changing with the people.

Of course many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ceremonies and beliefs remain the same as they have been for generations. However, along side these timeless traditions and building upon them, new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander songs, stories, art and lifestyles have emerged.

In the case of 'dot' paintings, Aboriginal people say that they retain the religious, social and political purposes they always had. They remain instruments of power in contacting the Dreaming ancestors, maintaining religious ceremonies and

functions and in protecting and maintaining the country, its land and living inhabitants.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have shown themselves to be remarkably adaptable and resilient. Despite losing their traditional homes on many occasions, being taken from their families, and living in a society where English is the dominant language, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have retained a strong sense of their own cultural identities.

Far from being locked in the past, but building upon it, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' cultural creativity has flourished over past decades. Today there are popular indigenous authors, playwrights, photographers, film-makers, dance companies, publishing houses, record labels and media.

The rock band Yothu Yindi combines Aboriginal language, songs and dance with contemporary dance and rock music to produce a mix which is achieving acclaim all over the world.

The work of film-maker Tracey Moffat has been acclaimed at the Cannes Film Festival, the first Aboriginal opera Black River has been produced, and the musical Bran Nue Dae has thrilled audiences wherever it has played.

This is all Aboriginal Australian culture. It builds on traditional styles, beliefs and indigenous heritage, just as new western forms of popular music build on, and are directly linked to, the songs and experiences of the past.

Aboriginal people who live in urban Australia are often hurt by suggestions that they are not 'real' Aborigines. Effectively, this denies them their identity.

A report of a recent Federal Parliamentary inquiry into the needs of urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, entitled *Mainly Urban*, documented a number of interesting surveys.

One survey focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Sydney's south-west found that:

- ◆ forty-eight per cent of indigenous households still use traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remedies;
- ◆ indigenous families visit other members of their families slightly less than once a day;
- ◆ ninety-five per cent of families maintain contact with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families;
- ◆ eighty-two per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families discuss indigenous issues regularly within the home; and
- ◆ a substantial number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families seek advice from family members during times of illness.

Indigenous Australians have adapted and used many elements of the wider Australian culture. Aboriginal schools often say they teach in 'two ways', meaning they teach Aboriginal languages and skills as well as English and the skills young people need in the wider community.

Fortunately, many of the wrongs of the past are being righted, such as the return of the bones of Aboriginal persons taken insensitively and thoughtlessly from their proper burial sites in the name of science or for financial gain.

Many Aboriginal cultural heritage sites have been protected as part of the National Estate. Sites containing rock paintings and engravings, shell middens, carved and scarred trees, camping places and others contribute to a world-wide understanding of hunter-gatherer lifestyles and are an important part of Australia's cultural heritage.

Australia's collection of ancient and spectacular rock art, located in places such as Cape York, the Kimberley, the Pilbara, Carnarvon Gorge and Arnhem Land, is recognised as one of the most important in the world.

Much of Australia's cultural heritage resides with people in the form of knowledge, songs, stories, dances and language.

Many of the 200 to 250 distinct languages and their myriad dialects spoken by indigenous peoples in Australia in 1788 are no longer in daily usage.

Only about 20 to 30 indigenous languages are in current use but bilingual education, and indigenous media and language centres are strengthening the use of remaining languages.

New languages have emerged, such as the creoles spoken in northern Australia, and new words have been added to surviving languages.

This country's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage is for all Australians to learn from and value as part of our nation's heritage.



Aboriginal traditional dance has been kept alive through the generations.

KEY ISSUE 4

HISTORIES

*We remember:
sharing our
histories*

Anzac Day is an emotional occasion for many Australians.

We remember the loss of many young lives, and contemplate the history of our nation and the contribution the Anzacs and other soldiers made to it by fighting in battles on foreign soils.

Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples played a role in the defence of this country. They were there when Australian soldiers fought and died in battles on foreign soil. Their descendants remember them on Anzac Day.

It is painful for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that their cooperative contribution to this country's history and development since 1788 is often overlooked.

