The formal Australian reconciliation process: 1991-2000

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Introduction

In 1991, the Commonwealth Parliament unanimously passed the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act (Cth) 1991 (CAR Act). This Act instituted a formal ten-year process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The process was intended to reconcile Indigenous and non-Indigenous people by the end of 2000, in time for the centenary of the foundation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 2001. The CAR Act also created the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) to promote and guide the reconciliation process.

In this paper, I briefly analyse this ten-year formal Australian reconciliation process. Firstly, I discuss the success or otherwise of the broad goals of reconciliation. Secondly, I explore several interrelated factors that impacted upon the reconciliation process.

The broad goals of the reconciliation process

The formal Australian reconciliation process had three broad goals. These goals were to educate the wider Australian community about reconciliation and Indigenous issues; to foster an ongoing national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage; and to investigate the desirability of developing some form of document of reconciliation, and if it was considered desirable, to provide advice concerning the content of such a document. These goals were articulated during the formation of the reconciliation process in 1990, in the CAR Act and by CAR.

There were a number of successful outcomes related to the education goal. CAR produced a wide variety of general, accessible resources that aimed to educate the broad Australian community about reconciliation and Indigenous issues. These resources included the Study Circles project, a quarterly publication Walking Together, brochures, leaflets, reports, videos, television and radio promotions and information supplements for magazines and newspapers. CAR also developed the Australians for Reconciliation program which consulted with the Australian community and encouraged community involvement in reconciliation. The involvement of communities is imperative in these types of peace-building processes. Pat Dodson’s ‘Call to the Nation’ at the 1997 Australian Reconciliation Convention, in which he called for a ‘People’s Movement’ for reconciliation, significantly boosted this community involvement in the reconciliation process. Thus, by the completion of the process in 2000, there were hundreds of small reconciliation groups operating throughout Australia in a variety of settings including workplaces, churches, schools and local government. The signing of ‘Sorry Books’, the displays of the ‘Sea of Hands’ and the 250,000 people who marched for reconciliation across Sydney Harbour Bridge during Corroboree 2000 are three prominent examples of this broad community involvement in reconciliation.

However, despite these successful outcomes, a number of issues restricted the overall success of the education goal. These issues included: a confusion within the wider Australian community over the meaning of ‘reconciliation’; the influence of nationalism that encouraged the sharing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities, cultures and histories and discouraged discussions on issues such as sovereignty, a treaty and power relationships; an emphasis by some supporters of reconciliation on changing attitudes rather than on addressing injustices; and the levels of influence exerted by Governments over the reconciliation process.

CAR had two main strategies to address the socio-economic goal. First, CAR saw the need to educate the wider Australian community about the causes of Indigenous
socio-economic disadvantage.\textsuperscript{18} The programs CAR developed to address this ignorance were part of their overall education programs, such as the Study Circles and brochures.\textsuperscript{19} Second, throughout the reconciliation process, and particularly during its final three-year term, CAR attempted to develop partnerships with Indigenous peoples, sections of the Australian corporate sector and all levels of Government, in an effort to address the socio-economic goal of reconciliation.\textsuperscript{20}

Despite these efforts, the socio-economic goal was not achieved by 2000. This can be illustrated by examining several socio-economic indicators. Although there were some isolated improvements,\textsuperscript{21} none of the identified Indigenous socio-economic conditions – health, justice, education, housing and employment\textsuperscript{22} – significantly improved over the reconciliation process.\textsuperscript{23} There were two primary causes for the failure of this goal. First, neither the Keating Government (1991-1996), in failing to substantially consider Indigenous socio-economic issues,\textsuperscript{24} nor the Howard Government (1996-), in failing to understand the connections between socio-economic issues and ‘symbolic’ issues and Indigenous rights,\textsuperscript{25} were able to facilitate a national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage. Further, both Governments failed to recognise that Indigenous self-determination remains a vital component of improving Indigenous socio-economic conditions.\textsuperscript{26} Second, the attitudes of many non-Indigenous people towards Indigenous socio-economic conditions hindered the development of a national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage. These attitudes included a refusal to recognise the connections between history and socio-economic conditions,\textsuperscript{27} apathy to Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage,\textsuperscript{28} and a refusal to acknowledge any disadvantage.\textsuperscript{29} Elements of the wider media also demonstrated similar views on Indigenous disadvantage through their reinforcement of negative stereotypes, their sensationalist reporting and their apathy on reporting on Indigenous social issues.\textsuperscript{30}

