

RECONCILIATION AND JUSTICE IN AUSTRALIA

How a nation is trying to heal the wounds of its colonial past and reconcile with its indigenous people



In the second of two articles on reconciliation movements around the world, we look at attempts by the Australian people to come to terms with their colonial past and move forward as a more unified country. Rosemary Rule describes some of the initiatives aimed at acknowledging the experience of the Aboriginal community and make some degree of reparation, as well as honouring their ancient wisdom. In an additional interview, we talk to John Bond, who played a leading role in the ten-year campaign that resulted in the historic apology, delivered by then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2008, to the ‘Stolen Generations’.



Australia's First Nation's people continue to assert their sovereignty through their lived relationship with the land and each other, and remain connected to their ancestors through the continuation of cultural practices. Their spirituality – which for Indigenous Australians is absolutely inclusive of every aspect of their lives, extending to the land and its flora and fauna – is now being revised, recalibrated for the 21st century, and embraced by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples alike.

Aboriginal people have the distinction of being one of the oldest – arguably the oldest – continuous living cultures in the world. Recent research has confirmed that their occupation of Australia dates back more than 65,000 years. The nation is now starting to take pride in their history and to redress past injustices. In 1991,

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act – one of a series of government initiatives which reflect these changing attitudes – called for:

... a united Australia which respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provides justice and equity for all.

No One's Land

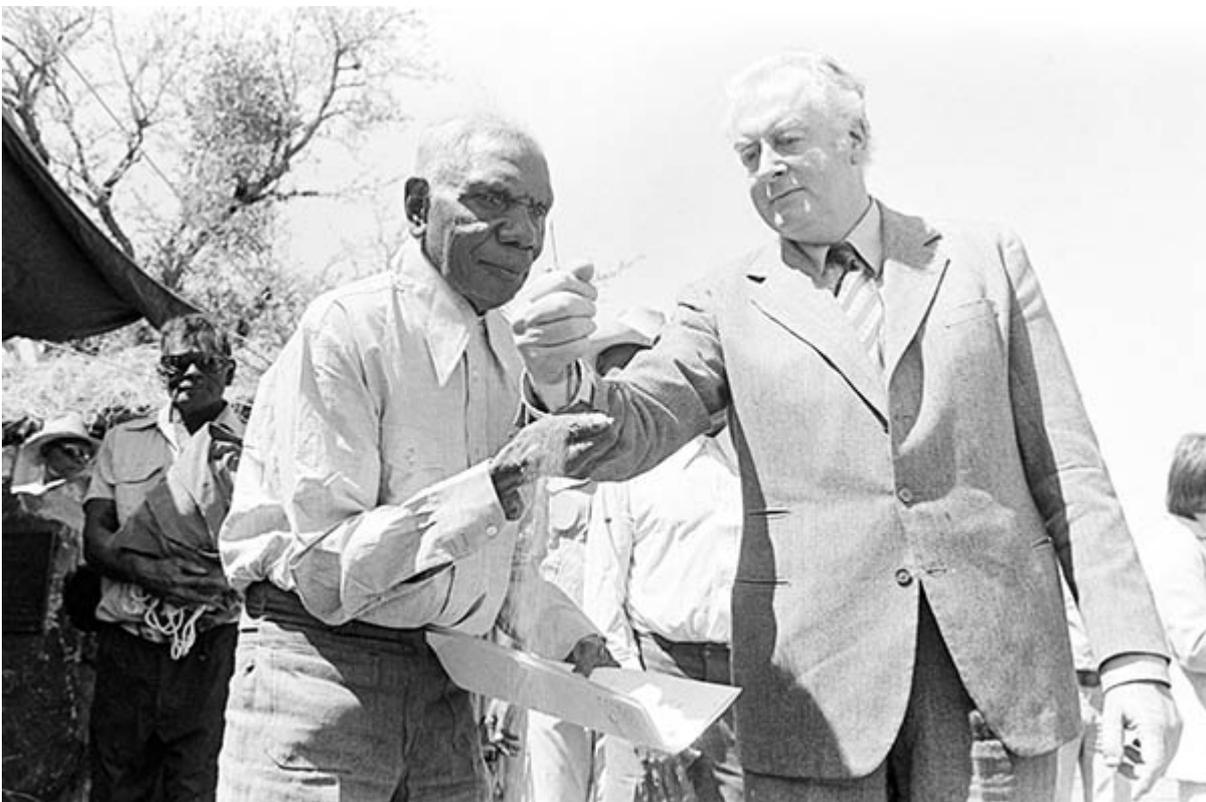
Prior to these initiatives, traditional cultural practices were, by and large, actively and often savagely discouraged, having devastating and long-lasting consequences on many of the 761,300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or 2.5% of the national population, who today still call Australia home. The problems stem back to 1770 when, during his voyage around the coast of Australia British explorer Lieutenant James Cook declared the land to be terra nullius or 'no one's land', thus opening it up to settlement by immigrants. In fact there were over 750,000 Aboriginal people inhabiting the island continent, speaking hundreds of different languages, and not only looking after but also cultivating the land [1]