This pain is compounded when people overlook the fact that the history of this country began thousands of years before Captain Cook landed at Botany Bay.

The history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, from many thousands of years ago to the present, is for all Australians to consider, study and share: it is an integral part of the history of our country.

Part of this history is brutal and unpleasant.

Anzac Day marks an event of great bloodshed and grief which Australia cannot forget. Likewise, Aboriginal and Torres Strait



A squad of Melville Island Aboriginal men line up for inspection at HMAS Melville in 1943. Holder Adams (second from left) was one of two men from Melville to go to Timor aboard Allied submarines as part of Allied Intelligence Bureau patrols.

Islander peoples cannot consider forgetting the blood shed and pain suffered by recent generations during the various stages of resistance to the colonisation of this country, which we all call Australia.

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In the past, the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia's history were largely overlooked.

Since the 1960s, indigenous Australians and wider community historians have taken another look at our history and, as a result, a number of myths and assumptions have begun to crumble.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resistance to colonisation, and the ugly violence of the

Australian 'frontier' began to be written about, as were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perceptions and behaviour towards the colonists.

Equally as important, indigenous Australians were telling their histories from their perspectives.

It has been estimated that during the first 160 years of colonisation about 20,000 Aboriginal peoples and 2000 Europeans and their allies were killed in frontier conflicts over land and property rights.

History is beginning to recognise the tragedy that had been visited upon thousands of indigenous children this century. An estimated 6000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were separated from their families and placed in institutions or foster care between 1900 and 1969.

Historians are also recognising the creative and continuous adaptation of indigenous cultures, lifestyles and politics since 1788.

Still, the reappraisal has taken a long time. Many people, including very young adults, went through a school system which taught practically nothing of the indigenous history of the country.

Yet, history is very important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander peoples. Efforts are now being made by indigenous communities to record their histories, through film, writing and oral history projects.

One example of a major omission in Australia's recorded history which has only recently been corrected is the indigenous contribution to Australia's defence.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women have served in every major war Australia has participated in this century, but they have scarcely been acknowledged until recently.

More than 300 Aboriginal men served in the first Australian Imperial Force

during World War One. Three of these men received awards for gallantry during their service.

In World War Two, Torres Strait Islanders enlisted to fight the Japanese threat (the Torres Strait lies between the northern tip of Cape York and the southern coast of Papua New Guinea).

In the Northern Territory, Aboriginal soldiers were respected for their traditional military skills and their vast knowledge of the land.

Indigenous Australians have made other great contributions to the development of this nation. Aboriginal stockmen and women were integral to the economic development of the north as were Torres Strait Islanders to the development of Australia's railway infrastructure.

There are many ways to learn more about the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in this country.

There are numerous books, tapes and films, including *Exile and the Kingdom* (available from Film Australia) in which Aboriginal people from the Pilbara tell their history from creation to the present.

The brutal and tragic stories, and the hopeful stories, can help us all to understand our country better.

KEY ISSUES



5 & 6 DISADVANTAGE & CUSTODY LEVELS

Getting to the heart of disadvantage

In 1989 it became clear that something had to be done about the alarming rate at which Aboriginal persons were dying in police custody.

Underlying this tragedy was the fact that the rate of imprisonment of indigenous Australians was 29 times greater than that of the wider community.

Not everyone knows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the most disadvantaged distinct group in Australia. But they are, on every measure. Most remain ignorant about why this disadvantage exists or why it is little impacted upon.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, which began in 1989, not only focused attention on this disadvantage, but showed the devastating effect it was having on so many people's lives.

The conclusion the Commission came to was that this country would always be diminished as long as we allowed people living here to continue with poor health, little education or hope of a job, suffering prejudice and racism and squalid community facilities.

The Royal Commission examined the deaths in custody of 99 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons. The profile of the dead was, and is, astounding.

Of the 99, only two had completed secondary school and 43 had experienced childhood separation from their families through intervention by State authorities, missions, or other institutions. Their standard of health ranged from poor to very bad. The average age of those who died from natural causes was a little over 30 years.

