

**RESEARCH INTO ISSUES
RELATED TO A DOCUMENT
OF RECONCILIATION**

A REPORT PREPARED FOR THE

**COUNCIL FOR ABORIGINAL
RECONCILIATION**

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INTRODUCTION

This study was conducted for the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation by Irving Saulwick and Associates in association with Denis Muller and Associates.

It is based on a series of fourteen focus group discussions conducted throughout the country from December 7, 1999 to January 13, 2000 and on 23 depth interviews with leading citizens in 'high contact' areas during the same time. A description of the structure and location of each group and a list of the people interviewed is contained in Appendix 1.

Appendix 2 includes the Discussion Outlines used in the focus groups and the depth interviews.

Our objective, as defined in the Research Brief, was '.... to provide information about the attitudes of the whole Australian community towards:

1. whether a document of reconciliation would assist in the process of reconciliation;
2. the form and content of such a document;
3. the general form and content of the Council's *Draft Document for Reconciliation* in particular; and
4. specific content and formulation in the Council's Draft.'

'The research would also:

5. provide an update on Sweeney research in 1996 in regard to attitudes to the specific issues of reconciliation documents and agreements;
6. provide a benchmark against which any further research could determine changes in community attitudes following the release of Council's final proposals for a document, and any subsequent public discussion of those proposals, and
7. assist the Council in preparing its media and communications strategy for Corroboree 2000 and on the document issue generally.'

This report on the qualitative research represents a first major stage in meeting these objectives.

The work described in this report was undertaken jointly by Irving Saulwick and Denis Muller. These two consultants also wrote this report.

We would like to express our appreciation to our individual respondents who spoke with us, sometimes at some personal inconvenience, about their experiences and their attitudes with an openness and a willingness which was both refreshing and greatly appreciated.

The citizens whom we engaged in our focus groups, who were recruited without any knowledge of what we wanted to talk with them about, were in the main pleasant, tolerant of us, and certainly revealing, even if at times they were somewhat frustrated by the complexities of our subject. Almost without exception they went away more thoughtful, if not wiser, as a result of their participation.

Overview

There is a widespread feeling throughout Australia that Aborigines have been badly treated in the past.

There is little recognition of the effect this may have had on present-day Aboriginal citizens.

There is a willingness to treat Aboriginal Australians like any other Australians provided they are prepared to accept 'our' values and play by 'our' rules.

There is impatience with, and lack of understanding of, Aborigines who will not conform to general community norms, and in particular with those in rural areas who live on welfare on the fringe of small towns. Those living in cities are thought not to be representative of all Aborigines and, indeed, not to be 'real' Aborigines, particularly if they have some white forebears. Indeed many of these people are accused of claiming Aboriginality in order to gain the welfare benefits which flow from this status. They are seen as more demanding, and somehow less 'genuine' than Aborigines living in remote areas.

There is also a widespread view that many Aborigines now look to welfare and other support systems and are not prepared to help themselves. The many who do work and who do not seek welfare are not seen. While most people support the concept of a safety net, they see Aborigines as exploiting the welfare system which they are paying for.

Aboriginal interest in land rights is not understood by most Australians. Many believe that it has a pecuniary base. Many also believe that to accede to it would be to accept double standards – one rule for Aborigines and one for others. Non-Aboriginal Australians do not want this. They have accepted the concept of multiculturalism – one nation, one people.

Most also have become convinced that to offer an apology for past treatment could lead to further claims for compensation. They do not want this either.

Most see Reconciliation as an Aboriginal issue, not as an issue for all Australians. It is similar to the way multiculturalism was seen in the past – as an issue for 'new' Australians, as distinct from how it is seen now – as describing Australian society as a whole. One is to move the concept of Reconciliation from a narrow one to a broad one.

Many who have thought about it, even minimally, tend to confuse Reconciliation with issues such as Mabo, land rights, and compensation. This makes them nervous.

Perhaps understandably, because of limited resources for information dissemination and promotion, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation is not widely known among ordinary citizens.

Reactions to the Draft Document were varied. A few liked it in its entirety. Most did not. Many saw it as divisive, backward-looking, based only on the Aboriginal perspective, requiring a series of concessions from non-Aboriginal Australians without any corresponding "give" by Aboriginal people, and a high-risk document which would probably be used as the basis for claims for land and monetary compensation.

It was also seen as coming from an elite group of people who probably had little idea of how ordinary people lived and thought.

When asked how any document should be handled, people responded by saying that it needed to be 'owned' by the people, but at the same time they did not want to see a document rejected and the cause of Reconciliation damaged.

To promote Reconciliation it may be necessary:

To show, through wide publicity of one form and another, examples of reconciliation in practice - ordinary Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people living and working together.

To consider a shorter and more simple version of a Document which might be seen by the community as more even-handed.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

