Introduction

The lack of scholarly analysis of the reconciliation process in Australia remains notable, given that the policy commanded so much public attention and political energy during the 1990s. A frequent lament for reconciliation under the Prime Ministership of John Howard, however, evokes the lack of national political leadership that has been offered. Andrew Leigh’s article ‘Leadership and Aboriginal Reconciliation’ (AJSI, May 2002), is useful as it brings a concern for rigour to definitions of what leadership might actually mean, while encouraging a renewed critical engagement with the terms of reconciliation itself. The present paper is an attempt to make that engagement within the terms of political leadership: what sort of leadership is appropriate to the policy of reconciliation?

Leigh’s notion of “adaptive leadership” comprises several different strategies: the separation of ‘technical’ from ‘adaptive’ forms of leadership and work; the application of pressure to move non-indigenous Australians into a “zone of discomfort”, and a focus on ‘interpersonal relations’.

I contend that these suggestions, while well intended, underestimate the actual dynamics of the reconciliation process. In fact, mainstream politicians offset indigenous demands against the capacities and tolerance of non-indigenous Australians, with a vague sense that a new social coalition would emerge. Reconciliation operates with an ideal of a postcolonial national identity emerging from the community as it becomes enlightened; yet the lack of definition as to that ‘enlightenment’ means that leadership is subordinated to a diffuse but powerful sense of ‘community’. This abdication was an explicit political intention of reconciliation in Australia.

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The secret life of reconciliation

If political leadership is the issue, what was the power of reconciliation and how was it manifest in political debate? In this section I examine the issues of native title, the Stolen Generations and ‘interpersonal reconciliation’, in order to demonstrate how the principle of reconciliation became delinked from legitimate Indigenous expectations for the recognition and protection of rights and the provision of social justice. Each reveals how reconciliation was the vehicle by which the capacities of the non-indigenous community became the limit to justice. I conclude by questioning whether the application of an adaptive form of leadership to reconciliation can overcome this pattern.

Land

Leigh notes several significant events dealing with the land issue during the life of official reconciliation: the Mabo and Wik decisions recognising and developing ‘native title’; the passage of the Native Title Act (1993), codifying that recognition; and the amendment of the Act after the election of the first Howard government, to meet their political commitments to pastoralists and the resources sector.

The 1992 Mabo judgment would almost certainly have occurred regardless of the commencement of reconciliation. It reflected the determination of Indigenous leaders, particularly Eddie Mabo, to have traditional rights to land respected. It also revealed the extent to which non-Indigenous supporters both inside and outside the legal profession were prepared to pursue principles long established elsewhere, principles that rejected terra nullius. It did not demonstrate or precipitate a wide public enlightenment about Indigenous rights; to the extent it generated a public response it was greeted with suspicion and hostility.

The relationship of native title to reconciliation is therefore crucial: I deal here with the later Wik judgment and its place in the reconciliation process.

After the election of the Howard government in 1996 and the delivery of the Wik decision at the end of that year, it was clear that the boundaries of reconciliation would be tested. The government railed against the decision itself, portraying the High Court decisions as regrettable and indicative of ‘judicial activism’ (Edgerton 1998, 34–37). There was unconcealed anger that a progressive judiciary had improved the possibilities for Aboriginal claims forever, and a campaign to delegitimise both the High Court and its decisions became a constant in 1997 (Richardson 1997; Mason 1998, 77). It reached a crescendo when the government
decided to amend the original native title legislation, ostensibly to accommodate the new factors raised in the Wik judgment.

Simultaneously, a concerted effort was being made by the pastoralists’ industry group, the National Farmer’s Federation (NFF) to sow fear and discontent among Australians. NFF President Donald McGauchie left no one in any doubt about the effects of truly recognising indigenous rights: “this decision has just about ended Aboriginal reconciliation, certainly with the pastoral industry.” (Wahlquist 1997)

What the pastoralists focused on was the idea of ‘uncertainty’. Edgerton has captured the usage neatly: “(t)he rhetoric of ‘uncertainty’ creates the impression that there must be something wrong with Wik and that pastoralists are being put in a vulnerable position. Claims of uncertainty give the impression of instability, unfairness, arbitrariness, and significantly, that ‘certainty’ is easily achievable” (Edgerton, 23; Bennett 1999, 54–55). NFF activities reflected the tone set by the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, who respectively, went on national television holding up a map showing 70% of Australia ‘under threat’ of native title claims, and toured the country promising ‘bucket loads of extinguishment’. The PM indicated that as part of the legislative response to Wik, the Racial Discrimination Act was not sacrosanct, implying that it may be open season on indigenous people and their rights in order to re-establish ‘certainty’ of title to pastoralists (Edgerton).

