

# ***POLITICS OF SUFFERING***

Peter Sutton 2009, Melbourne University press

**Peter Sutton** is an anthropologist and linguist who has worked with Aboriginal people since 1969. He speaks three Cape York languages, and as an expert on Aboriginal land ownership he has assisted with fifty land rights cases. He has authored or edited twelve books, including “Native Title in Australia: an Ethnographic Perspective,” regarded as the most authoritative work in its field. He is an Australian Research Council Professorial Fellow at the University of Adelaide and the South Australian Museum, and a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia.

In her forward to the book **Marcia Langton** writes: “..If the ideologues in the Aboriginal affairs industry – whether progressive romantics or carping neoconservatives – were to read this book, they would put it down at the end with a heavy heart but a sharp, clear view of the problems that face Aboriginal citizens of the inland gulags and outback ghettos of remote Australia. I hope they do read it, but more importantly, that they think about the humanist reasoning set out here, and apply it in their own writing and thinking...”

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## **ON FEELING RECONCILED**

Chapter 8 (pages 194-215) of “*The Politics of Suffering*”, Peter Sutton

Could formal, legal, bureaucratized Reconciliation<sup>i</sup> between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians divide us more than unite us? It's thinkable. It's certainly possible if the process is used to entrench two nations within one state. Those who see formalised Reconciliation as a way of burying the hatchet of their own feelings of guilt about the past may be less worried than others by the perpetuation of a racially based separatism. Their own needs perhaps seem more important than the maintenance of the delicate cohesiveness of a mass society. Or perhaps they think that good walls make good neighbours. As a wall sceptic, I think they may be mistaken on both counts.

There are two basic ways of framing a resolution of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. I will call them the ‘sacramental’ and the ‘pietistic’. In religious talk, sacramental paths to spiritual grace require a collective and ceremonial act. Pietistic ones are those of the individual in quiet communion with the divine.

The sacramental approach to Reconciliation demands a joint and public ritual, one in which the substance of the mass relationship between two historic peoples is transformed, and the peoples are made one political flesh, or at least agree to bring an end to recriminations. Or the two peoples are to achieve statistical parity in the hospital wards, the jails and the cemeteries. Or something else. Whichever way, it's an event taking place in the maximal Australian political arena, the nation state, even though much of the work is to be done, and is being done, at local, regional and state levels.

The attraction that many have felt towards this model can be sympathetically understood. It offers the comfort of company and the strength of numbers. It offers a kind of mass Bridge Walk, crossing off a painful chapter on behalf of all the citizenry, even on behalf of those who hate the process, who would wave placards saying ‘Not In Our Name’. It also offers conjoint catharsis, an authorised shedding of guilt, possibly a sanctioned regaining of innocence. Confession, followed by penitence and absolution, perhaps.

A less lofty view is that collective Reconciliation is about the politics of appeasement; that it is only by coming to some kind of compact between settler descendants and First People that the insistent negatives of Indigenous criticism, the culture of complaint about which we hear now so many complaints, will be silenced. This view suggests that Reconciliation is something the non - Indigenous have to do, while the Indigenous sit back gratefully

silent, or merely nod their acceptance, or just don't want to hear, or, in some cases, spit back our solicitude. But surely that is not Reconciliation, that is more an apology. And we have had the governmental apologies.

An apology for the official removal to state or mission care of those Aboriginal children deemed too white to remain in the camps required no justification beyond simple decency. I knew a number of these people well. For many their pain was lifelong. There were few dissenters when Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made his apology speech on behalf of the Commonwealth Government in February 2008. Many thought this was the one and only apology, forgetting, or not having noticed, that all the states, formerly the Australian colonies, had already made their apologies, along with the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory, and that they did so by the centenary of Federation in 2001. Had they forgotten that these apologies covered all the nation's people, despite the absence of the national apology that was still seven years away? These apologies - needed as they were - don't seem to have changed anything much in the world, and the Rudd apology of 2008 won't either, predictably. But the decency has been good.

It may turn out that these various apologies are as good as Reconciliation gets, especially in the absence of a mass Indigenous Forgiveness Movement. That such a movement is unlikely to materialise has been prophesied by the general absence of any acceptance - of the - apologies response from Indigenous Australia. Reportedly, many people in the bush were indifferent to or unaware of the 2008 apology. One Aurukun woman said: 'That's for urban people and Whitefellas'. Others have wept and felt the 2008 apology as closure.