An almost universal element was that as well as having early contact with the criminal justice system, they had repeated contact with it.

Despite some people's belief that indigenous Australians live a privileged life on 'government handouts', it is very clear that indigenous Australians are the most disadvantaged group in our community.

On average the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unemployment rate is four times the national average and incomes are less than two-thirds that of other Australians. Health and housing figures show a massive gap in the well-being of indigenous and other Australians. About 11 per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population aged 15 years and over have never attended school.

A child born of indigenous parents will, on average, live 20 fewer years than a child born at the same time of parents in the wider community.

The Royal Commission was the most comprehensive inquiry into the position of indigenous peoples that this country has seen. It provided some answers about how things might be fixed up or improved. Not all of the Commission's recommendations require money to do this either.

It found that the major underlying factors in this situation were the legacy of history: the dispossession of indigenous peoples from their land and, as a consequence, their lack of access to economic, social and political power.

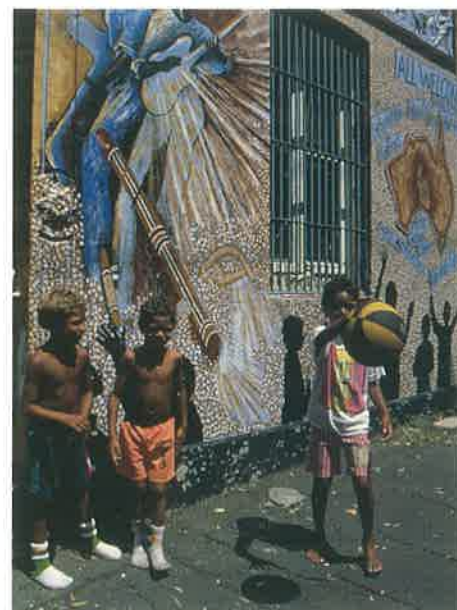
This means that, like those who died in custody, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are relegated to the fringes of society with little power to exercise over their lives.

Today, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons talk about the difficulty they have in renting a home, finding employment, shopping, just doing the everyday things that most Australians take for granted.

These difficulties are caused by prejudice, fear and mistrust based on assumptions that many people in the wider community have made without ever learning about indigenous Australians, let alone forging relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The Royal Commission describes the despair and anger this situation has generated in many indigenous persons.

Governments, community groups and, especially, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples themselves have done much



Kids play in the Neighbourhood Centre, Redfern.

to conquer the disadvantage suffered by indigenous Australians.

But health standards are still poor, unemployment high, many communities live in sub-standard conditions and imprisonment rates are unacceptably high compared with the wider community.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are still dying in custody. The underlying causes examined so exhaustively by the Royal Commission are still operating to deadly effect.

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation believes the issues of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage and deaths in custody are too important to be ignored or treated simplistically.

The Council wants all Australians to gain an understanding of why indigenous Australians are disadvantaged. In fact, it believes that this understanding is crucial to the process of reconciliation.

If you want to find out more, contact a local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisation. Visit your library. They should have a copy of the Royal Commission report or know where to get one. Read the overview (there are 12 hefty volumes in the report) and go from there.

All Australian people and groups need to recognise that this isn't a matter of 'us and them': Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are an important part of the community and while they suffer, the whole country suffers. The Royal Commission above all else highlighted that the understanding of a 'duty of care' by custodial officers and others who deal with indigenous peoples was not well understood or applied. This highlights the deep seated basis of how we relate to each other.

We can't change what happened in the past, but we can try and deal with the legacy of those events by becoming conscious of how we all contribute to ongoing disadvantage today.

KEY ISSUE



DESTINY

Shaping our future, our way



Aboriginal artefacts in store on Bathurst Island. The carvings are made by the local Aboriginal people for their enterprises and sold across Australia.

Alana Harris

How would you feel if someone told you where you could and couldn't live? What if they told you who you could live with, where you could travel and work, which public places you could frequent, whether you could speak your language or not and where to locate the rubbish bin in your house? Indeed your right to enjoy the rights of a citizen were entirely dependent upon this subjective judgement.

