

# Reconciliation and its Key Issues

Pamphlet from: Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, Reconciliation and its Key Issues.

## Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation first met in 1992 to build bridges for a better understanding between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider Australian community. The Council, which was set up by the Federal Parliament, has 25 members - 12 are Aboriginal, two are Torres Strait Islander and 11 are from the wider community. All major political groups are represented on the Council which has adopted the following as its vision:

**“A united Australia which respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provides justice and equity for all”**

The Council believes that eight issues are an essential part of the reconciliation process.

### **Key Issue 1 - Land and Sea**

**Understanding country - the importance of land and sea in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies**

The land and sea are important to every Australian. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a special, unique relationship.

It's hard in the wider community to understand this relationship.

It centres on Ceremonies and The Dreaming, a time beyond when great spirit beings created the world, people and animals. Their tracks and spirits live on in this land and sea.

Indigenous Australians must care for their country - it's sacred. This is done through rituals, ceremonies, respect for the law and looking after the environment.

The sacred relationship is a fact of life. It has always been - in the cities and in the bush, it's a basic part of life. For reconciliation to occur, the wider community needs to understand and accept Indigenous Australians' relationship with the land and sea. Also required, is an appreciation of what happens when this relationship is denied.

### **Key Issue 2 - Relationships**

#### **Improving Relationships**

With few exceptions, relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider community have been poor. Indigenous Australians have long suffered from violence, dispossession, racism and the failure of government policies.

It was standard practice... Children were taken from their families and homes... Whole communities were shifted from their homes to another part of the country. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life has been regulated and supervised at almost every turn. There was no choice!

This isn't just history. Indigenous Australians still suffer intense scrutiny wherever they go and whatever they do. They still remember.

Reconciliation means healing the ruptured relationships. But what can be done?

Many Australians have never met an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person. Some assume knowledge through what they hear from others or see in the media, much of which fuels hurtful

stereotypes.

Learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the impact of institutions on them is the first step to better relations. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has material and information to help you.

### **Key Issue 3 - Cultures**

#### **Valuing Cultures**

Australia has many cultures. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are special because their values are those of Australia's first peoples. All Australians can learn from this unique heritage.

Culture doesn't stand still. After two centuries of interference and domination, Indigenous cultures have developed and survived.

Despite losing their traditional homelands 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.

Many people in the wider community don't understand the nature of these identities, and deny they exist. This denial continues to hurt many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whether they live in the city or the bush. The diversity and strength of Indigenous cultures and identities are seen in today's popular Indigenous authors, playwrights, photographers, film makers, actors, dance companies, sports people and entertainers.

This diversity needs to be recognised to be truly valued and accepted with pride.

### **Key Issue 4 - Histories**

#### **Sharing History**

The history of Australia began long before the

arrival of Captain Cook in 1770.

It started with Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples - a history for all Australians to learn and share.

Much of the history of our interaction is brutal and unpleasant.

Indigenous Australia's part in Australian history has long been ignored or unrepresented. Since the 1960s, Indigenous peoples and historians have challenged a number of myths and assumptions. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' resistance to the violence of the Australian frontier is now recognised as well as the contribution Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples made to the nation's development, including their involvement in the two World Wars.

Equally as important, Indigenous peoples are now telling their own stories.

Historians are also recognising the changes to Indigenous cultures, lifestyles and politics since 1788.

It's taken time. Most of us have gone through a school system knowing nothing of Australian Indigenous peoples' history or how they were treated by governments and other institutions.

There are now many books, tapes and films available. But, don't forget - local Indigenous peoples may be the best way to get to know our histories.

### **Key Issue 5 - Disadvantage**

#### **Addressing Disadvantage**

Statistics show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the poorest, unhealthiest, least employed, worst housed and most imprisoned Australians.

On average, unemployment is three 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 percent 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 years less than a child born at the same time of parents in the wider community.

The 1991 Royal Commission in Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Final Report provided a very comprehensive picture of the disadvantage faced by Indigenous Australians and made constructive recommendations on way to address it - many of the recommendations do not require money to be achieved.

It found the major underlying factors are historical - to do with loss of land and power.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals face prejudice when trying to rent a home, find employment, get service in shops and banks - just doing the every day things most Australians take for granted.

If we understand why these disadvantages exist we can do something together about them - that's reconciliation.

## **Key Issue 6 - Custody Levels**

### **Custody Levels**

Indigenous peoples are arrested at an alarming rate. That's why there was a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Death in Custody set up in 1989.

The rate of imprisonment of Indigenous Australians is 29 times greater than that of the wider community. The Royal Commission examined the deaths in custody of 99 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as well as the underlying reasons for the custody levels. The profile of the dead is shocking.

Of the 99, only two had completed secondary school and 43 had been separated from their families as children by the State, missions, or other institutions. Their standard of health ranged from poor to very bad.

Almost everyone had early or repeated contact with the criminal justice system.

The Royal Commission concluded that the most significant cause of over-representation in custody was the economic, social and political disadvantage of most Indigenous peoples. A factor in many deaths was the lack of understanding by police and correction services of their duty to care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their custody.

It pointed to the need for reconciliation and cross-party commitment to address the disadvantage and lack of power of Indigenous Australians. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was established by an Act of Parliament in 1991 with cross-party support.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are still being jailed at high rates and are still dying in custody.

## **Key Issue 7 - Destiny**

**Destiny - Greater opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to control their destinies.**

Since 1788, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have suffered an enormous amount of regulation and supervision by governments and other institutions.

The result has been a loss of independence and self-esteem. Families and communities have been destroyed and cultures endangered.

People were isolated from the rest of the community, their personal liberty denied. Through 'assimilation' thousands of children were taken and placed in missions and other institutions and farmed out to non-Aboriginal

families for foster care. It wasn't until a successful referendum in 1967 that Indigenous peoples were officially accepted as Australians and the Federal Government was given power to make laws for Indigenous Australians.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples believe strongly in their right to self-determination which means having greater control over their destinies.

The Australian Government supports this. In 1990 the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was established, ATSIC is one way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can make decisions about programs which affect them.

Clearly, people who control their destinies have greater self-esteem, purpose and direction.

## **Key Issue 8 - Formal Document**

**Formal Document - Agreement on whether the process of reconciliation would be advanced by a document or documents of reconciliation.**

Since contact between European and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia began, the legal concept called *terra nullius* formed the basis of the relationship... These are Latin words which mean 'nobody's land'.

So, the Indigenous peoples were considered to be without rights to their land.

The historic High Court decision on Native Title (Mabo) in June 1992 rejected *terra nullius*, and recognised Indigenous Australians' prior ownership and native title. Many Australians believe it is time to address unfinished business, and resolve the rights and position of Indigenous Australians.

One way is to agree about matters under dispute and formalise them. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation is seeking community views about whether or not reconciliation between Indigenous Australians and the wider

community would be advanced by a formal document or documents.

Between now and 2001 the process of reconciliation provides the opportunity to find practical ways to achieve reconciliation at regional and local levels, and to build new relationships that may be celebrated in some formal way through a document or documents.

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has further resources available on reconciliation issues. They include:

- Publications
- Videos
- Posters.

To be on the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation mailing list, or for more information, please write to:

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