Collective and reciprocal definitions of Reconciliation are difficult to bring to bear in the present context because we don't really have mutual recriminations to deal with. What we have is criticism and complaint about one people by members of another. This is why Reconciliation has been so readily linked to the Stolen Generations Apology and its National Sorry Day, to the Stolen Wages case and the question of compensation for child removals.

By saying this, though, I am not suggesting there is a great unity of opinion on the usefulness of perpetuating the role of historic accuser, on the Indigenous side. Many Aboriginal people would like to get beyond conflictual stances and just get on with their lives, and a good many have so voted with their feet.

In a 2007 television documentary Noel Pearson said:

Unfortunately, the next generation will not have the luxury that I had hoped we'd be able to bequeath to them, which is a luxury of pursuing their own choices in life, *to be in a position where you don't have to be a campaign Aboriginal all your life*, fighting to protect your land and you're fighting for the recognition and so on, you know. We've got to reach a stage where that is behind us now. The struggle is behind us.<sup>ii</sup>

The switch of tense at the end here projects something, something about a wished-for and foreseeable end to being 'a campaign Aboriginal all your life', and it projects it into a rhetorical present. Many individuals have in fact already made this graduation to civvy street. This only illustrates the variability of Indigenous opinion.

On the non-Indigenous side, I am not suggesting, either, that there is a unity of opinion on the usefulness of people now alive claiming to be able to atone for the deeds of those who, in most cases, have long been dead. And while the state makes formal collective acts on this kind of national scale legally thinkable, the state is there for all residents. It cannot convincingly be made to seem as though it is constitutionally the mouthpiece of the settler society only. It is not a modern state unless it has a duty to act for all. One of the mysteries of the appropriation of parts of the Reconciliation movement by a centralised, publicly funded bureaucracy is that it can appear to be there for two sides of an allegedly unreconciled relationship of 'nations', as if the same lawyer could act for both parties in a Family Court custody hearing. This is more like a doctrine of being able to be in two places at once.

Another drawback of the collective approach thus lies in the realm of group representation. Indigenous Australians over the long past have radically resisted the notion of representivity, especially the idea that someone from some other Aboriginal country with another language and to whom one is not related can get up and agree to something in one's own name, as well as in his or her own. Elected representatives who do the right thing by the rules of Aboriginal cultural practice are principally there to speak for their own, and to maximise the benefits flowing to

their own constituents, their own mobs, more than to pursue a higher collective structure at the expense of local autonomy and of locally brokered largesse. For some, however, continent-based structures like the National Aboriginal Conference and ATSIC were a prologue to the construction of a national Indigenous government resting on a continental sovereignty, and ultimately, for a few, to an Indigenous secession movement for lands successfully claimed under legislation.

Those of us who laughed at Joh Bjelke-Petersen's prediction that land rights would lead to claims that could end in a fractured national political unity might have laughed a little too soon. Geoff Clarke was right, within his own scheme of things, to reject Reconciliation except on terms that cast the federal and state governments as representatives of the 'wider community'—the usual code for the non-Indigenous. In Clarke's published scheme, government would negotiate a treaty with Indigenous Australians, who were to be represented by ATSIC, of which Clarke was sometime chairperson before its abolition. Clarke's short bio at the end of the volume in which his paper appeared, Michelle Grattan's 2000 book *Reconciliation*<sup>iii</sup>, made a pungent commentary on his appearance there. It noted that Clarke was a vice-president of the Aboriginal Provisional Government.

The difference between the state and the Indigenous realm that matters most here is that the modern state is the concrete outgrowth of centuries of movement along the road, whereby belonging to the wider nation brings with it both the fee of self-subordination to the collective and the right to national protection in return. Although among Aboriginal people there is general acceptance of the rule of Australian law, much of the informal Indigenous domain within the Australian state actually operates on different and previous principles, including those of local sovereign autonomy, the commitment of primary loyalties to one's kin, and, when needed, an assertion of the right of physical self-redress as a means of dealing with conflict. In this realm the state is not held to own a monopoly on violence. It is this lack of fit between formal and informal political domains, one that also lies at the heart of their different assumptions about the limits and possibilities of collective action, that ultimately means that a document of Reconciliation signed off between a state and a notionally Indigenous polity would be an unequal one, with much more collective psychological and moral force on one side than on the other. Even if legally binding on all parties, it would not be so in cultural and moral terms.