Throughout 1997 and early 1998 the government attempted to draft a legislative response that could gain support in the Senate, where the government did not hold a majority. The spectre of a double-dissolution ‘race election’ on minority rights loomed large at several points. Most commentators felt this was a ghastly prospect. However, one writer was later to call for just such a poll: “What we need is an election in which a central question is just what has gone wrong in the past few years; why so much goodwill towards the reconciliation process has dissipated” (MacCallum 1998). His rationale was that it would force Australians to examine their values in the most searching and public method available, a general election.

What transpired in May 1998 was that a package of amendments to the original NTA passed the Upper House, with the vote of one independent Senator. No significant indigenous leader in Australia supported these amendments. As the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission’s (HREOC) Social Justice Commissioner Mick Dodson commented: “What I see now is the spectacle of two white men — John Howard and (Senator) Brian Harradine — discussing our native title while we’re not even in the room. How symbolically colonialist is that?” (Brearley and Nason 1998).
A race-based election had been averted but at a heavy price: native title as expressed in the two judgements was heavily regulated; government’s ability to extinguish it increased; pastoralists’ rights were upgraded; with power being transferred to state-based regimes of legislation. This was clearly an erosion of the ‘1967 mandate’.

The election held in October 1998 saw Pauline Hanson’s newly-formed One Nation party win the first preferences of nearly one million Australian electors. Here was a party explicitly committed to the abolition of all ‘special rights’ of Indigenous peoples, and they were only denied parliamentary representation proportional to their electoral support through the open collusion of the major parties on preferences. One major party (the ALP) that had stressed the importance of native title to a meaningful reconciliation, conspired with another (the Liberal-National Coalition), that rejected such connections and kept the issues separate, to prevent a third party from gaining a parliamentary foothold from which they could call for the abolition of the lot.

In relief now was a constituency in rural Australia and on the fringes of the cities, that was finding a voice, and saying with a ‘native’ urgency that ‘special rights’ must end. The Coalition was and is able to orient their policies to respond to this new constituency. The ALP, political backers of the indigenising project remain unable to formulate any coherent response. Clearly, the ‘indigenising’ of Australian title has reached limits. And for what? According to the President of the Native Title Tribunal, Robert French, native title is “a thing of shards and fragments when measured against the richness” of traditional life (Moran 1999, 230). Aboriginal activist Gary Foley maintained that the Wik judgment rendered native title an inferior title to that enjoyed by cattle.

Wik was an obvious point at which reconciliation should have taken a more tangible role; for some of the benefits of the process to be demonstrated and drawn upon in the subsequent challenging discussion about substantive rights. The distinct lack of a conciliatory approach during the debate around the NTA amendments in 1997–1998 suggests fundamental boundaries were becoming clearer. These were the limits of Australia’s reimagination of itself as a prerequisite for undoing the injustice of terra nullius.

Howard saw that reconciliation would work in a conservative cause, his case for social ‘balance’. This idea is frequently sourced in the writings and speeches of historian Geoffrey Blainey, for whom political choices act as the propulsion of a ‘pendulum’. Good politicians must make decisions that bring the pendulum back from extreme positions and promote ‘balance’.
Nothing in reconciliation appeared to contradict this stance. There were no outcomes agreed to at the start of the process (in fact they were expressly denied) so it was impossible to gauge whether particular acts advanced or obstructed reconciliation. This is clearly the case with native title, which in 2002 remains the source of tremendous frustration, not reconciliation, throughout Australia.

The Stolen Generations

It is to the issue of an apology by non-indigenous Australia to indigenous peoples that reconciliation was most systematically joined. In 1997 blank books started appearing in Australian libraries. Called 'Sorry Books', they offered Australians an opportunity to reflect about the historical relationship between black and white Australia. In particular, the books allowed Australians to make personal apologies to the 'Stolen Generations', those indigenous persons removed as children from their families under child welfare legislation. The extent and genocidal implications of the policy were made clear to Australians in the report of the HREOC inquiry, entitled Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families.

The report, and the question of an appropriate response to it, was the focus of many speakers at the Australian Reconciliation Convention in May 1997. The refusal of the PM to offer a national apology (as opposed to a personal one) and the manner in which he did so caused many in the audience to turn their backs and jeer him. After counselling the delegates to forget symbolic, overblown gestures, and rejecting anything that smacked of difference, he said this: "we must not join those who would portray Australia's history since 1788 as little more than a disgraceful record of imperialism, exploitation and racism" (Howard 1997).

Yet the readiness with which many Australians understood the implications of the HREOC report — the systematic removal of children from their families by powerful institutions of Church and State — meant that the Stolen Generations' story quickly became a centrepiece of the movement toward reconciliation. Indeed it galvanised that movement, helping to form a reservoir of concern about the inherent injustice of the Australian story. The numbers of books and contributors showed the extent of support for the idea of personal contrition and a corporate form of apology. Howard's refusal then became a focal point for the increasing sense of anger among reconciliation enthusiasts. However, his stance helped to catalyse another response — opposition to apology and the refutation of those arguments. It is important to look at the reasons for this attitude prior to returning to a discussion of the implications and assumptions of an apology: 'Why should I say sorry? I have done nothing to them — I didn't take their kids away, or steal their land. I wasn't even here, my ancestors didn't arrive until...'