It is a myth that Aboriginal people were hunger-gatherers who never made the transition to agriculture. There are many reports from early settlers of villages and land cultivation, with up to 19 different crops being grown. This drawing from the Baudin expedition shows a settlement of about 12 well-constructed huts on the tip of Peron Peninsula in Western Australia on 18 March 1803. Click here [2] for more

Captain Cook and his contemporary early white explorers were oblivious to the real nature of the people they were invading or to the spiritual richness of the land they were exploring. Instead, they opted to introduce a period of colonisation from 1788 onwards. This has had profoundly poor consequences for Australia's First Peoples. So while for many of these early explorers, the period was one of discovery of a 'wondrous' southern continent, to the Aboriginal peoples it was an invasion of homelands occupied for many millennia. They were deprived of their lands and marginalised, treated as the 'other' or outcasts, and many thousands were massacred. They were denied the same basic human rights as white Australians and forced to assimilate. Cultural practices were misunderstood, outlawed and/or ignored.

Lighter-skinned Aboriginals were targeted in particular, and between 1900 and 1969, tens of thousands of children were forcibly removed from their families by government agencies and put into the care of church missions and other institutions, a practice which is now referred to as the 'Stolen Generations' [1].



Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pours sand into the hand of Vincent Lingiari of the Gurindji people, signifying the return of a portion of their territory during the first land return on 16th August 1975. Photograph: Mervyn Bishop via Wikimedia Commons

Reconciliation

However, since the mid-20th century, things have begun to change, with a series of major political, judicial and cultural milestones which included, in 2008, an official apology by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd [2], on behalf of the Australian government, for the injustices perpetrated against the stolen generations in particular. (See our interview with John Bond, *The Power of Saying 'Sorry'*, at the end of this article.)

The process began in 1967 with a National Referendum that altered the Australian Constitution by giving Aboriginal people the right to vote in Federal elections, and to be regarded as Australian

citizens. More than 90% of Australian voters chose ‘Yes’ to counting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the census.

Then in 1976, the Aboriginal Land Rights Act opened up the possibility of territory being returned to its original inhabitants. About 50% of the land in the Northern Territories was transferred to collective Aboriginal ownership in the same year, and since then, other areas have followed. Finally, in 1992, the High Court’s Mabo judgement overturned the terra nullius fiction. However, in the same judgement, the High Court accepted the British assertion of sovereignty in 1788, and held that from that time there was only one sovereign power and one system of law in Australia.



Patrick Dodson on a human rights panel discussion in 2011. Photograph via Wikimedia Commons

In the 1990s, locally-based reconciliation groups were formed throughout the country, typically by white people wanting to learn about the history, culture and achievements they shared with the original inhabitants. They also wished to deal with continuing discrimination and racism. As Patrick Dodson, known as ‘the father of reconciliation’ and since 2016 a Labor Senator, has said:

Reconciliation cannot be taken for granted; the past is not going to be forgotten or forgiven. This reconciliation will come when governments stop trying to make us the same as everyone else. When they desist from constantly demanding we conform to every facet of mainstream society that wants to break down or deny who we are, especially with regard to our unique relationship to our land and community.

There has to be acceptance that we are a collection of diverse peoples with our own uniqueness and we are entitled to be as such. This is what has been taken from us, along with our lands, our spirituality and unique societal framework.



Murray River Dreaming, 2017 by Daniel M., a Yorta Yorta man for whom turtles are his totem. Photograph courtesy of The Torch, an organisation that provides support to Indigenous offenders and ex-offenders in Victoria through art, cultural and arts vocational programmes. Indigenous Australians make up less than 3% of the Australian population but represent 27% of the national prison population. More information here [1]

Spirit and the Land

One important aspect of reconciliation is recognition of the unique spiritual vision of the Australian Aboriginals. As Patrick Dodson has explained,

The aborigines and the environment are but one, and all things on earth have a cycle, and they recycle. All rivers, trees, creatures and plants are alive just as we are, today and in the beginning. They are part of nature as we are, and our connection to all things natural is spiritual.