1. There is little overt prejudice directed towards Aborigines or to other minority groups in Australia on the basis of race alone. Although there is often a lack of understanding of the lives, beliefs and attitudes of minority groups within the Australian community, and at times a feeling that separateness is undesirable, there is tolerance of the IDEA of difference. This tolerance is bounded by the egalitarian ideal that we are, or should be, one people – one nation. It is also bounded by the inability of many citizens to imagine that other people might have fundamentally different ways of looking at life than the way they do, or that other people may want fundamentally different things from life than those offered by the dominant culture. The dominant culture defines the norm, and most people accept it without too much questioning.
2. It is agreed universally that the position of the Aborigines in Australia today is a tragedy. There is widespread agreement that Aborigines were badly treated by the early white settlers. Many people find it hard to face up to this. Some, particularly those who are defensive on this point, argue that there was bad behaviour on both sides – that both settlers and Aborigines behaved badly towards each other. There are few who are inclined to see one side as the invaders and the other as the invaded. Nor are there many who wish to accept any responsibility for what happened in what most see as far-off days.
3. Some say that what happened was wrong. Others say that those who did take the land or in other ways disrupt Aboriginal society did not know it was wrong. Some say that those who created the missions or took the children did these things with the best intentions. Some say that some good was done. Most say, with some vehemence, that one cannot judge past actions by today's standards. The vast majority say that they personally were not involved and certainly should not be expected to accept personal responsibility for what happened, or feel the need to apologise or have anyone else apologise for them. Among the descendants of post-War non-British immigrants this feeling was very strongly expressed.
4. Behind many of these statements appears to lie an intolerance or a lack of empathy; there also appears to be a widespread inability or a disinclination to attempt to look at the matter from an Aboriginal perspective or from the perspective of the disinherited. It could be argued that there are shades of racism in this, although to argue whether this is racism or not appears to us not to be greatly productive. It is as though people do not have the imagination to look at the world through the eyes

of a victim. After listening carefully to our respondents, we believe the wellsprings of their attitudes are to be found in the following factors:

- It is too painful or too threatening to take on the mantle, even in one's imagination, of the victim.
 - It is too confronting to accept that we have produced a splendid and democratic society which does have a serious flaw.
 - The thought that it is the collective 'we' who are to blame is too difficult to accept. This is one area where we subconsciously know that we cannot attribute the blame to our leaders whom we usually delight in criticising and lampooning.
 - The fact that our education and our folk culture have largely written out these matters means that some of us do not understand the background, some of us do not want to, and some of us are given licence to disregard it.
 - The problem, despite the fact that some attention has been paid to it in the last couple of decades, is so difficult to resolve, so persistent, that many of us don't want to hear about it.
 - There are too many legal and financial risks involved in facing up to the realities.
5. There is a widespread feeling that the Aboriginal culture has been seriously damaged, that it cannot be restored to its pre-settlement condition and that there is no good in pretending that it can be. There is little understanding of the possible psychological or social effects on a people of the undermining of their culture by a dominant culture. Thus there is little tolerance for any anti-social or apparently aberrant behaviour of Aboriginal people which might arise because of their position in society or because of what they have experienced.
6. People argue that there are few 'real' Aboriginal people left. Some define 'real' as people with 50% or more Aboriginal lineage who live in a tribal and usually remote environment. They see many of these people as retaining a tribal culture, and believe that if they wish to continue in their traditional ways (separate from, and outside of, white society and not dependent on it) they should be free to do so.
7. People tend to see people with less than 50% Aboriginal lineage as not 'real' Aborigines. They claim that many of these people have been brought up on welfare (many for two or three generations), that they expect it, that they do nothing to help themselves, and that they do not take responsibility for themselves. Even non-Aboriginal people who have grown up with Aboriginal people and have friends among them whom they like and admire, when they talk about Aboriginal people tend to concentrate on the stereotypes described above. People generally see these Aboriginal people as living off society and they resent this. This resentment is based on a number of platforms:
- the feeling that their taxes are going to support people who will not help themselves,

- the feeling that Aboriginal people are getting special privileges which others are not, despite the fact that the others are not well off, and
 - the feeling that Aborigines, or people who choose to call themselves Aborigines, are abusing the system.
8. People argue that Australia is a free and democratic society in which all people should be treated equally. They argue that Aborigines, and those who call themselves Aborigines, at the moment get better treatment:
- they get special money,
 - they are treated, even if they are drunk in a park, better than non-Aborigines are treated.
- In this context people see the treatment of Aborigines as offending against the egalitarian ethic. They also claim that, because it does not encourage Aborigines to take responsibility for themselves, it does not encourage the development of Aboriginal self-respect.
9. Aboriginal demands on land, or the possibility of such demands, worry people. The worry seems to arise from a number of sources:
- people on rural properties think that their tenure may be disturbed,
 - many do not know of the definition of identification with the land which the courts have made, and feel insecure as a consequence of their ignorance,
 - some feel that excessive demands are, or will be, made which have little basis but which will nonetheless be pursued,
 - many feel that Aboriginal leaders will make claims so that they will be in a position to negotiate on mineral royalties from the land claimed.
10. Again there is a feeling that here is an example of people being treated as special. People argue that they have had to work hard to buy their land and feel that all other people should have to do the same.
11. As a result of this cluster of attitudes, many people say that all Australians should come together as one people and that
- there should be no apologies, and
 - Aboriginal people should not continue to receive special help – as they believe that this is both unfair and tends to perpetuate a culture of dependency.
12. People's reasons for not wanting an apology were threefold. First they said 'We did not do it' and second, that the past was past and that reconciliation was about the present and the future. The further concern is that such an apology might lead to further substantial claims for compensation in one form or another.