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Many Australians will have had such thoughts in recent years. Indeed the CAR-commissioned research in 2000 shows exactly this (Newspoll and the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation 2000). Finding oneself innocent on these issues, however, requires a certain kind of productive listening. The requirement of an honest recounting of history, a ‘shared history’, is that we should not resile from unpleasantness, but should see of the nation-state its multiple courses through time. No one undertakes that sort of reflexive distancing with regard to other moments that celebrate national history and achievement, such as on ANZAC day or in public effusions for Don Bradman. The distancing from an apology — conducted mostly in an abstracted or thematic way and without regard to specific events — exposes the danger of renewing national identities without an honest reckoning of the past. Shortly after concluding South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Desmond Tutu offered the understanding he had operated with in that country’s search for closure and renewal: “We are connected in the things in which we glory, while connected in the things of which we are ashamed and we can’t pretend there is not that connection.” (Tutu 1999).

Only a minority of Australians are prepared to countenance the condemnation of aspects of history that is implicit in a national apology (Newspoll & CAR 2000, 4.4). The reasons for refusal are these: first, that individuals cannot be responsible for acts they have not committed and that individuals cannot be held responsible for the consequences of previous generations’ actions; or secondly, that those actions of dispersal and forced removal were thought to be in the best interests of indigenous people at the time they were committed, so judgment by today’s standards is inappropriate; or finally, that the acts committed actually were in the best interests of indigenous people, as a mechanism for their ‘uplift’ and civilisation.

The first view has a liberal flavour: what is the point of an apology from someone who has not committed wrong, by commissioning acts of dispossession or violence? This severely limits the potential of apology. A sense of shame, for example, about the facts of dispossession and its consequences cannot then be compatible with this strong liberal position. It is perhaps no surprise that those who take this position are often thought heartless.

The second response strives against ‘anachronism’, refusing to see the Australian story as of a piece: a radical disconnection exists between ‘then’ and ‘now’, between prior social values and those we now cherish. An historical model is posited whereby successive ages of enlightenment become dominant, before being cast aside in some instant of deeper understanding. It is not at all a satisfactory historiography; the work of many recent historians challenges it. For example, Russel McGregor’s work Imagined Destinies shows the subtle interleaving of theorisations like the ‘doomed
race' with a growing fear of miscegenation and 'half-castes' (McGregor 1997). Former HREOC Social Justice Commissioner Mick Dodson's powerful speech at Corroboree 2000 demolished this view: he used the narrative of his own life, profoundly affected by policies of assimilation, against that of a non-Indigenous contemporary to expose both how recent now 'unacceptable' practices were to our own time, and how their consequences are still lived.

Where or who is this generation of Australians Mr Howard blames for the removals and the assimilation policies? Are my sisters part of this generation. Are not John (Howard) and John (Herron, Aboriginal Affairs Minister) part of this generation? Indeed, am I not part of this generation? (Dodson 2000)

While only a minority of Australians openly proclaim the third view, the wisdom of the policy or forced-removals (Brunton 1998; McGuinness 1999; Howson 2000), the vigour with which this view has been put in recent years has clearly affected the shape of the debate. Arguing recently that the state should never be reticent about removing children from negligent or abusive families, the Daily Telegraph suggested that, "(t)he tragic irony is that the consequences of this debate and the impact of the flawed 'Bringing Them Home' report by Ronald Wilson has now created an environment in which needless deaths will occur, not because of government policy, but because of a reluctance to apply it." (The Daily Telegraph 2001)

The eventual government response to these revelations showed no discomfort with such positions. They cavilled over issues such as whether one in ten children removed constituted a 'generation', and attacked HREOC's research methodology (Read 2000; Jopson 2000). Simultaneously, the government adopted another of these strands of denial in its defence during a 'test case', brought by two members of the 'stolen generations', Lorna Cubillo and Peter Gunner, which began in the Federal Court in the Northern Territory in 1999. During the trial, the Commonwealth's defence team sought to have the case dismissed on the grounds of inadequate evidence and that witnesses were deceased, and then defended itself on the grounds of the enlightenment of previous policies. As Robert Manne has noted:

I do not know how far the Howard Government can legitimately separate itself from the historical arguments mounted in Darwin on its instructions and on its behalf. But if (lead counsel for the government) Meagher's attempt to portray child removal as noble and to rehabilitate the philosophy of assimilation has the support of his client, the Commonwealth Government, then the cause of reconciliation is dead (Manne 1999).
It seems reasonable to ask what a project for ‘sharing history’ was likely to achieve — say a modern Australian history syllabus for secondary schools that incorporated material on the stolen generations — while in the wider world the government was actively avoiding any implication of contemporary responsibility. Was this likely to become a challenging alternative to learning the numbers of livestock transported with the First Fleet? In what sense might this stark contradiction help to change “the way the story of Australia is told and understood”, refashioning a shared national identity (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation).