There is also their distinctive understanding of ‘The Dreaming’ which from time immemorial has been the explanation of the beginning and the continuity of life. It is deeply embedded in the spiritual lives of Aboriginal people. It influences codes of behaviours, laws and lores, family, social structures and sacred duties, differing according to the respective custodians of the land on which it is practiced. Dreaming Stories (sometimes called Creation Stories) are passed on through a rich tradition of song, poetry, dance art and storytelling, explaining the creation of the land, the animals and the people.

Some stories are restricted or controlled by an elder or elders. Stories may relate to specific archaeological sites depicting the long history of this ancient culture, such as rock art in caves, or fossils from places where groups lived and shared their meals. Today, Aboriginal people take pride

in being the custodians of their sacred sites, either protecting or guarding them, or more recently, opening them up to the public and guiding visitors. Thus, the recent excavations at Madjedbebe [1] on the Arnhem Land plateau, which seem to have definitively established the extraordinary longevity and continuity of culture in Australia, were undertaken with the cooperation of the Marrar people. [For a video on these remarkable discoveries, click here [2].]



A member of the Anangu people at Uluru National Park. Photograph: David Kirkland courtesy of Tourism NT

One of the most significant and internationally recognised symbols of Australia is Uluru, the giant sandstone monolith in Central Australia (formerly known as Ayers Rock) which plays an important part in many Dreaming Stories. It is a widely recognised source of spiritual connectedness with the continent, and surely represents the reconciliation process for the human condition far beyond the confines of culture or nationality.

In 1985, after lengthy negotiations, the Australian Government handed joint management and title of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park Uluru to the traditional owners, the Anangu people, on condition that they lease it back for a period of 99 years. This is so that the Park can remain open to the half-million or more visitors a year who come from all over the world.

This decision did not pass without protest, and Uluru in many ways has come to symbolise the problems of reconciliation, particularly as it concerns the use of the land. Mass tourism inevitably brings changes to the environment, and since the Anangu people took over, the impact has been carefully controlled – access to the Park is limited, and visitors stay off-site in designated areas. More contentious has been the practice of climbing the rock, which many tourists like to do. The traditional owners have actively discouraged this, and the environmental damage has been considerable. Uluru will therefore be closed for climbing permanently on 26th October 2019, a date marking 34 years since the hand-over.



The Massacres Map produced by the University of Newcastle Centre for 21st Century Humanities. More information here [1]

Acknowledging Past Wrongs

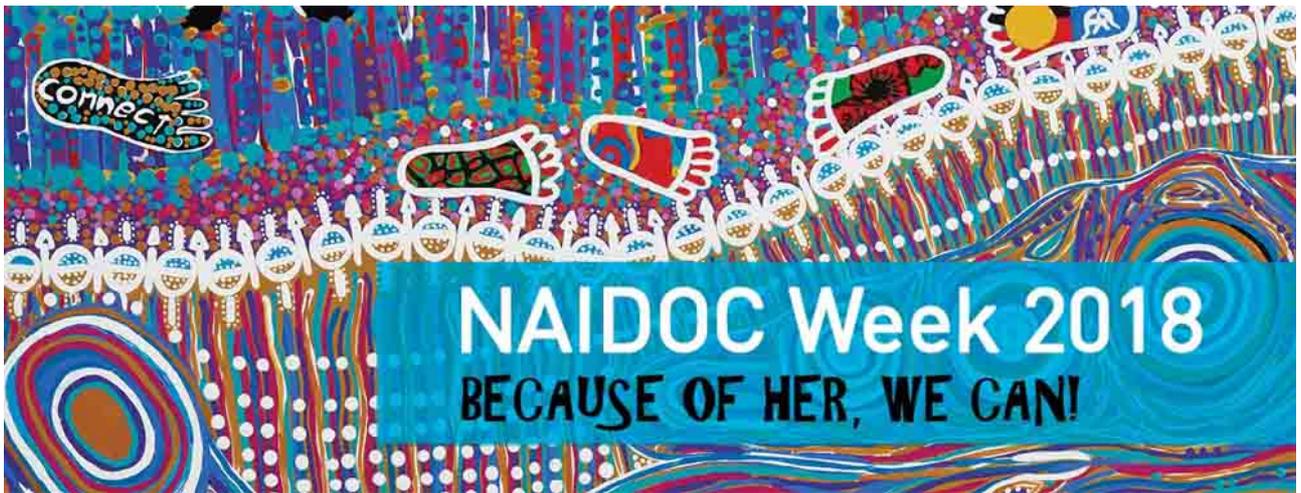
Another indication of changing attitudes towards Australia's colonial past is the public acknowledgement of atrocities committed across the vast continent and the murder of Indigenous people, the so-called 'Frontier Wars'.