13. Although this is the majority view, it is certainly not universally held. Some feel that an apology would help the healing process. Some feel that each 'side' should apologise to the other.
14. Attitudes to the Draft Document for Reconciliation are wide-ranging.
- There are those who look past the words and say that they like the sentiments.
 - Others say that the document is divisive, or that it is biased in favour of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
 - Some say that it opens the door to further land and other claims, and are not inclined to accept it because of this.
 - Some of a more pragmatic bent found the language overblown in places.
 - Still others questioned assertions about spirituality and interrelationships which they felt were not necessarily universally shared.
15. Looking at the text of the Draft Declaration:
- People liked:
- 'Speaking with one voice, we the people of Australia, of many origins as we are ...'
 - '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'
 - '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 ...'
 - '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.'
- People did not like:
- '... the gift of one another's presence.'
 - '... the original owners and custodians of traditional lands and waters.'
 - '... customary laws, beliefs and traditions.'
 - '... this spirituality.'
 - 'We acknowledge this land was colonised without the consent of the original inhabitants.'
 - '... 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.'
16. Thus, people are prepared to acknowledge the past without apologising for it. They do not want to be lectured to or made to feel guilty or have imposed on them some contrived set of norms. In their pragmatic way they say, 'Let's get on with it'.

17. Attitudes to the strategies which are associated with the Draft Document are also wide ranging. However, the majority view is that while economic independence is a worthy objective, it may not be achieved because of lack of education and related problems among the recipients, and thus the scheme may degenerate to further 'hand-outs' to which they object. The other strategies raise similar problems: in most cases the yardstick used is: 'Does this represent special and preferred treatment? If it does, I don't support it - partly because it is not fair, and partly because it has been tried in the past and has failed.'
18. People had given little thought to reconciliation, and few know anything about the process or about the Council. Only one or two had heard about a document of reconciliation, and they knew nothing about its contents.
19. They did not want to see the document used in any way which risked demonstrating a lack of support for reconciliation. Thus they were worried about it being put to a vote in parliament or at a referendum. A few were opposed to giving it any legal standing on the grounds that it was impossible to say what the legal consequences might be, particularly with respect to land rights.
20. On the other hand, people wanted it given some kind of meaningful status. They were content to have it available in public places to be signed by individuals or organisations (provided it was satisfactorily worded). But many wanted something more. Endorsement by the parliaments - short of legislative enactment - was regarded positively on condition that sufficient political groundwork was done to ensure unanimous or near unanimous endorsement and provided it did not become a spring-board for further claims of privileges.
21. People say that no amount of official action will provide a complete solution. Official action can contribute to a climate but in the end it will be what is done by ordinary people in their day to day lives which will be the measure of reconciliation. Many say that this may take generations.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS WITH COMMUNITY LEADERS

Attitudes of community leaders tend to be more positive than those of the general public. They recognise that Aboriginal people have suffered disadvantage and that some initiatives to help them overcome this legacy could be useful. They tend not to carry with them the resentment which is found in the general community towards programs designed to assist the Aboriginal people. They seem more able to bring empathy and generosity to the issues involved. There were one or two notable exceptions and these were to be found among the elected local government officials.

Community leaders, by virtue of their position, have been forced to think more deeply about these matters and to look for ways to advance the cause of reconciliation.

Unlike ordinary people, they do have some knowledge about the process of reconciliation and about the Council. Many had heard of a document of reconciliation, and some had seen it before.

In common with ordinary citizens, they did not want to see the document used in any way which would risk demonstrating a lack of support for reconciliation. Thus they were worried about it being put to a vote in parliament or at a referendum. A few were opposed to giving it any legal standing on the grounds that it was impossible to say what the legal consequences might be, particularly with respect to land rights.

The Police

The police are practical people. They have to be. They have been given the tasks of ensuring that people obey the law, of maintaining civil order and – in their own words – doing society’s dirty work. Because they are accountable for these tasks in a highly political operating environment they have had to think hard about how to meet them in ways which conform with community expectations and standards. When, in the past, they have failed to do this, they have been severely censured.

Their work with individual Aborigines and with the Aboriginal community is especially sensitive and operationally demanding. Of course many Aborigines are law-abiding citizens and are not seen by the police. But in some places, particularly in northern Australia, the police and some elements of the Aboriginal community are in constant contact. The reasons are many, and we do not wish to canvass them here. What we want to emphasise is that we have been impressed by what we have heard from senior officers during this

study. These officers were not only committed to the concept of reconciliation, but were introducing, often in difficult circumstances, and at times despite the views of people in the non-Aboriginal community, partnership programs with Aboriginal people both inside and outside the force which they saw as reconciliation in practice. They were, in their language, 'walking the walk'.

We found a nice combination of realism and concern. The police were realistic about the need to keep the peace in circumstances where an element of the Aboriginal community acted in anti-social and self-destructive ways, and so provoked outrage in the wider community. They were concerned to try to treat Aboriginal offenders fairly, humanely and sensitively wherever possible, while fending off pressure from the wider community to take a more punitive approach.

We heard of examples where the force was learning from its Aboriginal members, and was attempting to employ them in ways which were consistent with, or were not antithetical to, their own culture.

One of the stereotypes of policing in Australia is that in high-contact areas, the police take a brutal and uncompromising approach to Aborigines. We do not know whether this stereotype is justified or not. However, we do say that the evidence from our discussions with senior officers in three States and the Northern Territory suggests it is unjustified. If the policies espoused by these officers are in fact practised on the ground, then we believe that the way these police in outback Australia are handling Aboriginal-non Aboriginal relations may form one important model for reconciliation throughout the nation.

It was put to us by a number of other community leaders in each of the towns where we conducted in-depth interviews, that the police were doing a good job in extremely difficult circumstances. Success can be hard to quantify. However, in the Northern Territory the police quoted statistics indicating a drop in youth suicide in one Aboriginal community where a special program of policing, involving Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal officers, had been introduced in consultation with that community.