Reconciliation was profoundly influenced by the range of attitudes adopted in the late 1990s to an official national apology. The CAR’s approach was to emphasise the education of Australians about the events of the past in such a way that it would alter their attitudes to contemporary Indigenous disadvantage, stimulating an inter-generational identification with the renewal of national identity as inducement. The politics of apology in Australia from 1997 put this approach into doubt. Just as had occurred with native title, an apology made by the national government became for some the threshold for participation. Former Chair of ATSIC Lowitja O’Donoghue suggested that “there can be no reconciliation while (Howard) refuses to apologise on behalf of the nation for the removal of children.” (McGregor 1998). A tactic adopted was to suggest that whoever became the next PM would give that apology (Steketee 2000; McCallum 2000).

More than three years after the release of the HREOC report, The Weekend Australian was still insisting that the apology was “the one last obstacle” on the road to reconciliation (The Weekend Australian 2000). However, Howard openly contradicted this definition of reconciliation, relying on a majority of measured support (AAP News Service 2000). Defined in this way, the apology will continue to be the source of antagonism and erosion of reconciliation’s potential to unify the Australian community.

**Inter-personal reconciliation**

Yet an undoubted success of reconciliation has been its ability to spawn a ‘movement’. But a movement towards what?

An unambiguous project of the CAR was to support, indeed to initiate, this movement. Significant portions of the CAR’s modest funding went into the preparation of materials for local groups and their co-ordination. Yet it is far from clear that local reconciliation groups or ‘study circles’ produced coherent outcomes that related clearly to Indigenous concerns. Two examples will demonstrate this.
The ‘See-Saw’ project was conducted in Ceduna, South Australia over several years from 1994. While the project was not funded by the CAR, it was explicitly understood as a possible “community model for cross-cultural reconciliation” (Murphy 1998). It began as an attempt at “recognising, as well as dissolving, cultural, social and economic hierarchies” (Murphy, 7). Two non-Indigenous women working as community artists oversaw the project, which worked with the following conscious commitments:

...descendants of first settlers and descendants of original, indigenous groups, are likely to have: common as well as distinct historical and cultural memories; interacted economically and spiritually with the same land and seas (but in culturally specific ways); chosen to intermarry or remain culturally separate; enacted the roles of the powerful and the powerless (Murphy, 56).

Initially, the project was to be structured around the theme of ‘land loss’, given that both Indigenous people (through dispersal and dispossession) and non-Indigenous (via drought and economic downturn) had experienced the phenomenon. This was thought to be a good basis for cross-cultural dialogue and could provide a “useful and positive methodology”. So, the search for a common ground promoted an equation between different types of hardship: that brought about by colonial practices and institutions, with those attendant on the vicissitudes of climate and global commodity prices. Whatever one might think about the merits of such an equation, the project was not able to go ahead on that basis. As Catherine Murphy, one of the Project Initiator/Coordinators, explained:

...complexities surrounding the ‘land loss’ theme began to emerge, which compelled us to rethink our theme. We became convinced that the effectiveness of our project relied on balance, which could more easily be achieved if our original intention of exploring the ‘land loss’ theme was abandoned. It appeared to have the disturbing effect of provoking barriers rather than effacing them. So we took the pragmatic step of shifting our theme from ‘land loss’ to the more generalised theme of ‘reconciliation’. This decision enabled us to continue working constructively as it demonstrated our flexibility and willingness to work with, rather than against, local intentions (Murphy, 58).

Oddly, given the prevailing self-consciousness of the written documentation, Murphy is less than clear on the emerging ‘complexities’ that necessitated a more pragmatic approach. Yet in the search for effectiveness (indeed the very viability of the project is more than hinted at), a shift away from the stable ground of ‘land loss’ takes place,
moving to the 'more generalised' notion of reconciliation. Their decision seems a token of the pattern of reconciliation: two settler women, seeing the potential and necessity for an intercultural exchange, take on the advocacy and development of an historically challenging project; but 'land loss' is not the basis for community openness and interest; it was impractical and would mean working against 'local intentions'. Reconciliation here resiled from challenge and confrontation, even challenges to the past in the implied sense of land that had been lost.

While the participants felt that the project was clearly in danger without a more pragmatic direction, it is also clear that their choices seem more directed to the political realities of the community than by a need to tell the truth about that community, or other artistic considerations.

In the very pith of the project, then, was more of a willingness to recognise (and reinforce) existing hierarchies than to 'dissolve' them. It was after this experience that the two Project Initiator/Coordinators came up with the figure of the 'see-saw', as a way of demonstrating the new theme of reconciliation: sensitivity and balance (Murphy, 60).