In fact, it would be a serious mistake to assume that all Aboriginal people believe a signed document to mean anything significant, or to have any necessary positive value. Non-literate friends of my long acquaintance do not tire of criticising white man's law for being on paper and open to change, whereas theirs is in their minds and landscapes and is unchanging and thus superior. They also never tire of saying that they don't need to rely on paper maps: they've got all the places in their heads, again a superior position. They would admire 'The Knowledge' of London's cabbies.

There are other incompatibilities. Many more non-Indigenous people, proportionately as well as numerically, can make nation-level or local-level Reconciliation an important consideration in their lives than can possibly happen in so many of the Indigenous communities. There the more important, visible, daily and emotionally consuming ties and conflicts are not with 19.5 million non-Indigenous people, most of whom they will never meet, but with the other Indigenous families and neighbourhoods of their own kindred and township and district.

## UL PIPTIGIDA

A field of much deeper incompatibility lies in the different cultural constructions that Aboriginal people of a classical or traditional frame of thought, and Australians of a Western, especially Judaeo-Christian, frame of thought, give to matters of morality. Two areas of special relevance here are *justice* and *remorse*.

Very briefly, Aboriginal conceptions of dispute resolution focus on the regaining of equilibrium between people whose relatives have fallen into conflict because of someone's act or acts. What counts is not so much that an abstract idea of 'justice' is served, but that the parties severally end up 'satisfied', or as they say in some parts of the Top End, *ul piptigida* (all fifty(-fifty to)gether).

Remorse scarcely enters the picture, nor does conscience, nor does a feeling of guilt. Those who will these states onto traditional Indigenous minds are projecting their own Eurocentrism in one of those many late refinements of the colonial impulse that are based on a misplaced goodwill. Many people of goodwill are able to walk around a remote ghetto and see around them only the reflection of their own natures. This uncaring kindness is readily subject to local ridicule after they have passed, having gone on to smile at a different mob of strangers.

The non-Indigenous reconciliationist's desire to engage in self-blame must seem unreadable, or at least merely exotic, to many Indigenous Australians. Blame in the classical Aboriginal scheme of things is consistently directed outwards to others, not inwards to the self. In Aboriginal languages there is no word for 'sorry', in the sense of a self-accusing apology, although there are interjections of regret, of the 'Oops' variety. Words sometimes translated as to do with apologising tend to refer to the restoration of being on good terms, not to any admission of blame or guilt<sup>iv</sup>. Sometimes these expressions are so culturally specific as to defy simple translation. In Burarra, of Arnhem Land, two expressions glossed in part as 'apologise' and 'seek reconciliation' are these:

*morlangoypiya*. Literally, 'to wear a good luck charm dillybag around the neck', and even more literally, 'moiety [social category] + hang bag around neck'; also less literally 'to feel happy; to seek to make amends' <sup>v</sup>

*marrngoyipa*. Literally, 'soul + put on power bag to perform'; also less literally, 'to worship, praise, show appreciation'<sup>vi</sup>

In Aboriginal languages there are always words for feeling sorry for someone. These are words of pity, compassion and sympathy, and they are words of frequent use. Feelings train speech but the words themselves are not apologetic. Aboriginal emotions glossed in English as 'shame' are closely mingled with feelings of sulkiness or withdrawal, shyness, squeamishness, embarrassment, anger and even rage, a hard set of concepts to see as a continuum from the point of view of a non-Aboriginal psychology, but a continuum they are. And there is no vocabulary for the inward barbs of self-criticism. The notion of 'shame' is often transitive. One speaks of shaming, which is to ostracise another, this being followed predictably by the withdrawal of their sociality, either by 'taking sulk' or by angry attack, or by both, in just that order. Sulks and attacks are denials of relatedness, and, simultaneously, affirmations of its value, griefs about its loss. Relatedness far outclasses abstract justice as a priority in such a society.

The moral equivalence of persons does not depend, of course, on a shared scheme of morality. But where peoples do not share a scheme of social morality it can be difficult to assert that they are in the same activity when negotiating something called, for example, Reconciliation.

## INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

The last incompatibility I'll deal with here is that between *innocence* and *experience*. I want to conjure up old friend William Blake for a moment, who wrote a poem, 'Infant Sorrow', in a collection of poetry called *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*<sup>vii</sup>. This is how it starts.