The police live on the ground. Some of the police to whom we spoke knew a lot about the Aboriginal people in their area. For example, they could talk about tribal groups in their area and about tribal rivalries. They knew and listened to the elders. The elders, in turn, listened to them. Over time they were beginning to build real mutual respect. This in turn was leading to other examples of cooperation, such as where local Aboriginal auxiliary police were working to good effect in their own communities.

Other examples may be quoted.

- Some people in our group discussions complained that Aboriginal people were treated more leniently than were non-Aborigines. They thought this unfair. The police, while in no way being soft hearted, believed that at times, particularly where alcohol was involved, different practices were appropriate.
- We also learned that considerable resources and time were being devoted to the training of Aboriginal liaison officers, even though the attrition rate, due among other things to burnout, was high.
- In Kalgoorlie a new position of liaison officer to communicate with the three or four local clans, is being considered.

Local Government

Our discussions suggest that the attitude of local government is very much influenced by the opinions of the mayor, who often seems to devote much, if not all his or her working time, to the post.

We heard some mayors who were attempting to deal with the Aboriginal citizens with sensitivity and great tolerance. Some had been in the area for a long time and had developed deep friendships with people in the Aboriginal community and probably had earned their respect. We spoke with others who were highly critical of local Aboriginal behaviour and who seemed not to wish to understand the reasons for this behaviour. In their view, anyone who offended against community norms should pay the price.

Townsville, in particular, gave us grounds for concern. This was the one high-contact centre where the mayor did not see us, despite repeated attempts to make an appointment. A council "cultural attache" was offered to us, but we declined. People in the Townsville focus group and others to whom we spoke told us of a recent incident in which the council had unleashed dogs on Aboriginal "parkies" – people who lived rough in the city parks. We should add that this remains hearsay since we were not able to raise it with the mayor.

The councils of all the mayors we spoke to were involved in one initiative or another to manage the local "Aboriginal problem". In some cases this meant creating special camping sites on the edge of town where Aboriginal people from the out-stations could gather and live without arousing the enmity of townspeople. Many had initiated or taken part in local reconciliation meetings or public ceremonies. They were familiar with the Council and some had seen the Draft Declaration of Reconciliation.

Others were going out of their way to promote the positive aspects of the town's Aboriginal heritage, partly to improve the position of the local Aboriginal community and partly to promote the tourist trade.

Chambers of Commerce

The Chambers of Commerce saw themselves as the representatives of the local business community, and in particular the local traders. Anything which enhanced their position was good; anything which acted negatively on them was bad.

Some did have contact with the local Aboriginal community. For example, the Jarwon Association (who manage the Katherine Gorge tourist site and who had other commercial ventures) had recently joined the local chamber, and in time would sit on their executive.

But in the main the Chambers showed little interest in, and a good deal of antagonism to those members of the Aboriginal community who spent time sitting around the town. One gained the impression that local traders thought that their presence was not good for business.

The Chambers spoke of few initiatives designed to foster employment among local Aborigines, nor of other initiatives to assist them, although one leading Chamber member to whom we spoke was personally involved in working with Aboriginal people and was deeply committed to this work. Another expressed personal feelings of concern for the position of Aborigines in her community, but had no idea what, if anything, could be done about it.

Industry

From our limited experience we may suggest that industry does see itself participating, in a practical way, in reconciliation.

MIM runs special employment induction courses for potential Aboriginal employees. Management is committed to this program, despite the fact that few will offer for work and some of those who do will not stay for the long term. Management believes it is contributing to skill enhancement which may assist the individuals involved in the long term.

MIM also run special classes for all employees to give them a better understanding of people in the Aboriginal community.

Kalgoorlie Consolidated Gold Mines also has taken initiatives to build up employment opportunities for Aborigines. In addition to employing a small number of Aborigines on staff, it has followed up approaches from Aboriginal communities who have sought to enter into commercial relationships with the company for the provision of environmental restoration services and other contract work. Little has come of this, however. We were told that even though there had been many meetings at which the Aboriginal communities

had confirmed their interest, they had not taken the next necessary steps, such as providing a quotation.

The mine management indicated that it was prepared to assist in every possible way to ensure that the Aboriginal communities got the work, but that in the end it had to operate on the basis of proper management and financial principles.

The Gwydir Cotton Growers' Association is excited about the employment initiatives it has taken and the success it has achieved. It works closely with members of the Aboriginal community.

In each case the commitment and enthusiasm of the executive in charge was the critical factor. Without their commitment on the ground – which was plainly evident to us – even activities which had proven useful could fade away.

Others

We spoke with two or three others: Jim Boyce in Moree, Darcy Redman in Mt Isa, an academic in Townsville. The former two were working to improve economic performance and employment opportunities in their area, and were sensitive to, and sympathetic to, the problems and needs of their local Aboriginal community. Indeed they seemed more so than the general population among whom they lived and worked. But they tended to be impatient at what they saw as distant bureaucrats whom, they believed, knew little about the real situation 'on the ground', or about how to deal with it.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Introduction

An impasse lies at the heart of the problem of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, and this has major implications for any communication strategy associated with the Reconciliation process.

The impasse is this.

Australians in general have accepted the new multicultural society which has emerged within the last one or two generations. People who look different to the Anglo-Celtic majority, and who have different cultural or religious backgrounds, are accepted, if they meet certain threshold conditions. These include learning, or trying to learn English, mingling in the wider community, and acting 'like us'. Acting "like us" implies accepting "our" values and "our" worldview. "Our" values include the notion that self-respect is based to a large extent on economic self-reliance, and that this in turn is based on gainful employment. "Our" worldview includes the idea that Australia is a land of opportunity in which individuals may succeed on their merits, where class barriers and ethnic ghettos are absent and where the prevailing spirit of egalitarianism dictates that people who "give it a go" will get a "fair go" in return.