Stranger still was the decision to continue the project even though local Indigenous people were withdrawing their support for the reconciliation process at large. This took place in 1996 when, shortly after the election of the Howard government, major funding cuts were announced to ATSIC. Murphy's response is quite revealing:

... we resolved to continue with our original intentions, despite the feelings of gloom and despair which pervaded the town. Our Aboriginal friends were ultimately pleased about our decision to persevere. From our perspective, it was important to stand together with them, even if our chosen courses of action (at that point) were different (Murphy, 59).

This prompts the observation that 'reconciliation' as a community-based project appears to be quite able to withstand the complete absence of Indigenous participation and support: conceptually, it continues to work when the substantive interests of Indigenous people, as they themselves see them, are being tampered with and damaged.

Of course, See-Saw had no explicit political goals; its real ambition, seen both in the thematic 'flexibility' of the project and in the events referred to above, was consciousness-raising and the formation of new personal and local relationships:
I can see by the way you demonstrated respect and the way you’ve treated me that you’re not someone who needs to apologise to me because we’re on level pegging (Murphy, 33).

That comment, from one of the Indigenous artists involved to her non-Indigenous collaborator, was highlighted as an example of interpersonal reconciliation. That is, the non-racism of settlers as validated by Indigenous people. This hope for reconciliation was also felt by the former Democrat Senator, now social activist, Sid Spindler, for whom the process must lead to a state when Indigenous people ‘will feel comfortable in our house’ (Spindler 2000a). Personalisation of this kind may have the effect of taking us away from a context of legal and political obligation. It may also put individual Indigenous people into the invidious position of being asked to absolve settler society or individuals. The receipt of forgiveness or validation is thought to be a basis for supporting deeper social change, but the connections always remain unclear.

From 1997, the CAR began to produce material more explicitly tailored to reconciliation groups. Drawing on the success of learning circles in Scandinavia and the USA, the CAR envisaged “small self-managing discussion groups”, and produced a series of straightforward information sheets in 1998, dealing with hot topics like the Stolen Generations and native title, but also advising how to set up such groups.

One such group was that followed over its course of eight weeks by Rachel Landers, in her insightful film Whiteys like us (Landers/SBS Independent 1999). The documentary followed the experience of the 11th Study Circle in 1998, at Manly Community College on Sydney’s northern beaches. There were 15 participants at the outset, with a distinct emphasis on people with tertiary qualifications, including three schoolteachers and a research scientist, as well as an ex-missionary and a retired Anglican minister. Another bias was that nine members were female, six male, with two men dropping out after the first week.

As one member, Bere, pointed out, they all had “strong and distinct personal motives” for being there: Hugh suggested that “despite being here 200 years, we don’t feel comfortable here”; Judith thought that “if you wanted a job in this country, it’s better to be a disabled lesbian with a dark skin colour”; Darren saw his participation as akin to that of a “shepherd”. The debate throughout, which at times was little more than bickering, consolidated the issues as a non-Indigenous contest between enlightenment and defensiveness.
On the issue of what actually happened in the past, Leslie, an elderly ex-missionary, maintained that she "never saw anything but good done for Aborigines ... (we would tell them to) brush the flies out of the babies' eyes." Her comments caused others visible discomfort, with one, Carolyn, saying afterward that she "felt quite sick." The tone of the debate cooled down, but the issue was far from resolved. Rather than coming to some new understanding, Leslie maintained that "everybody was anti-England." Bere thought that if it continued like that it would become destructive.

An Aboriginal man working as a heritage officer visited the third session. Most members were silent. Darren took up a hostile line of questioning, probing at the notion of Aboriginality. Another member, an epileptic with a significant speech impediment, reflected on what he had heard about the lack of education for Indigenous people, relating it to discrimination he had experienced as a child in the 1960s, when it was thought 'not worth it' to educate people like him.

More than halfway through the course, an extended debate took place on 'who was a real Aborigine?' Darren asked, "Is an Aborigine anyone who is black, any part black, is that an Aborigine? Or is it someone who is a native Indigenous Australian living and practising their culture and customs?" Bere provided the answer in administrative use in Australia: identification of the person as Indigenous; evidence of descent; recognition by an Indigenous community. Without considering the implications of the definition, Darren railed against discrimination in the provision of subsidised home loans and welfare, arguing, "this question for Australians is not just about Aborigines, it is about immigrants, it is about all the welfare groups — why do they get more than me?"

What followed illustrates one potential of this type of forum, and more generally, the conflation between individual and national concerns. Darren immediately lamented the fact that "we (are) deliberately divided" and proceeded to tell the group of his own sexually-abusive childhood, finishing through a veil of tears, "we are all born the same!"