My mother groaned, my father wept!  
Into the dangerous world I leapt.  
Helpless, naked, piping loud,  
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

If we subscribe to the necessity for a moral person to be constructed out of an initial innocence to which are added the bitternesses of experience as well as the sweetnesses of reason, we simply cannot all bring to Reconciliation the same compounded and sedimented substance as social persons. That is why we cannot share the same moral being in this context. We can only intersect. Some of us have had no previous relationships with Indigenous people, some have had these relationships only superficially and recently, and some have had lifetimes of enmeshment with

Indigenous people and have long attempted resolution in our minds of those things that can make and break our relationships. A mirror-image range of separation and enmeshment is the experience of Indigenous Australians, except that almost all now have been in some sort of touch with non-Aboriginal Australians all their lives. This is an asymmetrical situation.

In a closely similar way there is much asymmetry among the so-called settler population. Some of us, myself included, come from colonial migrants who were here at the time of the bloodiest pastoral conquest in the early nineteenth century, families who have survived and, eventually, prospered on this legacy of an agrarian, then industrial, then post-industrial, modern economy. Why should we expect to have the same sense of beholdenness, the same belief in an obligation to help, the same potential for stained memories, the same involuntary wearing of the historical mask of what an Aboriginal teenager once called 'Captain Cook cunts'<sup>viii</sup>, as a Sudanese refugee who landed in Adelaide last year or last month? Or as a Samoan who migrated to Sydney in the 1980s? Or as an Italian who came to Melbourne in the 1940s?

Who is vain enough to claim to calibrate the weights of such delicately differentiated burdens? And are we to say that recent immigrants thus belong *less* than others, to the moral community of Australians, given that they may be excused from a sense of responsibility about the original Indigenous dispossession? Or do all migrants acquire a guilty mantle as soon as they put a first step on Australian soil? There are too many clouds of unknowing drifting by here. Once again the collective and sacramental model founders on the snags of trying to be socially inclusive.

The most dangerous snag is the potential for collective action to divide us.

## TWO NATIONS

Reconciliation is too important a matter of personal moral adjustment to be a process owned by the state, on one side, or by a putative Indigenous nation on the other; that is, unless building two nations is what one is after.

Some would argue that, together with the treaty proposal and the demand for a formal nation-state apology for the past removal of children from Indigenous families, Reconciliation would merely complete a trinity of naively Balkanising dreams. This is an ironic reversal: the motive common to Reconciliation, a treaty, and an apology, is to heal past divisions and make us more of a unity; but in order to do so we must first recognise the two nations between whom such parleying and signing off is to be contracted.

The danger is that formal agreements will only serve to entrench the separation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and would do so in an era when the fragile achievement of social cohesion is once again on the table as a precious thing to be shielded and fostered, not merely assumed. And who is now old and alive enough to remember the machine guns set up in Martin Place in Sydney, with the New Guard waiting in the wings ready to take over essential services when the feared breakdown of Australian society happened in the early 1930s?

Structural racial segregation in Australia has become normalized and now penetrates most institutions of any size. Racial segregation of Indigenous residential communities is more than matched by a vast apparatus of racially segregated funding, infrastructure, administrative powers, football events, even scout troops and bank employee targets. By 2008 large corporations like the National Australia Bank and Qantas had set themselves Indigenous employee numbers to aim for. Under the Howard government, even the prime minister's own department created a racial employment quota. And in 2008 Oxford University announced that it would create Aboriginal scholarships. This kind of gesture is now commonly swept along in the rapids of Reconciliation; indeed, it is becoming definitional of it, at least in policy terms. And this is even when 'mainstreaming' of service delivery is also, increasingly, Australian government policy. The contradictions of this mixed message are profound. The actions are antithetical.

Let me clarify something. By structural segregation I am not referring to physical separation, although there is plenty of that, but to a separation of rights and powers according to ancestry. The basis of this segregation is

compensatory. But some depressing flaws in this generosity of the state and of the odd big business are readily noticed. Along with the beneficence of recognition comes the risen phoenix of essentialised race difference and an implication of ethnic inferiority.

Because these special powers and measures are racially targeted, not targeted on a basis of demonstrable disadvantage, they have at least one implication that should make us sit up and question their existence. The unintended subtext of racially defined special assistance schemes, employment targets, academic enclave programs and the rest of it, is this: if you are Indigenous, you must be damaged, and if you are damaged it is because you are a victim. There must be something inherently missing or defective in your being, simply because of your ancestry and your people's history. That is why you have been singled out for exceptional treatment. Your actual abilities or disabilities don't define you.

Will anyone be surprised if the Oxford Aboriginal scholars are recruited from those with backgrounds of least or even no demonstrable disadvantage, those who least need a leg-up, but who will be told by the subtext here that they are inherently, racially, flawed? I doubt it. But at least some in charge will feel good about themselves.