The goal of developing a document of reconciliation was achieved by the conclusion of the reconciliation process. CAR released the \textit{Draft Document for Reconciliation} in June 1999. Following widespread consultations with the Australian community concerning this \textit{Draft Document},\textsuperscript{31} CAR released its \textit{Documents for Reconciliation} at Corroboree 2000 in May 2000. This consisted of an aspirational statement, the \textit{Declaration Towards Reconciliation},\textsuperscript{32} and the \textit{Roadmap for Reconciliation}, which outlined four national strategies for reconciliation.\textsuperscript{33} Further, in December 2000, CAR released four booklets that expanded on these national strategies.\textsuperscript{34}

However, the achievement of this goal was dampened by the concerns from several Indigenous leaders that the documents of reconciliation did not fully address several issues important to Indigenous people, including sovereignty, a treaty and power relationships. Geoff Clark, Pat Dodson and Gatjil Djerrkura raised these concerns following the release of the \textit{Draft Document} in June 1999 and argued that any document of reconciliation should be a formal agreement between Indigenous peoples and Governments that specifically discussed issues such as Indigenous rights, a treaty, self-determination, customary law, land, power relationships, sovereignty and constitutional recognition.\textsuperscript{35} Further, just prior to Corroboree 2000, Pat Dodson, Geoff Clark, Aden Ridgeway and David Ross argued that several issues should be placed on the reconciliation agenda, including the development of a treaty, the reservation of parliamentary seats for Indigenous people, self-determination and customary law.\textsuperscript{36} However, despite these arguments from Indigenous leaders, the final \textit{Declaration Towards Reconciliation}, released in May 2000, did not fully address the specific measures proposed by many Indigenous leaders.\textsuperscript{37} Further documents, including the \textit{Roadmap for Reconciliation} and the four national strategies on reconciliation, proposed numerous actions, yet similarly failed to substantially address many longstanding concerns of Indigenous people.\textsuperscript{38} Thus, despite the
development of the documents of reconciliation, this goal could have been more successful if the documents had more adequately reflected the broad concerns of Indigenous people.

**Factors that impacted upon the reconciliation process**

There were a number of interrelated factors that limited the effectiveness of the formal reconciliation process. These factors were: the manner of the establishment of the reconciliation process; the emphasis on symbolic and practical reconciliation rather than on substantive reconciliation; the nationalist discourse of reconciliation; the emphasis within the reconciliation process on a restricted concept of justice; and the attempts by the reconciliation process to improve relationships instead of also endeavouring to accommodate differences.

The first factor was the manner of the establishment of the process. In the 1980s, the Hawke Government reneged on their commitments to Indigenous people to implement two key Indigenous demands, that of national land rights and a treaty. In the Hawke Government then proposed the reconciliation process, partly as an attempt to divert Indigenous attention away from the Government’s failure to address these demands. In seeking feedback on this proposal from the Australian community, the Government received enthusiastic support from a broad range of non-Indigenous people, yet received less support from Indigenous people, who often saw other issues, such as land rights and a treaty, as more relevant to them. However, the Government largely ignored these Indigenous concerns and proceeded to implement the reconciliation process. This close connection between the Commonwealth Government and the reconciliation process continued throughout the ten-years of the process and, along with other factors discussed below, ensured that many Indigenous people’s concerns, including land rights, a treaty and sovereignty, continued to be marginalised throughout the reconciliation process.

The second factor was the emphasis on symbolic and practical reconciliation rather than on substantive reconciliation. The Howard Government and conservative elements of the wider Australian society often emphasised ‘practical’ reconciliation, a neo-assimilationist view that argued the need to concentrate on improving socio-economic outcomes such as health and education. Alternatively, the Keating Government and progressive elements of the wider Australian society often emphasised ‘symbolic’ reconciliation that focussed on issues such as apologising to the stolen generations and marching for reconciliation. In contrast, many Indigenous people, including those involved with reconciliation and those alienated from the reconciliation process, argued the importance of substantive reconciliation. Substantive reconciliation addressed issues such as Indigenous rights and existing power relationships. Elements of both the symbolic and practical forms of reconciliation were seen as vitally important, such as an apology and addressing Indigenous socio-economic conditions. However, neither of these forms was sufficient for many Indigenous people as neither could fully address their demands for recognition of their Indigenous rights. Unfortunately for Indigenous people, the debates that occurred throughout the reconciliation process concerning the most appropriate approach to reconciliation focussed predominately on the symbolic and practical, whereas substantive reconciliation was largely ignored by both Governments and the wider community.

