



◀ Queensland pastoral landholder Camilla Cowley with Wik woman Gladys Tybingoempa (famous for her High Court dance following the Wik decision) at the first Sea of Hands event in front of Parliament House, Canberra, 12 October 1997.

Photo: Andrew Meares, Sydney Morning Herald

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FROM THE EDITOR

This issue is being printed as the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation launches its Declaration for Reconciliation at Corroboree 2000. The document is a culmination of 10 years of work toward achieving reconciliation between non-indigenous and indigenous Australians, towards achieving an understanding of our shared history and of Australian history before white settlement, and of developing ongoing strategies to advance reconciliation.

A draft document for reconciliation was released in 1999 and earlier this year the Council released four draft strategies to advance reconciliation. They were strategies to:

- promote the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rights,
- for economic independence,
- to sustain the Reconciliation Process, and
- to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage.

Corroboree 2000 was intended to be the culmination of a ten-year reconciliation process. It was designed to bring together the white political leaders of Australia's Commonwealth and States with indigenous leaders. Here was a great opportunity to signal to Australians and the world that Australia's political leadership had spent ten years listening, discussing, and learning from each other and would celebrate that in agreeing on a document about our past and future.

It is now unlikely that this great hope will be achieved. In February the Prime Minister announced that reconciliation would not be achieved by end of this year.

His announcement was based on survey data collected by ATSIIC that

WHO WILL TAKE THE LEAD ON RECONCILIATION?

showed that Australians were not willing to accept reconciliation with indigenous Australians. There were other factors as well in John Howard's decision. His personal position he had made clear was that a national apology was a mistake and would imply that the present generation of Australian were being blamed for any past injustices. Another consideration in his decision to postpone the process was that a reconciliation process entered into just to satisfy a timetable and lacking genuine commitment would be artificial and counter-productive. There is certainly truth in the final point.

WHO WILL TAKE THE LEAD?

This raises the question then of who, or which organisations, will take a lead in laying the foundation for genuine reconciliation. There is much to be proud of in Australia's history, and much about contemporary life that is enjoyable. It is remarkable that in a little more than 200 years a stable parliamentary democracy has been established, that there is relative harmony among the diverse cultures that live within Australia, and a level of material wealth has been generated that has resulted in a very comfortable living standard for the majority of the population, especially when compared to other countries.

Yet it is also clear that Australia has a racist history. For much of the past 200 years we have co-existed with forced migration in Queensland; a white Australia immigration policy; a number of infamous nineteenth-century massacres; forced separation of indigenous children from their families; pass laws in Western Australia after the Second World War; the Queensland Act; and

currently, mandatory sentencing policies and notorious levels of infant mortality and ill-health among Aboriginal communities.

It is not possible to genuinely celebrate the positive aspects of recent history while trying to ignore or pass over the terrible incidents in our recent past and history. Without recognition of our history, there cannot be genuine reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

"The real event is between May and December, but if anyone is going to have the energy and drive and commitment to pursue the process of reconciliation right to the wire – that's where the real results are going to be."

LEARNING AND RECONCILIATION

Over the past few years, numerous community learning centres, reconciliation groups, churches, government departments and trade unions have been active in patiently learning about our past and our future.

People from all walks of life have participated neither to gain a qualification nor to improve their exchange value on the labour market, but for other reasons. To understand our shared history, to gain insights into Aboriginal culture, beliefs and history, and to understand different meanings of land, place and family. In the absence of political leadership it is among these groups that the necessary learning and activity will need to occur. This type of community activity strengthens the social fabric and can help embed tolerance and justice as part of the Australian character.

ADULT LEARNERS WEEK

In recognition of those community-based learning initiatives, Adult Learners Week will this year give a national award to a reconciliation learning program.

This award will recognise learning programs designed to promote reconciliation and learning among non-indigenous and indigenous Australians. The successful

program will demonstrate innovation, commitment, co-operation and success in design and delivery of learning opportunities.

The awards will fall in the middle of a critical time for reconciliation. In Patrick Dodson's view 'the real event is between May and December, but if anyone is going to have the energy and drive and commitment to pursue the process of reconciliation right to the wire – that's where the real results are going to be'.

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's formal life is set to end on 1 January 2001. The next six months will be an important period to reactivate both learning and action for reconciliation among non-indigenous Australians. ■

Tony Brown

Adult Learning Australia Inc. (ALA) is the peak body for organisations and individuals involved with adult learning in Australia. ALA informs and fosters networks of adult educators; advises and lobbies government; promotes policy development; represents Australia on international education bodies; coordinates Adult Learners Week and more.

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