How have we come to such a vile pass through kindness? One short answer is that the problem with assured virtue is the blindness it induces whenever we look in the mirror.

The official creation of this parallel universe of Indigenous/non-Indigenous functions, committees, boards and programs creates a career structure such that those who want to tread this ladder of success are easily wedded to the continuance of racial division, and indeed to the status of victimhood that prompted the compensatory acts in the first place. If one's career is wedded to suffering and its compensation, then there cannot be an easily accepted endpoint for special status as victim. Victimhood thus becomes, for many, the family business, a business of status as well as of economics. The idea of Reconciliation as the point not only of extinguishment of disadvantage, but also of the extinguishment of special claims on the state by descendants of the First People, becomes anathema. It becomes something mainly white people want.

It is precisely because so many of them are not racists that many young Australians find that this mechanical Aboriginal preference, in employment especially, gives them feelings of outrage. This is a story about feeling too. Like the others, it will only be neglected at great cost. Liberals cannot take their own young people for granted. They often do not share our politics, or our guilts. But they do own the near future.

In 2007 the fortieth year of the post-referendum age was being celebrated by many Indigenous spokespersons as a time to remark on how little progress had been made since the 1960s. I don't recall too many Indigenous leaders in that year celebrating the major drop in infant mortality that occurred around the year 1970, the gradually increasing longevity of Indigenous people, or the greatly increased levels of home ownership. Nor was there much praise for the passing of the vitally important Racial Discrimination Act in 1975; or of the various land rights achievements of the 1970s—1990s, qualified as most of them have been; or of the far-reaching legal apparatus that protects sacred sites and the ancient heritage of rock art and sacred mobile art in this country; or of the signal advances in the protection of Indigenous intellectual property, and so on. For many, leadership had become defined as perpetual protest.

Of course it is true that the Indigenous/non-Indigenous health, life expectancy, violence, child abuse and incarceration statistics continue to stand in stubborn contrast with those of the rest of the population, some categories consistently getting relatively even worse, not better. It is often argued that while peoples differ so profoundly on these scores then either they cannot settle their historic political differences through a process of Reconciliation, or they can, but it will be just another gesture followed by business as usual. There is something in this, or at least there is something in it if you think of Reconciliation as a mass contract between nations, one contrite, the other forgiving, or as a treaty between two peoples, one conquered, the other wishing to bury the hatchet that has brought us to this division. But if you think of the crucial reconciliation more as a state of being between persons, or a resolution of issues within one's consciousness, you will reach it no matter how the statistics are faring. Or you will fail to do so, but not because of the statistics.

There is a segregation of the heart, of the emotional life, as well as a segregation of powers and bodies, in many parts of Australia. The story of high levels of community violence, substance abuse, child abuse and all the rest of it is not at base a medical or legal or political story but one of the emotions. It is not different words and grammars that make Aboriginal lives so often so untranslatable into the terms of the settler consciousness, and vice versa, but differences between often quite opposed ways of responding with the feelings. The visceral intensity of a remote Aboriginal settlement is almost impossible to describe. It is also pretty well invisible to the casual outside visitor, until the lid blows off.

There are cross-cultural limits to empathy, and thus to real mutual recognition. Human beings do not have a unified cultural perception of what makes a feeling self. Nor, to be specific in the present context, is there anything universal about what makes a wife's words a justified basis for rage followed by violent assault, or about what makes the use of fists, sticks and broken bottles appropriate when one is slighted and shamed by some apparently small denial of relatedness, or about what makes it necessary to first get full drunk so as to validate, to justify, the expression of pent-up feelings that cannot come out any other way than in tongue-bashing or giving someone a flogging. These are some of the experiences of emotion that stand in the way of better statistics, but they stand in the way of better mutual acceptance, as well.

## TWO PEOPLE?

Pietists stress a one-to-one relationship with the deity, unmediated by priestcraft or the collective witnessing of a symbolic sacrifice. Pietism is in some ways much more at home in an age of individualism than in ages of greater corporatism and communalism. The sacramental - sacrificial approach represents the reverse. It also goes back deep into Old World prehistory, to a time when animals and humans, not symbols, were sacrificed in religious rituals.

Only Bill Stanner, the anthropologist, has ever mounted a cogent argument that there was a significant sacramental theme in Aboriginal religion; few have built on his thesis, and most have failed to support his vision.