Even more troubling was the isolation that the group members were all feeling in relation to their friends, family and colleagues, with one woman leaving the group because she could not handle the ridicule at work. Sandy also lamented this development, "No one talks to me about it ... there's this sort of 'here she goes again'." David Watts, the Aboriginal heritage officer, made some telling remarks in conclusion: "If these groups keep going a lot of good will come out of it ... but in the long run, black justice, land rights, those issues won't be solved."
Such personal passions create a striking contrast with the view of reconciliation held by Indigenous people surveyed for the CAR in 2000. The body of the report does not support one of the conclusions the report makes in its executive summary—that the importance of unification was widely appreciated by Indigenous communities. Only in a few communities did respondents feel that an apology, for example, was a step toward becoming a single people (Saulwick and Associates 2000, 95).

Yet, genuine consistency exists on the question of social deprivation, a concern about the process of reconciliation itself and the validity of an Indigenous leadership to be negotiating on the behalf of communities. For one group reconciliation was not an important issue. They asked whether Europeans were even ready for it (Saulwick, 12-15). Another group felt that their social problems overwhelmed any thoughts of reconciliation (18-19). Some felt left out of the debate. Others were cynical and thought reconciliation "remote" (25). One group expressed real anger and frustration at social conditions — they felt distrustful of reconciliation — to support it you had to have a "stake in Australian society" (28).

Nationalism framed in strictly egalitarian terms is capable of generating great support: "On some matters the community appears to be in general agreement ... a desire for equality and unity ... (recognition) that Aboriginal people were treated badly ... efforts to help Aboriginal people have been less than successful ... a desire to look to the future and move forward ... and that reconciliation between Aboriginal people and the wider community is important" (Newspoll and CAR 2000, Section 3). Hugh Mackay wrote of a tolerance "bounded by the egalitarian ideal that we are, or should be, one people — one nation" (Newspoll, Saulwick and Muller, and Hugh Mackay 2000, 37). The Newspoll researchers noted the fact that the most supported aspects of the document are those that were "at odds with 'special treatment'." (Newspoll and CAR 2000, Section 3). Again comparison with the responses by Indigenous people reveals a great disparity in the perceived importance that national unity has. Only one Indigenous focus group, the elders of Elcho Island, explicitly endorsed the idea, but to them unity was 'not conformity'.

At an individual level, reconciliation is about how one feels in order to belong in Australia in a tolerant, just and inclusive way; a strong equation is being made between individual feelings and national issues. This may be unavoidable in an era of life coaches and personalised deities, but it prompts the question: can the injustice of a system of institutions (colonisation) be revisited and undone through the myriad interactions of millions of Australians all of whom seek that their personal enlightenment will become a national orientation?
Adaptive leadership and reconciliation

Here I return to the three proposals for an alternative style of political leadership that Leigh brings from his reading of Ronald Heifetz’s work.

The separation of technical from adaptive forms of work

The suggestion here is that reconciliation implicates multiple strategies in a confusing whole. Therefore, it is reasonable to separate practical from ‘symbolic’ matters.

The matter of the living standards of Indigenous people in Australia reveals the perversion of reconciliation. Many Indigenous leaders have asked why the provision of basic entitlements of Australian citizenship should be contingent on some collective acquiescence on the part of their people.

Howard showed tremendous skill in transforming the latent confusion over what reconciliation actually was into something that was easily constrained: practical reconciliation. Like economic rationalism (who wants to be irrational?) practical reconciliation became a fait accompli. In the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody report, a process of reconciliation had been recommended as a way to create trust amongst Indigenous communities for the institutions of the criminal justice system, particularly police in rural areas. Practical reconciliation subverts this profoundly, allowing that improvement in the social circumstances of Indigenous people is in and of itself a ‘reconciliation’.

This repackages the social justice long denied Indigenous people as a type of charity. Non-Indigenous people set about delivering basic human entitlements and are rewarded with a de facto national settlement. There is in this construction little space for unfinished business or the recognition of rights, to political autonomy or to substantive legal and negotiated agreements.

Leigh presents practical reconciliation as a technical matter, while emotional issues are the deeper challenge to be approached with ‘adaptive’ techniques and forms of engagement. However, to what extent is ‘practical’ reconciliation simply a ‘technical’ problem?

The major debate now underway, as Leigh points out, bears almost no relation to the rights agenda of the 1970s and 1980s; now the burning issues are those of economic underdevelopment, chronic disease, terrible social services, addiction and domestic
violence. In fact, insofar as the nominal figurehead of this push is Noel Pearson, it could be said that this is the antithesis of the ‘rights agenda’. Certainly Pearson has laid the blame for current Indigenous marginalisation at the feet of a zealous leftism of an earlier time (Pearson 2001).