The idea of the self-sufficient individual living in a "fair go" society includes the conviction that "bludgers" are intolerable. People temporarily down on their luck or unable to help themselves are seen as worthy recipients of assistance from a society that prides itself on being generous to those in genuine need. However, chronic dependency without obvious cause or cure arouses profound condemnation and resentment. People see no reason why the wealth they have created through their own individual efforts should be shared with such people.

Aborigines are seen by many as transgressing these threshold conditions for acceptance and assistance. They are often seen as not behaving "like us" or accepting "our" worldview. They are often seen -- in general -- as not being committed to the work ethic, although people differentiate between those who conform and those who do not. Worse, many are seen as being content to suckle at the welfare system, or to batten and feed on those of their relatives who are in the workforce. On top of this, they are seen by many as not only asking for more than "we" get, but getting it at "our" cost and then wasting it unconscionably.

Among many respondents this is seen as making a mockery of the "fair go" ideal on a number of levels. At one level, it is not a "fair go" that one person should get more than another in similar circumstances. At another level, it is

not a “fair go” that people can go on getting assistance without making any visible effort to help themselves. At a third level, it is not a “fair go” because there is not the faintest appreciation of the assistance, but instead an idle wastefulness, an apparently insatiable demand for more, and a total lack of reciprocity.

Many non-Aboriginal Australians would like to see Aboriginal Australians have a better life. They are conscious of the injustices they have suffered in the past. But for many those threshold conditions still apply.

Herein lies the impasse: the basically egalitarian and accepting majority implicitly demand a price for entry which many Aboriginal people, perhaps because of their past experiences, are unable or unwilling to accept. More than this, the Aboriginal “problem” has been with us for so long, that the non-Aboriginal part of the community despairs of ever solving it.

Paradoxically, however, it is this sense of despair, coupled with a widespread recognition that white society has badly failed in this area, which we believe offers an opportunity for developing further an effective communications strategy.

The recommended approach

It is clear from our research that to achieve reconciliation will require a continuing public awareness and communications program. We believe that any such program should be thought about in two ways:

A short-term approach, and
A long-term approach.

The short-term approach

There is no quick fix, in our opinion, if a communications strategy is to succeed even in the short term.

The abstract idea of Reconciliation is widely supported. However, once people look at the subject in depth their reaction is a mixture of hope, fear, hostility, confusion, and boredom.

People associate the *idea* of Reconciliation with four topics, on all of which many feel hostile or afraid:

- Land rights
- Monetary compensation for wrongs such as the Stolen Generations
- Welfare handouts
- Saying sorry.

Among many, their ignorance of the *process* of Reconciliation is almost complete. It is commonly confused with the Mabo case, the political troubles of ATSIC, and the referendum on the constitutional Preamble.

Among ordinary citizens hardly anyone has heard of the Council. This is perhaps not unexpected. We know, from other work, that few ordinary citizens can name more than three or four members of the federal parliament, if that many. When told about the Council, many withhold conferring legitimacy on it because:

they see it as yet another surprise sprung on them by elites and special interests whom they distrust, or

they have never heard of any of the people on it, or

the draft Declaration strikes many of them as the work of people who are pushing a pro-Aboriginal line and are out of touch with ordinary people.

They listened to our descriptive briefing on the Council and its work. To the extent that they made any response at all, those responses were always brief, and usually perfunctory or dismissive. Then when they had read the draft Declaration, while a few accepted it without reservation, in general their remarks about its authors were often unflattering in the extreme. In northern Australia, the draft was seen as the work of "southerners" who were out of touch with the reality of day-to-day life in high-contact areas and who were infuriatingly inclined to prate about the shortcomings of northern communities in the matter of race relations.

In this climate, the proclamation of a Declaration in its current form, would be seen as akin to the handing down of the Tablets from Mt Sinai. While some will support it, many will not. In our view, this could put public support for Reconciliation at risk, certainly in the short term.

Given this situation, Council might consider a number of options: for example, whether a shorter Declaration, which focused on better relations and the future, could be a useful stepping-stone to a more comprehensive statement.

Even so, we recommend that a further climate-changing exercise be undertaken first. We say this for two main reasons.

First, it may well be that the Council, to this point, has not had the resources to put into a comprehensive public education campaign of the kind this research suggests is needed, or that other demands on resources have, quite properly, been given higher priority. We would suggest that this research indicates a need for resources to be channelled in the direction of public education.

Second, our limited understanding of the Council's position is that any Declaration will have to satisfy certain minimum aspirations for Reconciliation. At the same time, to be successful in advancing the cause of reconciliation, it will need to be acceptable, or potentially acceptable, to the majority of the wider community.

Our reckoning is that people in the wider community may well place a more generous-hearted interpretation on any Declaration if they were reading it in a climate that was more receptive than is the case at present. Political controversies around such issues as an apology and native title have created a very negative climate.

In this climate, people seemed instinctively drawn to placing the worst possible interpretation on the words. This was particularly the case with any words suggesting an apology or which seemed – however improbably -- to open the way for native title claims or monetary compensation.

We are not seeking here to minimise the level of opposition to many of the passages in the Declaration. Other parts of this report demonstrate that some concepts are going to be very hard for the community as whole to accept.

However, the level of community concern about the plight of the Aboriginal people, and the sense of failure on the part of white society which accompanies that concern, suggest to us that, in the correct climate, many people would look for ways of accepting a Declaration as at least symbolic of their own commitment to reconciliation. Moreover, they want the matter brought to closure.