This is probably for the best. A minimal approach to human connection, in the sense of the elemental social relationship, many would say, is the twosome, coldly named in the social sciences the 'dyad'. I prefer 'couples' (see Chapter 7). I feel quite satisfied that the Rev. Lancelot Threlkeld did his bit of reconciliation in the 1820s -1840s when he became an admiring friend of Biraban, was mentored and taught by Biraban, acted publicly to protect the Awabakal from frontier violence, and pleaded loudly for the settler terror to be stopped. I am satisfied that Ursula McConnel did her reconciliation when she befriended and became kin to Billy Mammus and his wives in 1927, wrote glowingly of their Wik society and referred to them as her 'friends' in the Sydney *Sun*, defended them against racist slurs, and attacked the state Indigenous policy of the day in a published lecture given at the Toogoolawah branch of the Country Women's Association in 1936.

And so it goes for innumerable others. While it's true that we don't have a record of what Biraban really thought of Threlkeld, nor of what Billy Mammus thought of Ursula, there are abundant clues. That Mahkarolla felt deeply and strongly about his relationship with Lloyd Warner was shown by his tears of fear for Warner's safety during a dangerous sea journey by canoe, and the fact that he wept during his final parting from Warner on Darwin pier in 1929. Again, of course, these are the records left by only the European in the relationship, but they were people of honour and I believe them.

The idea that these people and others like them are condemned forever to have gone to their graves with their historical selves as native and settler unreconciled, like so many pre-Columbian lost Indian souls, I find deeply repugnant.

It is inconceivable that the Aboriginal people in these relationships played parts that were merely passive. Their relationships were collaborative. Collaborations of this order happen all over Australia every day. That is

reconciliation in action, and evidence that it has been achieved, but achieved atomically, not *en masse*. Each of us has to sign off when we're ready. Some of us, recent immigrants for example, may feel there is nothing to sign off on. So be it. Some people will not be bound by national gestures, except on paper. Perhaps there is something of Aboriginal tradition from which we might borrow, no matter how selectively here: 'No one else talks for me, I'm boss of myself'.

Part of my scepticism about collective Reconciliation, and my vote for making reconciliation primarily a personal and interpersonal journey instead, comes out of the experience I had as a speaker at the Deliberative Poll on Reconciliation held at Old Parliament House some years ago, which I've already mentioned. In reality it was a case of the use of persuasion, and the moral suasion of a group decency situation, to re-educate those who had arrived in Canberra feeling they had no particular need to be racially reconciled with anyone. In cattle-station parlance, coachers were used to wheel the mob. The outcome was presumably what the organisers ordered. The numbers committed to a formal Reconciliation process rose significantly over the weekend. I thought the exercise was marred by an atmosphere in which people seemed not to have the right to be wrong. The initial atmosphere of goodwill had to that extent been corrupted by the will of the good. On the contrary, I think people do have the right to be wrong. Getting a national compact to which much of the population subscribes only by grudging or conformist consent, or because they are *men pleasers*, or because they merely yearn to belong to some-thing, is a compact with feet of clay.

But the main reason why I am sceptical of a formal Reconciliation process, or rather view its potential as limited, is because it politicises and collectivises the very things that need to be dealt with by Australians as individuals. Real reconciliation has to be a citizen's conscience vote, no party discipline, no whips. Many have done it already and are dead. Some won't or can't do it. Many more will do it in the future. We do not yet know their names.

The more a commitment to formal Reconciliation becomes a measure of one's political rectitude, the more it lends itself to unsavoury displays of moralism. These require no coming to terms with the feeling self held in the quiet fastnesses of private hours, yet for many of us this is the maximum we can truly experience of the matter. Even so, it is a big ask.

The more Reconciliation becomes part of the thicket of management-speak, as against being a state of mutual regard, private or public, enacted together with the self or with others whom one truly knows, the more it induces a kind of numbness of the sensibility. '*The system will do our morality for us. If we sign up, we're in.*' But we're not of course. This is why there is no 'being reconciled' without 'feeling reconciled'. And if we 'feel reconciled', what more then is there to do? Get on with life.

The Stolen Generations inquiry and its *Bringing Them Home* report<sup>ix</sup>, for all their original necessity and wrenching truths, were marred by politicisation and by a less-than-technical attitude to collecting factual information. Had the inquiry been sufficiently factual in a detailed historical sense it might have provided an unassailable basis for some kind of collective closure, on that subject if no other. The trauma of raking over the past has to be compensated for by something truly significant, if it is to be taken on. That clearly did not happen in this case. The general outcome of *Bringing Them Home* was to vitally raise awareness of a relatively unknown negativity in Australia's past, but at the same time it enhanced victimhood as a basis of positive regard for Indigenous people, and polarised opinion about state or other collective historical guilt. It certainly didn't put chickens on the kitchen tables of Docker River, if there were any, and Reconciliation won't do that either.