The third factor was the emphasis on nationalism within the process. The importance of nationalism can be illustrated by observing that the goal of reconciliation was to be achieved by the Centenary of Australia’s Federation in 2001. The nationalist discourse of reconciliation encouraged Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to
become a ‘united’ people and to ‘walk together’ through sharing histories, cultures and identities.\textsuperscript{49} This discourse failed to recognise that historical factors, such as the invasion, colonisation, massacres, genocide and theft of land and children, and their continuing contemporary repercussions, ensured that there will continue to be conflicts and differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The discourse also ensured that those Indigenous demands that could not be situated within the nationalist discourse - such as sovereignty, land rights, treaty and self-determination – were marginalised or ignored by the reconciliation process.\textsuperscript{50} This marginalisation of several Indigenous views contributed to both the education goal and the document of reconciliation goal not being fully achieved as the wider community was not fully educated about Indigenous issues and the document of reconciliation did not fully reflect the broad range of Indigenous views.

The fourth factor was the limited notion of justice utilised throughout the process. The term justice was largely restricted to meaning the addressing of Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage, such as health, education, housing, employment and overrepresentation in custody.\textsuperscript{51} Thus, one of the broad goals of the reconciliation process was to foster a national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage. Consequently, the education and document of reconciliation goals both largely ignored any notions of justice that fell outside the reconciliation process’ narrow definition of justice. The reconciliation process did not encompass a broader notion of justice that would have included issues such as a treaty, sovereignty, Indigenous self-determination, land rights and challenging existing power relations. Hence, the process generally failed to recognise that justice means more than simply achieving socio-economic equality but must also involve reparative justice, which recognises the need for reparations to be made in respect for previous injustices.\textsuperscript{52}

The final factor was the emphasis on improving relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people rather than on issues such as Indigenous rights and existing power relationships. The reconciliation process predominately saw the achievement of reconciliation in terms of the development of better relationships and improved communications instead of addressing historical and contemporary injustices through recognising Indigenous rights and transforming existing power relationships.\textsuperscript{53} This approach contributed towards the formal reconciliation process adopting a limited notion of justice. This emphasis on improving relationships also generally failed to acknowledge that legitimate differences do exist between and within Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples concerning issues such as Indigenous rights, sovereignty, a treaty, self-determination and justice. Instead of implying the desirability for a ‘transcending of disagreement’, the reconciliation process could have adopted an approach that accommodated and respected a range of views and differences.\textsuperscript{54} This could have allowed issues such as Indigenous rights and power relationships to have been acknowledged, addressed and protected.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I briefly analysed the ten-year formal Australian reconciliation process. I argued that the education and document of reconciliation goals had a limited success whilst the socio-economic goal did not succeed. I also argued that several interrelated factors – the establishment of the process; the emphasis on symbolic and practical reconciliation; the nationalist discourse of reconciliation; the restricted notion of justice; and the emphasis on improving relationships – limited the overall effectiveness of the reconciliation process.

It is important to identify and analyse these, and other, interrelated factors and their impact on the reconciliation process. In attempting to explore the reasons for the
failure of reconciliation to be achieved by 2001, the literature has largely focused on the impact of the Howard Government upon the reconciliation process. This focus has often obscured the role that the above mentioned factors, amongst others, have played in the demise of the process. These factors need to be identified, critiqued and addressed before any reconciliation process can genuinely be advanced. Further, international experiences of reconciliation projects can be explored to identify those aspects of the projects that would be most applicable and beneficial to reconciliation in the Australian context. Finally, reconciliation models could be developed that address symbolic, practical and substantive reconciliation issues, such as an apology, socio-economic outcomes, sovereignty, power relationships and treaties. Research could be conducted into how these models could address these issues in a non-nationalist manner that accommodates and respects differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Endnotes
2 Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act (Cth) 1991: 3-4.
4 The Study (or Learning) Circles project distributed over two thousand kits throughout Australia to numerous church groups, trade unions, community-based organizations and groups of interested people (AAACE 1993a: 4; AAACE 1993b: 2). These kits enabled participants to undertake a self-managing eight-week discussion course that discussed Indigenous cultures, histories, contemporary issues, socio-economic disadvantages and reconciliation (CAR 2000a: 62; AAACE 1993a: 9).
5 Walking Together was published throughout the reconciliation process and was the major strategy to communicate with groups and individuals interested in reconciliation (CAR 2000a: 23). There were thirty issues published and at its height, Walking Together reached a circulation of 75,000 per issue (CAR 2000a: 23).
10 CAR 1997a: 10.
12 CAR 2000a: 60, 64, 83.
13 Tatz 1998: 1-2; Saulwick and Muller 2000: 5-6; Pratt, Elder and Ellis 2000: 7, 9-10; McIntosh 2000: 5.
18 CAR 1994: 143
20 CAR 2000a: 36-37.
21 For example, the numbers of Indigenous people accessing the various educational sectors significantly improved during the 1990s. From 1991 to 2001, the number of Indigenous full-time school students increased from 72,249 to 115,465 (ABS 2003: 318-319). The number of Indigenous people accessing Vocational Education and Training (VET) increased 107% from 1995 to 2001 (ABS 2003: 319-320). Further, the number of Indigenous students accessing higher education increased 53% between 1991 and 2001 (ABS 2003: 321).
23 The following are some examples of this stagnation, or decline, in socio-economic outcomes:
Health: Life expectancy for Indigenous people did not improve during the 1990s (J. Taylor 2000: 4). It remained at 56 years for men and 63 years for women at 2001 (ABS 2001c), compared to 77 years for non-Indigenous men and 82.4 years for non-Indigenous women in 2001 (ABS 2001c).