In 2018, a landmark project, the Massacres Map [1] was launched, mapping massacres between 1788 and 1930. It documents 250 sites across almost every state and territory, with mass killings continuing well into the 20th century. The first of its kind, the map has generated a high level of interest internationally and locally and is publicly available [1]. According to project developer Professor Lyndall Ryan of the University of Newcastle (New South Wales):

Finding sources to corroborate oral history of the massacres was difficult, because the killings were designed not to be discovered.

The project is still in progress, and it is expected that it will eventually document over 500 massacre sites altogether.

Interest in past history was further evidenced recently with a powerful (and popular) exhibition *Colony: Frontier Wars* [1], held in Melbourne at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). This brought together different understandings of Australia's shared history and offered a pathway towards recognition through the works of many Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. The exhibition was presented concurrently with *Colony: Australia 1770–1861*, offering viewers a parallel experience of the colonisation of Australia, an attempt by the NGV perhaps, to unite the contemporary with the colonial; a difficult endeavour that Australia has yet to completely master or to come to terms with.



Poster for NAIDOC Week 2018 celebrating women of power

Celebration

Inspired by people such as Patrick Dodson and his measured approach to cultural, social and political issues, thousands of Australians now come together regularly to support the reconciliation movement. National Reconciliation Week, 27th May–3rd June (the date is bookended by two significant milestones: the successful 1967 referendum, and the High Court Mabo decision respectively) is commemorated each year. It continues to put a spotlight on matters that still need to be addressed for the Aboriginal community: poor health and educational outcomes, disproportionate incarceration rates, among others.

NAIDOC Week (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) held each July celebrates the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Indigenous communities and increasingly, in government agencies, community organisations, local councils, workplaces, schools and sporting groups. As Patrick Dodson has said:

Whatever differences we have between us as societies we need today to find the collective courage to negotiate our way through them, to mutually agreed outcomes. True justice may never be arrived at, but what we may achieve might give us peace and mutual respect. After more than 200 years, we Aboriginal people are due at least that...

We have much to contribute to the world; ways of knowing and being that are going to be essential to everyone's survival on our planet. As true citizens of Australia, properly acknowledged in our constitution, we can look forward not only to improving our own lot, but helping Australia contribute to the well-being of all of the world's people.



Rosemary Rule is an alumni of the Beshara School. She is Co-Chair of the Port Phillip Citizens for Reconciliation group based in Melbourne, a member of Reconciliation Victoria, of Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation Victoria, and has promoted and written about Aboriginal Australia-related matters for many years.

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Picture Sources

Banner: ‘Sorry’ over Sydney Harbour on the Corroboree Bridge Walk, 2000. Photograph: source unknown.

First inset: A member of the Anangu people at Uluru National Park. Photograph: David Kirkland courtesy of Tourism NT

Second inset: John Bond. Photograph: Initiatives of Change [/]

Third inset: ‘The Grieving Mother’ by Silvio Apponi at Colebrook Reconciliation Park, Adelaide. Photograph: <https://www.weekendnotes.com/colebrook-reconciliation-park>

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Other Sources

For more on the Reconciliation movement in Australia, see <https://www.reconciliation.org.au>

To view a video of the apology delivered by Kevin Rudd in 2008, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKWfFp24rA>. For the full text, see <https://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples>

For more on recent research into ancient past of Aboriginal peoples, see ‘The Archaeology of Rock Art in Western Arnhem Land’ by May et al, on the Australian National University website, and the film Spirit in the Stone.

For more on the Massacres Map see the University of Newcastle website

For more on the work of The Torch, see <https://thetorch.org.au>

For more on the Bringing Them Home report, see <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/>, including a video outlining the main findings of the enquiry on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S182VMuuK10>

Antonio Buti, 'Sir Ronald Wilson: A Matter of Conscience' (UWAP Press, Perth, 2007).