To hold out to those suffering the grim realities of certain Indigenous communities the expectation that they will be safer, healthier, less arrested, because of the contracting of a formal Reconciliation package is to offer them goanna oil. Surely by now we understand that to peddle the grand national gesture as a cure for early renal failure and child abuse is not just whimsy-minded, it is dangerous mumbo jumbo. And it distracts from urgent realities.

## PRACTICAL RECONCILIATION?

Robert Tickner, federal Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (1990-96), in a confidential briefing of the AIATSIS Council many years ago, invited us to his office at Parliament House and told us of his as-yet-unrevealed plans for a future Reconciliation process. I was immediately concerned that it would be used to extinguish any future special treatment of the First People, and said so; that is, it could represent closure of the door on any future special pleadings from Indigenous people as such, other than merely as individual citizens of need. This would not trouble me now. But it has not been pursued in that way. Instead, Reconciliation has gone down the pathway of two dominant models, both of them sacramentalist: one being an admission of settler guilt and a commitment to collective contrition, the other the so-called 'Practical Reconciliation' of the social indicator ledger books. I don't think either of these has a future in realism.

For many, by the end of the Howard government in 2000 Reconciliation had come to mean the attainment of parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous social indicators, not the mutual acceptance and respect that had been the dominant theme in its beginnings. It now attracted the hideous Orwellian language of management-speak. In glossy-brochure land, in a galaxy far, far away, we were to read about *governance, capacity building, partnerships, whole of government, benchmarks, stakeholders, leadership, targets, measurable outcomes, role models*—and so it goes. But as I read I ask myself: Is this the language of grievance settlement? Is it the language of forgiveness? Is it the language of the end of blame, complaint, retribution and guilt? No, it is the language of managerialist welfarism. But if you believe the media releases, it's The Breakfast of Champions. And where is our Kurt Vonnegut when we need him?

## LETTING GO

Feeling reconciled, and being reconciled, cannot be achieved by attaining a position of moral virtue. This is because they are relational states. The unvirtuous, as well as the virtuous, have achieved them and will continue to do so. We should take note of these histories. Inga Clendinnen wrote some years ago:

The stories made from history always have political implications, but that does not constitute their authority over us. History helps us to know who we humans are, and of what we are capable. It also reminds us that, however complicated the situation, however apparently compelling the circumstances, there is always space for choice: that the individual conscience is our first, last and only refuge. The current politically motivated simplifications can only impede the development of our individual analytic capacities and a reliable sense of social responsibility. <sup>x</sup>

It may be that the greatest act of formal and government-embraced Reconciliation will look like something else, a retreat from legal racism. A good candidate here would be the removal of race itself as a legal category of distinction in Australian law and bureaucracy. Aboriginality itself, of course, would not be removed, any more than Jewishness or Greek ethnicity are negated by their absence from the state apparatus. Mary Darkie, from the Great Sandy Desert, put her view this way:

Reconciliation is about getting to know each person individually. It means letting go of old ideas that all white-skinned people are the same or all black-skinned people are the same. All people are different; they may have the same skin colour but inside, each person is unique. It's what's inside each person that's important.

I sometimes think we live in a crazy world that we always have to divide people into separate groups.

Reconciliation also means letting go of anger, hurt and blaming. I had to let go of these things in order to get to know people as they really are. We cannot forget the past but letting go of anger and hurt allows us to move forward.<sup>xi</sup>

## A POSITIVE ENDING

I've called this last section 'A positive ending'. This is more than can be assumed for the Reconciliation movement, although there is hope against hope among many. Some will look forward to a formal compact in spite of the fact that it might be forever a wedge of difference between Indigenous and settler populations, no matter how convergent they continue to become culturally and physically. Even if that is achieved, and assuming the country does not grow too much beyond its present size, on present indicators of an extremely high majority rate of Aboriginal out-marriage into the non-Indigenous population (71.5 per cent in 2006), it will not be too many more generations before most Australians share some Indigenous ancestry. That might defuse the issue if it is still with us. Or will the racial wall be downed by then?

In his poem 'Mending Wall'<sup>xii</sup>, Robert Frost expressed a deep scepticism about his neighbour's view that 'Good fences make good neighbors'. As they perform their annual spring repair on the common drystone wall, Frost says:

There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.

