

Reconciliation: Where to Now?

VERN HUGHES

THE debate on reconciliation in recent months has left many thoughtful Australians aghast.

How is it that we can have a relatively intelligent public debate on taxation or economics or foreign policy or social security reform, but when it comes to indigenous affairs, we throw intelligence out the window and engage in collective 'dumbing down'?

Why is it acceptable for political and media figures to throw around weary cliches and emotive slogans about indigenous affairs and think that this is good enough to pass as public debate?

And why do 'group think' dynamics dominate the debate, stifling open and wide-ranging discussion?

The desperate demoralization in many indigenous communities continues unabated and will be largely unaffected by the documents produced by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. Rates of suicide, violence, crime, alcoholism and sexual abuse are moving in the wrong direction. These things will not be remedied by the push for a Treaty or the introduction of reserved parliamentary seats.

Nor have these appalling trends been positively affected by self-determination. The really hard question for ATSIC, the land councils and the Aboriginal leadership is why this continuing demoralization has accompanied the steady implementation of self-determination policies in recent years.

There are even harder questions for the non-indigenous population. Why have we allowed ourselves to suspend normal standards of accountability

and performance monitoring when dealing with indigenous programmes? Why are we afraid to speak of self-help as a universal virtue that is also important for indigenous people? Why do we exaggerate the capacity of governments to turn around the lives of demoralized individuals and communities?

Reconciliation should be about enhancing trust across racial lines. It should be about strengthening real

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relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous people in civil society. This cannot be legislated for or imposed from above. Nor can it be bought with buckets of money.

The ten-year official reconciliation process has failed to address the stresses in black and white relations generated by welfare dependency, high rates of crime, and poor outcomes from public expenditures on indigenous communities. These are the things that impede the development of trust.

The official process has failed to address the unease and confusion created by a proliferation of public institutions which seem to serve one race

rather than many. It has failed to identify the tension between a desire to recognize a special status for indigenous people and an affirmation of the moral equality of all Australian citizens.

Had the process commenced its work by stating this tension directly and promoting debate about how it might be resolved, then it might have had a chance. Instead, it sought to close off this discussion systematically, hoping it could push through a raft of special status measures via the back door. This strategy has failed.

Where does the process go from here? Three things are clear.

First, if reconciliation is about trust and relationships, then it will live or die in civil society. It is not something governments can deliver. Governments can help, primarily by creating space for civil society and talking about the importance of what happens in civil society.

This is where the Howard Government has fallen down. It doesn't know how to speak about civil society. This is an intellectual failure. Because it cannot speak about civil society, it lacks a capacity to win the intellectual argument. It is left trying to talk about 'practical reconciliation' (read 'service delivery'), but this is not enough to claim the intellectual and moral high ground. It thus finds itself at the mercy of the elites, condemned to playing compassion catch-up which it can never win.

Second, if reconciliation is about trust and relationships in civil society, then it has to be driven from civil society. But here's the problem. There is no organization of citizens to drive reconciliation, and in its absence, politi-

cians, media commentators and even church leaders will look to government for leadership. This becomes a vicious circle. Government is expected to drive and deliver a solution for something for which it is not the answer.

Third, the task of trying to sell civil society to our political and media elites is a very difficult one. Elites, by definition, are hostile to civil society.

What the reconciliation process needs now is a group of committed citizens, indigenous and non-indigenous, to drive an agenda which does not originate in Canberra. This agenda will have to be grounded outside the political class and be driven by people of high ethical standing who have no financial or career interests in it.

What would this agenda look like? It would require a succinct formulation of programmatic objectives and sentiments, and some clarity about basic principles.

TEN GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. There must be a straightforward acknowledgement of racism in Australia's past, including a recognition of the trauma generated by dispossession of land, cultural displacement, and the separation of families.
2. This trauma is personal and social in character, and cannot be overcome solely or even mainly by statutory means. It will be overcome only by reconstituting personal, familial and social relationships in civil society so as to re-establish trust and mutuality. This is not something the state can do. Appeals to the state to express sentiments such as sorrow or guilt or repentance are misdirected.
3. Indigenous trauma is trivialized by talk of financial compensation.
4. There must be a straightforward acknowledgement of the fragility and complexity of traditional cultures, and a recognition that all cultures change through contact with others. The 'noble savage' stereotype is as unhelpful as that

of the drunken welfare-dependent black.

5. Australia's land is shared by people of many races and cultures. Indigenous people do not have a monopoly on attachment to the land and are not the sole custodians of the land.
6. Native title should be accepted and made secure, with a timeline for concluding native title claims.
7. Indigenous communities and individuals cannot empower themselves by disengaging from the worlds of education and the real economy. Attachment to traditional culture cannot be a defence for detachment from these worlds.
8. Personal responsibility and self-help are crucial for indigenous empowerment and for overcoming the paralysis of dependency and victimhood.
9. Entitlements based on race institutionalize racial division and undermine principles of moral equality and social inclusion.
10. It is inappropriate for international bodies such as the UN Commission for Elimination of Racial Discrimination to liken Australia's current race relations record to that of Rwanda or Bosnia.

With these principles in mind, the following points might be a start towards a people's reconciliation charter.

A PEOPLE'S CHARTER

1. *Friendships are more important than documents*

People-to-people interactions across racial lines are the key to reconciliation. Multi-racial friendships are more important than documents or gestures of sorrow.

2. *Money cannot compensate*

Cash cannot be exchanged for souls. Money cannot buy dignity. Monetary compensation for the injustices of the past will not help generate trust.

3. *An ethic of self-help*

Welfare dependency is poison. Publicly funded programmes for indig-

enous communities should be tied to practices of personal responsibility, self-help, family consolidation, and engagement with the real economy.

4. *One set of laws*

Customary law amongst indigenous communities cannot override or take the place of the common law of the land.

5. *No to a treaty*

We are one people, not two. A treaty would institutionalize racial division and exacerbate differences.

6. *Action on crime*

Community justice panels are needed to oversee effective responses to crime, including tough alternatives to incarceration of juveniles, personal restitution to victims, offender-victim conferencing, mentoring and rehabilitation.

7. *Corporate leadership*

Corporations should take the lead in developing voluntary employment, training and mentoring schemes for disadvantaged indigenous people, with public listing of those businesses which do (and do not) participate.

8. *Concluding native title claims*

A timeline is needed for concluding native title claims.

9. *Phasing out quotas*

A timeline is needed for phasing out race-based quotas and representation mechanisms in public institutions.

10. *Abolition of ATSIC*

ATSIC is unable to generate trust across racial lines. Its record on accountability and transparency is poor. Representative bodies in indigenous affairs should be self-funding and genuinely independent of government.

An agenda of this sort is desperately needed if the reconciliation process is to be rescued from its current stalemate.

Vern Hughes works in a Mission of the Uniting Church.

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