That is why we suggest continuing the climate-changing campaign.

The components of this should be:

- Educating the general community on the meaning of Reconciliation.
- Telling stories to the community which demonstrate what Reconciliation looks like in practical terms.
- Telling stories to the community which show the historical as well and the contemporary partnerships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, with particular reference to the settlement of the Outback and the participation of Aboriginal soldiers in the ANZAC tradition.
- Raising awareness among ordinary people of the objectives, activities and membership of the Council or of any body charged to carry on its valuable work.

Further sophisticated editorial-oriented efforts are recommended so that these components are achieved using popular vehicles of communication such as television drama, magazine programs and populist current affairs, as well as print magazines and newspapers, radio programs and appropriate websites. With the Council about to end its work, this may require a greater sense of responsibility and initiative by the media itself.

Ideally, a carefully designed advertising-oriented effort is likewise required, because not all the necessary information will be of a kind that editorial people can make use of, and because control of certain key messages is essential. We are aware of the danger here: taxpayers may be critical of their money being used to promote a policy with which they have some arguments. In this case, if it is supported by community leaders we believe the benefits will outweigh the costs.

As part of this exercise, the idea of a Declaration should be broached with the community.

Only after this work has been done should a revised Declaration itself be launched.

“Reconciliation in practice” should continue to be the theme of much of this communication. There are hundreds of examples of this, and there will be many more as time goes on. The more these examples become part of the popular consciousness, the more Aboriginal people will be seen as part of the rich tapestry of Australian life.

Reconciliation in practice means Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians doing things together – it might be work or sport or community activities or just people relating to one another.

There are also a number of key messages:

Reconciliation is for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians alike;

Reconciliation is about helping us all move forward together.

Reconciliation is a two-way street;

We heard repeatedly that people saw Reconciliation as something that was by Aborigines for Aborigines.

There is an analogy here with the concept of multiculturalism. In a study we carried out two years ago, we learned that people saw multiculturalism as something that was “owned” by ethnic communities for the purpose of advancing the interests of those communities.

Yet people saw “multiculturalism” as one of Australia’s greatest achievements, a view which we found in this current study to be still held almost universally.

We note that where there has been bi-partisan support among community leaders for a proposition or a policy, general community support has often followed.

The lesson we draw from this is that people appear to take pride in the existence of what they see as a positive social phenomenon, so long as it seems to be for the common good, even if they perceive that “ownership” is more narrowly held.

Therefore, if Reconciliation can be seen as for the common good, then ownership of the process is less important. It is the perceptions that count. That is why we have formulated the key messages in the terms outlined above.

Concentration on these matters sidesteps the four sensitive issues which loom large in the eyes of non-Aboriginal Australians, namely, land claims, compensation, welfare payments and an apology. It is difficult to see how people’s attitudes to these four issues could be turned around in the short term, no matter how clever the communication strategy.

As we said earlier, people are in despair at the “Aboriginal problem”, yet recognise that this has been one of Australia’s greatest failings, and is one of Australia’s most urgent problems. They want to bring it to closure, put it behind them and move on. If Reconciliation can be presented as having these objectives, as well as the objective of Achieving justice for the Aboriginal community, people might be persuaded to give it a go. It is this sense in which we see the possibility of turning much of the negative community sentiment into an opportunity.

However, if the ideal of Reconciliation is really to take root in Australian society, we believe a long-term approach is also called for.

The long-term approach

In essence, the long-term approach is based on changes to what and how Australian children are taught about Australian history.

Many of our respondents were derisive in their comments about the nature and extent of what they were taught at school about Australian history.

Captain Cook, the crossing of the Blue Mountains, the heroic (white) settlers triumphing over the hostility of the land and its original inhabitants: this is a thumbnail sketch of what people told us they had been taught in school. If they had been taught anything about Aborigines, it amounted to a few

snippets about the Dreaming legends presented in a way that, even as children, they found impossible to take seriously.

They generally noted with approval that their own children seemed to be better taught in this area.

These responses resonated with us because they echoed the sentiments expressed to us by Australian parents in 1998 in a completely different context. On that occasion we were exploring parents' attitudes to the teaching of civics and citizenship.

Those parents too expressed sometimes bitter disappointment at what they saw as the sheer vacuity – to say nothing of the incompleteness – of the version of Australian history they had been taught. They said it had left them grossly under-prepared to take their place as citizens.

In this study, people said similar things. They were highly critical that the role of Aboriginal people in the development of Australia had not been taught; that they had no serious appreciation of Aboriginal attachment to the land; that policies now seen to have been mistaken were not revealed and discussed.

In short, they felt that they had been left ill-equipped to make any sense of the controversies now swirling around such matters as native title and the Stolen Generations.

As might be assumed from what they have said on matters relating to Reconciliation, our respondents were not, on the whole, bleeding hearts when it comes to Aboriginal issues. It might readily be inferred, therefore, that they would not be proponents of what has been described as “black armband history”. Nonetheless, they despise what they see as the one-sided fairy stories which masqueraded as Australian history for so many of them in their school days.

It would seem to us that between these two extremes might be found a way to educate our young people in what is, so far as possible, an honest and comprehensive history of Australia since 1788.

In this context, our respondents attached great importance to the education of the young, especially in primary schools. The single most oft-stated option for the use of a Declaration of Reconciliation was that -- when the words were right -- it should be recited in schools, just as earlier generations had recited an affirmation of loyalty to the Crown.