.....

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offence.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall  
That wants it down.

Aboriginal tradition does not put a high value on oneness but on complementarity, not on co—operative action so much as on reciprocity, although all four have their moments in talk and in life. Even in a complex ritual where there may be a recognised single boss, most of the action seems to unfold from a hidden script in which everyone more or less knows what to do. Aboriginal social and religious structures show a deep and ancient commitment to balanced oppositions, equal divisions. Two halves, four sections, eight subsections; male and female; inland and coastal people; hills and plains people; freshwater and saltwater people; light people and shade people; inside knowledge and outside knowledge; and so on. The list is vast. The major historical addition to this profound dualism since the arrival of the British Empire has been Blackfella/Whitefella. It is a dualism deeply inculcated and ingrained from many an Aboriginal infancy onwards, one in which most of us collude. From many an Aboriginal point of view, literacy and numeracy and penicillin and money and courts of law are 'Whitefella', not 'Blackfella'. That algebra was an Arab discovery, that writing came historically almost as late to the average Briton as it did to Aboriginal Australia, that Nigerians also are accountants, that Ghanaians have courts of law, gets polarised and politicised out of this over-neat picture and shoved into a category of 'otherness'.

If Reconciliation entails a push for a shared recognition of national oneness, it will also challenge this tenet of much Aboriginal thinking. It might also deny that modernism is just for Whitefellas. I do not suggest this challenge would be wrong, merely that one needs to know what one is doing. Whether we do the reconciling process by the kind of formal compact that, I have argued, suffers from some serious difficulties, and has an uncertain future, and is arguably counterproductive, or whether we do it in twosomes or alone, we will still be denying the nineteenth-century colonial mantra of 'East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet'. This will be so even where the heart of this pessimistic ditty reappears in the guise of bourgeois niceness or as Aboriginal tradition.

Under either kind of reconciling model, the sacramental or the pietistic, we can do no more than try to bring the various strings of this national instrument into harmony with each other. But this is not a once-and-for-all performance. Like any other instrument we will need to keep tuning it for each recital. In this sense reconciliation

might be a long undoing of our pasts. It will require the spine to break down not only the walls of mutual disregard and ignorance, but also the walls of kindness. Only persons can do this.

Let me leap back nearly four centuries and close with the words of John Donne, one time Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, London, written in his grave sickness, possibly in 1623, coincidentally the same year that Jan Carstenszoon van Embden made the first substantial record of Europeans and Australians meeting and interacting, and even not interacting, on the coast of Cape York Peninsula.<sup>xiii</sup> Preparing for death, Donne was also dealing with a yearning for the closure of a restored oneness:

Since I am comming to that Holy roome,  
Where, with thy Quire of Saints for evermore,  
I shall be made thy Musique; As I come  
I tune the Instrument here at the dore,  
And what I must doe then, thinke here before.

.....

I joy, that in these straits, I see my West;  
For, though their currants yeeld return to none,  
'What shall my West hurt me? As West and East  
In all flatt Maps (and I am one) are one,  
So death doth touch the Resurrection.

So, in his purple wrapp'd receive mee Lord,  
By these his thornes give me his other Crowne;  
And as to others soules I preach'd thy word,  
Be this my Text, my Sermon to mine owne,  
Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down.<sup>xiv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> I distinguish the formal political process by capitalizing the word, as 'Reconciliation', and the personal and informal process I spell as 'reconciliation'.

<sup>ii</sup> Pearson in 'Cry me a river'. Emphasis added.

<sup>iii</sup> Grattan, *Reconciliation*, p. 310

<sup>iv</sup> For Central Australia, see, for example, Henderson & Dobson, *Eastern and Central Arrernte to English Dictionary*, p. 391.

<sup>v</sup> Glasgow, *Burarra: Gun-nartpa Dictionary with English Finder list*, pp. 510-11

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p484.

<sup>vii</sup> Blake, 'Infant Sorrow', p 87.

<sup>viii</sup> Sutton, 'Myth as history, history as myth.'

<sup>ix</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home*.

<sup>x</sup> Clendinnen, *Agamemnon's Kiss: Selected Essays*, p. 156.

<sup>xi</sup> Darkie, 'This is my life', p. 115.

<sup>xii</sup> Frost, 'Mending Wall', p. 33.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sutton, 'Stories about feeling: Dutch-Australian contact in Cape York Peninsula, 1606-1756'.

<sup>xiv</sup> Donne, 'Hymne to God my God, in my Sicknesse', pp. 177-8.