Since 1788, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have suffered from an enormous amount of government and institutional intervention, management, direction and manipulation.

Thousands and thousands of indigenous peoples were uprooted from their land, their families and communities and forcibly moved to camps and institutions—to be made into

replicas of wider community Australians, usually through being indentured to work for white families as small boys and girls, many remaining throughout adulthood.

For a time, governments in Australia instituted a policy of 'protection' for indigenous peoples. This basically meant that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were isolated from the rest of the community, their personal liberty denied.

Thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were taken from their families and placed in missions, foster care and other institutions. If they sought to leave or run away they were brought back by the authorities or the police.

These are some of the reasons why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples believe strongly in their right to



'self-determination'. In other words, indigenous communities want greater control over their destinies.

Past government policies were not only patronising and belittling, they were terribly destructive. They resulted in a loss of independence and self-esteem, and splintered many families and communities.

In 1972, the Federal Government adopted a policy of 'self-determination' which means empowering Aboriginal communities to manage their communities within the context of contemporary Australian society.

Self-determination has been an important issue for indigenous peoples around the world and many governments have worked with indigenous peoples to establish mechanisms for self-determination.

In recognition of the importance of self-determination to the identity, dignity and status of indigenous people in Australia, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was established in 1990.

ATSIC, with elected regional councils and commissioners, gives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples the power to make decisions about the programs that affect them.

ATSIC administers a large and increasing proportion of Commonwealth-funded programs which are specifically for, or important to, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody recognised the importance of self-determination, particularly through community organisations that were controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

It also recommended that the Commonwealth Government give consideration to constituting ATSIC as an employing authority independent of the Australian Public Service (Rec. 189). This has been rejected both by the Government and the ATSIC Commissioners.

It might be difficult for the majority of Australians to understand the drive for self-determination. But most of us have never had our personal freedoms completely denied by the institutions set up to serve us. We all enjoy or want freedom for ourselves and basically this is what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are seeking as well.

The bottom line is that those communities that do exercise control over their destinies experience improvements in many areas, including self-esteem, purpose and direction.

KEY ISSUE

FORMAL DOCUMENT *Resolving our unfinished business*

From the beginning of contact between European and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, the legal concept called *terra nullius* formed the basis of the relationship.

That is, the indigenous peoples were always considered to be nobodies, without worth or legal rights at its most cynical, Aboriginal people were considered not capable of having rights to anything.

This little understood concept of *terra nullius* was overturned by the historic decision on native title by the High Court in 1992, which found that indigenous peoples in Australia do have inherited title to the land where they have retained traditional links and where the land hasn't been given to someone else by Governments.

The debate about the native title decision has encouraged many Australians to consider the history of our country, particularly the position of indigenous Australians.

What about this term *terra nullius*? Most commentators have said that *terra nullius* meant that the Europeans deemed Australia an uninhabited continent, and therefore the land was there for the taking.

But, as Patrick Dodson, chairperson of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation says: 'It is clear that the first Europeans were aware that the country was occupied.'



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KEY ISSUE 3

FORMAL DOCUMENT *Resolving our unfinished business*

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'Balarinji's Directors, John and Ros Moriarty believe that there is no such thing as a lucky break. They share a personal philosophy that the harder you work the luckier you become.'

'They saw the people, but they didn't want to know them. They were told to take possession of the country with the consent of the natives. That consent was not sought nor given.

'Way back in the 1600s, the pirate named Dampier, at Roebuck Bay, near my home town of Broome, saw people. He called them miserable brutes, which set the terms for the future of the relationship.

'He and others that followed in his footsteps felt that the first Australians were a barbarous race, incapable of exercising any rights in the British system, and therefore unworthy of being accorded any rights at all.

'The legacy of this view has underpinned the relationship between indigenous and Australian authorities for the last 205 years. The legacy of *terra nullius* persists.'