At the same they noted that this would be meaningless if done in a vacuum. Some credible learning program would have to accompany it.

We recommend that these findings be conveyed to the Minister for Education, or to MCEETYA.

IMPRESSIONS OF THE GROUPS

Group No. 1: Melbourne White collar under 35

This was a group of people with quite disparate backgrounds: some from European migrant backgrounds, some not; some with tertiary education, some not; some who came from an established white collar culture and some who had been upwardly mobile.

They were not very knowledgeable about issues affecting Aboriginal Australians: they did not know of the Council, they exhibited a mixture of support for Aboriginal rights, resentment at Aboriginal demands and what they saw as special privileges, and bewilderment and yet a measure of goodwill about what should be done.

Some saw the world very much from the position of their own efforts to find a place in it – ‘If I have to work hard to achieve things why can’t others’ – while others either saw society as unjust and partly corrupt or seemed to assess each issue as it arose without having developed a generalised view about Australian society.

A number had had contact with Aboriginal people. They did not seem to be motivated by prejudice at the personal level. Indeed, they seemed to favour the ‘melting pot’ concept of society: that Australians should maintain their cultural differences but at the same time should all merge to become one people.

Group No. 2: Ballarat Blue collar 35 and over

These were the resentful ones. They were not overtly racist, they had a few contacts or friends among the Aboriginal community, but they were deeply resentful that their money was being ‘thrown at’ or ‘thrown away on’ Aboriginals. They thought the money was being wasted. And worse: if money for support was to be offered why should they not benefit from it also. They saw themselves as being treated as less than equal. This was their philosophic plank (although they would not have expressed it that way): in the Australian egalitarian culture, all people should be treated equally, and what was happening was not equal.

They believed that in this land of opportunity people can achieve what they want to achieve (this, despite the fact that the proponent of this view had been sacked from the railways by a ‘University dropout’). They saw the Aborigines caught in a dependent hand-out culture which they claimed eroded their self esteem and their ability to take their place in the wider community.

The stereotypes abounded: people destroying their homes, wasting money, hitting the grog.

They knew nothing of the Council or its work, and were distrustful of Declarations. They thought that they personally had nothing to apologise for.

Group No. 3: Western Sydney Blue collar 35 and over

This group of nine consisted of five women and four men from the outer western suburbs of Sydney, including Dharruk, St Marys, Doonside and Mt Druitt.

Five of them had left school by Year 10; the others had reached HSC or its equivalent, and two of these had done a trade course at tech.

They included a pottery glazier, truck driver, teacher's aide, merchandiser, TAB call centre operator and a plumber. Two were on disability pensions; two others were from households where the partner was unemployed.

All but two had been born in Australia. The others had been born in New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

One of the men was married to a part-Aboriginal woman.

They were strong on the need for Aboriginal self-reliance and on putting an end to what they saw as a handout mentality. They saw this as a necessary ingredient in the dignity and equality which they regarded as the foundation for any progress in this area.

They were insistent on the need for reconciliation to proceed on the basis of equality for all Australians – and that meant equality for non-Aboriginal Australians, not just Aboriginal Australians, which is how they saw matters at the moment.

They were imaginative about what might be in a statement of reconciliation, mentioning the Stolen Generations, and the slaughter (their word) of Aborigines in the early days of white settlement.

They were wary about how reconciliation might be connected to land rights, a subject on which they knew little but feared much. They wanted any such connection severed, but some were not sure that it could be. Others, however, stated unequivocally that the two matters were separate and could be treated as such.

They approved of much in the draft statement, and particularly liked the generality of the terms in which it is expressed. One or two did not like the “apology” component.

They particularly did like the references to equality.

The term “injustice” was problematic. Some saw the injustice as being suffered by non-Aboriginal people by comparison with what was seen as favoured treatment given to Aboriginal people, particularly in housing, education and health. Others saw it in terms of the comparatively high rate of Aboriginal imprisonment.

On the whole, they were a thoughtful, imaginative and tolerant group of people, whose attitudes were grounded not in technical knowledge but in an instinctive grasp of egalitarianism and fair play. If Aborigines were prepared to be treated like all other Australians and meet them halfway, they would go halfway too.

Their general approach was best summed up at the end when one of them proposed changing the name of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to the Australian Council for Reconciliation. This was unanimously endorsed by the group. They felt it gave them a stake in a process which, to that point, they had seen as being done for the benefit of the Aborigines, and to which too much priority was being given.

Group No. 4: Northern Sydney White collar 35 and over

There were ten people in this group. They were ‘north shore’ people: well educated, sometimes graduates or married to graduates. They were people with opinions, which they were happy to express and defend. They came from a culture in which expressing their views was not uncommon.

Some were highly critical of Aborigines and those who argued for them. They did not seem to be motivated by prejudice, and certainly not by overt prejudice – rather by an unwillingness to look at any problem, and certainly one relating to the interface of Aboriginal and non Aboriginal Australians, from any standpoint other than their own. And their own was based on their own ethic: if one wants to get on in this world, and one was prepared to work hard, one could.

One or two took a different and more empathetic view of the same question. They were prepared to consider a different paradigm through which to view it. They were prepared to talk more about tolerance, or about pluralism (although they did not use that term), or about respect for other ways of life.

Neither side, and particularly not the former group, are likely to change their views easily.

Group No. 5: Moree Blue collar 35 and over

This group of eleven people was a bit of a hotch-potch. There were five people from the former Yugoslavia, some of whom had little English, and most of whom contributed little or nothing to the discussion. A woman, who worked in stained glass, was from a grazing family who had been on their property for 130 years. There was a teacher and her brother, an electrician. There were two people, one male and one female, who worked at the local RSL club. And there was one university graduate who owned a local motel.