Overrepresentation: The overrepresentation of Indigenous prisoners increased between 1991 and 2001 from 14% to 20% of the total prison population (ABS 2001b: 9).

Education: The educational attainment (the proportion of people aged 15 years and over without a post-secondary educational qualification) for Indigenous people improved from 90.7% in 1991 to 85.24% in 2001 compared to a greater improvement for the wider community from 73.6% in 1991 to 65.3% in 2001 (Gray and Auld 2000: 26; ABS 2001a: 4; ABS 2002b: Tables I01, I14; ABS 2001a: 4).


Employment: The proportion of working-age Indigenous people, neither employed nor on CDEP, was 71.4% in 1991 and 66.8% in 2001 (Gray and Auld 2000: 24; ABS 2002b: Table I16).


28 N. Pearson 2000a: 166; Clark 2001: 12.

29 In 2000, CAR commissioned a Newspoll survey on non-Indigenous attitudes to reconciliation and Indigenous issues. This survey found that only 41 percent of respondents thought Indigenous people were a disadvantaged group and that 60 percent felt Indigenous people received too much Government assistance (Newspoll 2000: 34).


32 CAR 2000a: 71.

33 CAR 2000a: 74.

34 CAR 2000a: 75. The booklets were: Overcoming Disadvantage; Achieving Economic Independence; Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rights; and Sustaining the Reconciliation Process.


36 On 12 May 2000, Patrick Dodson argued CAR should recommend to the Government that a treaty be developed between Indigenous people and the Australian Government (Dodson 2000b: 20-21). He argued that the treaty should be based on certain core principles, including: “political representation, reparations and compensation, regional agreements, Indigenous regional self-government, cultural and intellectual property rights, recognition of customary law and an economic base” (Dodson 2000b: 19).

On 25 May 2000 Geoff Clark, Aden Ridgeway, David Ross and Pat Dodson met with John Howard in an attempt to place certain issues on any post-Corroboree reconciliation agenda. These issues included the development of a treaty, the reservation of parliamentary seats for Indigenous people, self-determination, compensation, self-government and customary law (Saunders and Shanahan 2000: 5).


38 The booklet, Overcoming Disadvantage, contained over 100 ‘possible actions’ to address Indigenous disadvantage, but did not sufficiently examine issues such as racism, customary law, land rights, a treaty or self-determination (CAR 2000b: 3-18).

The booklet, Achieving Economic Independence, outlined several issues that inhibited economic independence, including racism, yet the suggested actions generally did not include those that would challenge existing power relations, such as alternative entry programs in education, affirmative action in employment or recognising Indigenous rights to their land in accessing capital (CAR 2000c: 3-10).
The booklet, Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rights, emphasised citizenship rights in introducing the concept of rights and narrowly defined social justice to largely socio-economic issues (CAR 2000d: 2-6). The booklet though proposed a legislative framework to address ‘unresolved issues of reconciliation’ and mentioned some Indigenous rights, such as native title and customary law (CAR 2000d: 2, 7-21). However, it excluded concepts of sovereignty from discussions of self-determination and argued some Indigenous rights could only be advanced ‘over the longer term’ (CAR 2000d: 3, 14).

The booklet, Sustaining the Reconciliation Process, in identifying six areas to sustain reconciliation, did, to a limited extent, recognise power relationships, including combating racism and inequality (CAR 2000e: 5-8). However, the majority of actions discussed in the booklet focussed on education and symbolism, rather than on issues such as a treaty (CAR 2000e: 23-25).


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