

THE IMPORTANCE OF FORMAL RECONCILIATION

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In the second half of 1999, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation will embark on one of the most comprehensive rounds of public consultation ever undertaken in this country. On the table is the Council's carefully considered Draft Document for Reconciliation, consisting of a Declaration for Reconciliation, as well as a set of National Strategies to Advance Reconciliation which provide guidance for future action in accordance with the principles and injunctions contained in the Declaration. The consultations will seek to engage all sectors of Australian society in the task of producing a final Document capable of wholehearted endorsement by the people and the governments of the nation. The Council believes that this process must be completed in time for the Document to become a powerful symbol of Australia's commitment to reconciliation as we enter the second century of the Federation. It should be a major highlight of the centenary of Federation celebrations, because of its ability to unite and uplift the nation and to confirm Australia's mature status as a civilised democracy.

I. THE DOCUMENT IN CONTEXT

An agreed document of reconciliation would not represent the end of Australia's search for genuine reconciliation between its Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Too many things remain to be done before we can say we have achieved true and lasting reconciliation. The Council believes debate should continue about other issues not directly dealt with in the Document, such as increased Indigenous representation in Australian parliaments, self-determination, and recognition and respect for Indigenous peoples in a preamble to the Australian Constitution. But, as a crucial step on the journey towards reconciliation, the Document of Reconciliation will become a beacon, at once proclaiming a national commitment and lighting the path ahead for all Australians and their governments. This document will represent a conclusion

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only in the sense that it will end the decade-long formal process of reconciliation that Parliament asked the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to supervise. In the Preamble to the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991* (Cth) ("the Act"), Parliament noted that there had never been a formal process of reconciliation in Australia despite the dispossession and dispersal of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from their traditional lands after many thousands of years of occupancy. Parliament unanimously agreed that it was 'most desirable' that such reconciliation be achieved by the centenary of Federation, and created the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to promote the process. Section 6(1) of the Act listed the functions of the Council, including two sub-clauses most relevant to this discussion. They were:

(g) to consult Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and the wider Australian Community on whether reconciliation would be advanced by a formal document or formal documents of reconciliation; and

(h) after that consultation, to report to the Minister on the views of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and of the wider Australian community as to whether such a document or documents would benefit the Australian community as a whole, and if the Council considers that there would be such a benefit, to make recommendations to the Minister on the nature and content of, and manner of giving effect to, such a document or documents.

Since the Act was passed, the Council has met its mandate across a very broad front. It has promoted the goals of reconciliation at all levels of government, in the other institutions of society, and in local communities all over the country. Much progress has been made towards genuine reconciliation. The Council believes that today there is a real movement towards reconciliation among ordinary Australian people. It believes that a similar momentum has either emerged, or is emerging, at the institutional level (among state and local governments, education systems, churches, union and employer bodies and key community organisations) and at the individual enterprise level in the private sector. These are very positive developments, and the national endorsement of a Declaration for Reconciliation would act as a major 'slingshot', propelling those developments into the twenty-first century with renewed force.

Technically, Council has probably already met the document consultation requirements of s 6(1). It has discussed all aspects of the document issue extensively with ATSIC, with other Indigenous organisations, with wider community bodies and, of course, with the Australian people in preparation for the Australian Reconciliation Convention in 1997. At that convention, participants urged the Council to produce a national document or documents in time for the centenary of Federation. At around the same time, the Council received the results of a national opinion survey which found, inter alia, that more than three-quarters of Australian people approved the idea of a national document. The Council, obviously, has concluded that a national document would indeed advance reconciliation. It is now extending its consultative function to ensure that the maximum number of people have an opportunity to contribute to the final form and content of the document.

II. THE DECLARATION FOR RECONCILIATION

Speaking with one voice, we the people of Australia, of many origins as we are, make a commitment to go on together recognising the gift of one another's presence.

We value the unique status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original owners and custodians of traditional lands and waters.

We respect and recognise continuing customary laws, beliefs and traditions.

And through the land and its first peoples, we may taste this spirituality and rejoice in its grandeur.

We acknowledge this land was colonised without the consent of the original inhabitants.

Our nation must have the courage to own the truth, to heal the wounds of its past so that we can move on together at peace with ourselves.

And so we take this step: as one part of the nation expresses its sorrow and profoundly regrets the injustices of the past, so the other part accepts the apology and forgives.

Our new journey then begins. We must learn our shared history, walk together and grow together to enrich our understanding.

We desire a future where all Australians enjoy equal rights and share opportunities and responsibilities according to their aspirations.

And so, we pledge ourselves to stop injustice, address disadvantage and respect the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to determine their own destinies.

Therefore, we stand proud as a united Australia that respects this land of ours, values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, and provides justice and equity for all.

The Council's draft Declaration for Reconciliation covers, in just 11 short paragraphs, the issues that the Council believes are essential to a robust and meaningful statement of this nation's position. It was felt that the people should be given an opportunity to comment on the proposals before the Council makes its formal recommendations to government. There are some points in the National Declaration that are likely to stimulate some lively debate in the public arena; and the Council will welcome such debate as long as it remains constructive and appreciates the historic significance of what is proposed. The Council also believes that paragraphs 9 and 10 of the Declaration for Reconciliation are very important statements of commitment to the restoration of basic rights to Australia's Indigenous peoples. The Council hopes and expects that in any debate on the draft, it will be a given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do not enjoy the full measure of the basic rights of citizenship, let alone their rights as the original custodians of the country. Paragraphs 9 and 10 are also the principal foundation of the second part of the Declaration for Reconciliation, the National Strategies.

III. THE NATIONAL STRATEGIES TO ADVANCE RECONCILIATION

The draft National Strategies provide guidelines for future action in four key areas. As the introduction to the Strategies states, the developed Strategies will "map out the steps we must take as we work together towards a reconciled nation". "By supporting these strategies," the document continues, "governments, businesses, organisations and individuals from both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider community can make practical commitments to reconciliation". Partnerships between all sectors of our community are the best way to ensure that the Declaration for Reconciliation becomes a reality in people's lives. Space does not permit a full discussion of the Strategies here, but briefly they are:

1. A National Strategy for Economic Independence, to facilitate greater economic independence and self-reliance in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
2. A National Strategy to Address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Disadvantage, which builds on the first strategy and seeks to achieve better outcomes, from both government and non-government services, in the fields of health, education, employment, housing, law and justice.
3. A National Strategy to Promote Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rights, which will focus on the rights of Indigenous peoples both as citizens such as participation in decision-making, equality of social and economic conditions etc and as the original custodians of Australia with a continuing cultural heritage, including a unique relationship with the land and waters of Australia.
4. A National Strategy to Sustain the Reconciliation Process, which will seek to maintain the strength of the existing people's movement for reconciliation, encourage institutions and groups to establish appropriate protocols and symbols of reconciliation, and seek recognition of the Declaration for Reconciliation in the Constitutions of the Commonwealth, States and Territories.

IV. THE NEXT STEPS

The Council has established a rigorous mechanism to ensure that all feedback from the public consultations on the draft document is recorded and analysed in order to inform the Council's work on a final draft. The Council will launch its final proposals about a document at a major public event to be held in Sydney in May 2000, which is just four months before the Olympic Games and some seven months before the actual centenary of Federation on 1 January 2001, which is also the date on which the Council itself ceases to exist. In the weeks and

months after the event, the Council will continue to seek the support and commitment of all Australians and their representative bodies to the principles and strategies set out in its final document proposals. The Council may establish registers which will enable individuals, groups and organisations to formally record their support and commitment.