However, Pearson’s stridency on the matter, and the forceful support of the federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Queensland Premier, amongst others, does not mean that the resolution of these problems is simply a technical matter. The growing frequency of suggestions that Indigenous people may have to give up their rights, to control their own welfare payments for example, or to drink, suggests that the case for ‘practical’ reconciliation is far from being a question of either resources or technical proficiency.

**Moving non-Indigenous Australians into a zone of discomfort**

Leigh also suggests that part of reconciliation is that a “state of disequilibrium” must be created: “without some degree of social stress, adaptive work will be absent”. Yet elsewhere, he argues for “mobilizing people to deal with difficult problems on their own terms”. Is this compatible with being moved into a zone of discomfort?

My view is that the promise of reconciliation was the restoration of equilibrium, not its opposite. As I suggested above, the concept of ‘uncertainty’ had a powerful repellent force in discussions about social change. It was visible in attitudes over land as well as in feelings toward history and an apology. A majority of Australians does not see a ‘state of disequilibrium’ as a desirable outcome on either of these issues, nor arguably on the issues I have not dealt with here, the questions of living standards and a Treaty. In fact, reconciliation promised the opposite: ‘a united Australia which respects this land of ours’.

It is interesting that Leigh cites Paul Keating as being someone who attempted to encourage ‘disequilibrium’. Undoubtedly this is correct. Yet Keating is still regarded by many Australians as someone who tried to impose big, ‘discomforting’ visions upon them and Leigh cites much evidence to support this argument.

Leigh’s ‘very real question’ then, as to the potential for a national leader to be discomforting to Australian complacencies without losing office, demonstrates that he has noticed the problem but has not pursued it to its conclusion: the communitarian paradox at the heart of the reconciliation project, in which the terms of reconciliation become only what those who wish to participate can bear.

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Yet those who choose to deny the value of the process for substantive issues like land or treaties such as John Howard, retain a full veto over it because in matters of Australia's reconciliation, all Australians' feelings are equal.

It is in this passage that we see Leigh's use of the phrase 'true reconciliation' (142). Implicit here is a commitment to a reconciliation that is yet to take shape in the public mind but a shape that must be realised if there is to be integrity in the process. This seems at odds with the project of 'motivating others to reach their own solutions', the orienting thesis of adaptive leadership sourced in Heifetz's work. Moreover, it continues to misconstrue the dynamics of Australian reconciliation.

The importance of personal relationships

Finally, Leigh proposes that 'true reconciliation' involves 'thousands of communities across Australia' reaching into each other's lives, to learn respect for difference. Two questions then arise: how realistic is this project? And, should the recognition and protection of Indigenous rights (my version of true 'reconciliation', or at least an absolute pre-requisite of it) be in any way dependent upon it?

The answer to the first question is that this is somewhat idealistic. In a society where perhaps 3% of the population is Indigenous, how many of the rest actually know, work or live with people we identify as Indigenous? In rural Australia there may be many who can answer this positively. However, this is not where most Australians (including Indigenous people) actually live. Nor is it how most Australians live.

One underlying value of reconciliation was that Australians were in need of some kind of national identity repair. The success of Howard is that he was able to convince many (and able to rely on others as 'shock troops') that the source of damage to our identity was elites (domestic and foreign) who would denigrate existing national traditions and stories. The sad irony is that he did this using the concept of reconciliation itself.

The view that Australian individuals, families or communities are all reaching out for the meaningful cultural experience made possible by intercultural reconciliation is easily contested. Over 15 years of research into Australian social attitudes, Hugh Mackay has raised the possibility that for many, Aboriginal people are a way of demonstrating where the bottom of the social scale actually is (Newspoll, Saulwick and Muller, and Hugh Mackay). Moreover, as I suggested in the studies of See-Saw and Whiteys like us, such an interest in intercultural experience may not produce coherent results in any case.
The second question is more straightforward. Indigenous people deserve to have their traditions and realities recognised and protected. That this is desirable should not be a function of other people realising a ‘deeper’ or more ‘truthful’ sense of national identity or belonging. The fact that in reconciliation some people seem more willing and able to make such realisations only provides space for those opposed to recognition of indigenous people to exploit.

Conclusion: From handshake to handprints

It is not clear how ‘adaptive leadership’ might really work in the context of reconciliation. It presumes that the fundamental mechanism of reconciliation works to produce social coherence, when in fact it offered a new space for disputation over the justice of Australia’s history and its future. There is no deeper harmony or vision of Australia that has been offered through reconciliation that has not also been either contested or simply ignored.

The examples of adaptive leadership that Leigh sources in Heifetz, such as an industrial dispute in Washington state and the policing of the Selma protests, do not offer any inter-cultural support. Both examples work within the agreed cultural and institutional framework of the contemporary United States.

Moreover, how coherent is the ‘problematic reality’: does everyone agree on the problem? As Leigh points out (albeit in a footnote) this theory “presumes it will be self-evident when a problematic reality exists”. In the case of reconciliation this is far from being the case, as the various schools of thought construct very different ‘problems’ at the core.