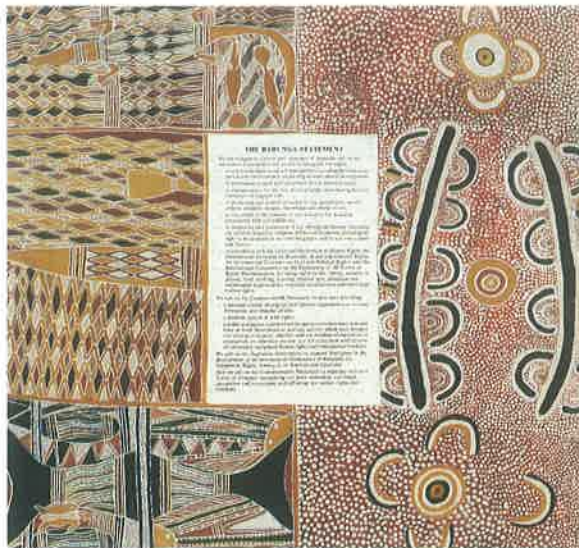
Terra nullius said that Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders weren't human enough to be given rights under British law.

Indigenous Australians were dispossessed of their land without rights, consultation, negotiation or compensation.

The acts of dispossession not only took place in the past, but were continuing up until the historic High Court's decision on native title in June 1992. It was only in December 1993 that the Commonwealth Government has legislated to set down the regime for the extinguishment of native title and for its determination.

Consider this: if you and your entire extended family lost all your property, means of earning a living and all democratic rights, if you were separated and scattered, imprisoned, refused medical treatment, mistreated and brutalised, how would your descendants be affected?

Clearly, they would demand justice, a **righting of the wrongs** committed against your generation and its descendants. They would also have many issues to work through with the descendants of those responsible for the denial and dispossession of the past also to ensure that there is justice and equity for the future as well.



The Barunga Statement is a document calling for recognition of the indigenous peoples' rights and for the Commonwealth to pass laws providing equality for all indigenous Australians. It was presented to Prime Minister Bob Hawke in June 1988. The paintings surrounding the Statement were painted by Aboriginal artists from different parts of the Northern Territory as a reminder of where the words came from—they are the stories of the land.

The native title debate has shown that many Australians—church groups and other religious organisations, politicians, the judiciary, community groups and individuals—believe it is time to do something about this country's unfinished business. The rights and position of indigenous Australians must be resolved.

One way of attempting to resolve these issues is to come to agreements about the matters under dispute and formalise these agreements in a document or documents.

Over the years, the possibility of a treaty or compact has been discussed extensively. Basically, such a document would set out an agreement between the wider community and indigenous Australians about their rights and their position in this country.

In this decade leading up to the centenary of Australia's Federation in 2001, the spotlight has been turned on Australia's Constitution and its Human Rights record.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and groups such as the Constitutional Centenary Foundation, are considering whether the rights of indigenous Australians could be enshrined in the Constitution.

There are numerous options for Constitutional change, or for the form of a treaty or some other kind of compact. This process is not uncommon in countries like Canada.

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has been asked to seek community views about whether reconciliation between indigenous Australians and the wider community would be advanced by a formal document or documents.

If the Council believes there would be benefit in such a document, it will make recommendations to the Parliament on its nature and content.

The Council is in the process of encouraging Australians to find cooperative paths towards resolving issues of contention and of advancing the interaction between themselves that highlights respect and recognition. A major way it is doing this is through the Australians for Reconciliation network. This is a

project which gives an opportunity for all Australians to get involved in reconciliation in a practical way.

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation is interested in your views about improving the relationship between indigenous Australians and the wider community and on what needs to be done to achieve our vision of Australia in the 21st Century.

We are keen to know what you think. If you can spare time to let us know your thoughts we would greatly appreciate it.

Write to us at:

Locked bag 14

Queen Victoria Terrace

Parke ACT 2600

For further information about the Australians for Reconciliation network please telephone the Co-ordinators in each State:

NSW/ACT 1800 060 266

NT 1800 060 268

SA 1800 060 270

Vic/Tas 1800 060 265

WA 1800 060 269

Qld 1800 060 267

FRONT COVER: Sigourney and Keshia, friends.