Official reconciliation began with a handshake between two settler Australian men, and reached its climactic moment in Sydney in May 2000, when political leaders from both indigenous and settler communities pressed their ochre-dipped hands against a blown-up version of the Document Towards Reconciliation. It is not yet evident, however, what kind of answer to the question of national desires is likely to be widely endorsed, let alone satisfy Indigenous people.

The apotheosis of Australian community at the very centre of reconciliation leaves no possibility that some views about who we are as a people, how we got here and where we are going, are quite simply wrong. In my view, this severely limits the advocacy of any particular vision, principle or ideal. In the circumstances, Howard’s rhetoric actually seems a lot like ‘adaptive leadership’ already:
The task of national leadership in these circumstances is not to impose a process and outcome on the community. The challenge is to communicate clearly the objectives of the reconciliation process, why reconciliation is in the national interest and the respective roles of government, indigenous Australians and the wider community in the process ... success in this process will ultimately be measured ... by the extent to which Australians develop a genuine personal commitment to reconciliation (Howard 2000).

References


Newspoll and the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (2000) *Quantitative research into issues relating to a Document Towards Reconciliation*.


Spindler, S. (2000a) ‘Sorry, Sir Gus, we’re not worthy’, *The Age* (February 18, 2000).

— (2000b) Interview with author (May 5).


Endnotes

1 A full election of both houses held simultaneously. A normal election only elects half of the Senate each time, with Senators being elected for six years, or two House terms. The effect of a double dissolution is to halve the quota of votes needed to be elected, thereby increasing the chances for minor parties. In 1998 that raised a real possibility of One Nation holding the balance of power.

2 Nationally, One Nation received 936,621 first preferences or 8.43% of those enrolled; 14.35% of electors in Queensland.

3 Much was made of Hanson’s inarticulacy and ignorance of political complexity. See Scalmer; Rundle 2001, 26. Undoubtedly this was part of her appeal.

4 The instrument of the Federal Court set up under the NTA to determine the validity of native title claims.

5 Gary Foley, oral contribution to a CAR community consultation meeting held at Dandenong Town Hall, November 1999.

6 However, the explosion in the reconciliation movement appears to have been largely catalysed by the politics of the NTA amendments and the question of an apology in 1997 and 1998.

7 On the extent to which Australian federal politicians shirked explicit outcomes, the Second Reading debate of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation

“Nationally we can conclude with confidence that between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970. In certain regions and in certain periods the figure was undoubtedly much greater than one in ten.” Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, Chapter 2, National Overview.

The terms of reference for which were to “trace the past laws, practices and policies which resulted in the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families by compulsion, duress or undue influence, and the effects of those laws, practices and policies”.

While no comprehensive study has yet been done on the Sorry Books, amongst a wide range of responses, from personal grief and statements of raised consciousness, was a thread of genuine anger. This was the case in three Sorry Books viewed by the author in Melbourne in late 1997.

The figure is not known exactly, as some ‘official’ books were never returned, and other books were put together by groups other than ANTaR. Many estimates put the number of signatories at one million, though anecdotal evidence suggests many people signed several books.

An official ‘statement of regret’ was subsequently passed in the House of Representatives in mid-1999, though after two years many consider the damage to have been done.

The foreword to Murphy’s book was written by CAR member Jackie Huggins.

While Spindler saw the importance of the personal, he has questioned the ‘good faith’ of reconciliation, given the ongoing discrimination against Indigenous people. See Spindler 2000a.

The report on the CAR’s second term refers to “96 new reconciliation groups”; the figure in 2000 was estimated at 396.

A theme picked up in the Australian media: “Well, to me, I reckon, it was new and we don’t know nothing about it, the first time we heard it.” Jerry Jones, a traditional owner interviewed on The 7:30 Report, ‘The rocky path
to Aboriginal reconciliation', ABC TV (November 29, 1999). One could reflect sadly on the rationale for indigenous social research at the tail end of the reconciliation process: if the operative assumption of the previous chapter was that positive change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was thought to be dependent on the mainstream community's will for change, it is bizarre that the result after nine years is to quiz Indigenous communities on whether they now supported a process about which they had barely been consulted. The widespread indifference the rapporteurs uncovered is tragic evidence of the conceptual failure of the policy.

The reluctance with which he participated in official reconciliation events was palpable. See Marr 2000.

The two men were Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the Keating government, Robert Tickner, and his Opposition counterpart, Michael Wooldridge, who shook over the despatch box at the conclusion of the debate on the CAR legislation. It is alleged to be the only time it has happened in the Australian parliament.

The hand-printed document was recently given to the new National Museum of Australia as part of the CAR’s bequest of its major materials. Surely the irony of reconciliation as a museum exhibit will not be lost on those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who felt that reconciliation was misleading from the start.
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