Although these people said that they had no racist feelings towards Aborigines, and spoke well of some who worked in the town, they were quite strident in their view that Aborigines should not receive special treatment or special privileges. They seemed to think that this would pander to the Aborigines' predisposition to look for handouts, and that it was unfair to non Aborigines.

They were confused about what association, if any, there was between reconciliation and land rights, although most assumed the two were inextricably connected. This made them deeply suspicious of the draft statement – because they thought it might be a subterfuge by which their land could be taken from them.

Only one stood out. The graduate made an impassioned plea on behalf of the idea of reconciliation, which was received in silence.

Group No. 6: Brisbane Blue collar under 35

Of these ten people, nine were born in Australia and one in Liverpool, UK. They worked mainly in semi-skilled blue collar occupations although one, a shop assistant, had a Bachelor of Justice.

These too were the resentful ones: they resented what they saw as Aboriginal people receiving handouts while they did not.

Their view of Aboriginal people and of Aboriginal society was made up of stereotypes – the real Aborigines were the 'full blooded' people (called the 'full-bloods', which, in a sense, is a dehumanising label) or those who had more than 50% 'aboriginal blood' and the 'others' who were not 'real' aborigines. The 'real Aborigines' were alright, particularly if they lived on their traditional lands. The 'others' were 'the problem'. They wanted everything for nothing. They did not take responsibility for themselves.

Many did see society from the view of the imposed upon. They saw politicians and perhaps other privileged people as looking after themselves – as doing alright. They saw many Aborigines, in a modest way, of doing the same. They saw themselves as missing out.

They argued that their ideal was equality for all. And, in the main, they asserted that they were not racist.

Group No. 7: Townsville White collar 35 and over

This group of ten people consisted of six women and four men.

Four of the women worked in various capacities at the general hospital, one as a genetic consultant, a couple as administrative officers and one as a medical secretary. The genetic consultant's husband had at one time been Director-General of the Department of Social Security.

Among the men was an economist teaching at the local TAFE, a high school manual arts teacher who had served for some time in the Army, a marketing manager, and an inventory controller.

All had been born in Australia, many of them in Townsville or North Queensland.

Many of these people had gone to school with Aboriginal children; the former soldier had served with Aboriginal soldiers; the inventory controller's parents had adopted an Aboriginal boy whom he regarded as his brother and with whom he was still in touch, although the Aboriginal was now a police officer in Perth.

This was high contact on a very personal level.

They were ready to state not only their own views but the views they said would be stated by their Aboriginal friends.

They also came to agree that they were probably somewhat "warm and fuzzy" in their attitudes to Aboriginal people. This was a term one of them used, and the others assented that she was probably right.

They tended to examine each question from both the white and black side. They did not speak in stereotypical terms; they did not generalise. They spoke about Aboriginal health, education and housing problems as symptomatic of poverty, cultural displacement and understandable angers, all of which they saw as afflicting indigenous people.

They spoke with disdain of people in places like Melbourne who, in their view, could not possibly have any idea of the reality of the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. These people, they said, would either idealise the relationship or would express extremely negative views about it.

The implication was that they lived this relationship in their daily lives, and knew what it was really all about.

This led to them to take a sceptical attitude to the reconciliation process. They saw reconciliation as something personal for each individual to find in his or her own heart, not something imposed by government.

For all that, some saw the reconciliation draft statement as an important historical step, but others thought it merely a piece of political window-dressing that wouldn't make life any better for Aborigines or non-Aborigines. Indeed a couple sharply questioned the wisdom of spending money on such an exercise when it could more profitably be spent installing a proper sewerage system in one of the town's Aboriginal settlements.

They will need to be convinced, not of the fact that Aborigines have been badly done by, but that this process will really do anything to improve the situation.

Group No. 8: Mount Isa White collar under 35 (with a little bit of blue)

This group included an army officer (who had previously been a male nurse), a grazier, a piano teacher married to an underground diamond driller, three female bank officers, married respectively to a drug and alcohol counsellor working with Aboriginal people, an engineer and a service technician, a car detailer and a car rental manager.

During the discussion the grazier said that he was part aboriginal. At the end of the discussion the army officer 'revealed' that he had recently discovered that he had a distant aboriginal ancestor. Neither identified with the Aboriginal community in any way.

Many of these people had grown up with Aboriginal people. Some spoke highly of them. The soldier said that he would often prefer them under his command to non-Aboriginal people.

They spoke at length about the loss by the Aboriginal community of their old culture. They saw this as an unfortunate reality. They argued from this that Aborigines had to accept the values of the dominant culture - that they had no alternative. They were therefore critical of those who did not. They were impatient of those who were not prepared to rely on themselves, who lived on welfare and whom they saw as living at times brutal and self destructive lives. They tended, in their discussion, to concentrate on these people as though they were the majority, and not to speak about other Aboriginal people whom leaders in the community saw as the majority, and who were said to be living productive lives according to prevailing community standards.

Group No. 9: Darwin Blue collar under 35

This small but useful group of five young people in Darwin was particularly interesting because of the contrasts revealed within it.

One participant was a young woman of Swiss parentage who had been born in the Territory, who worked with people with disabilities, and who was emotionally as well as socially interested to see Aborigines find a more comfortable and more accepted place in Australian society.

The other young woman, who had come from NSW to the Territory some seven years ago was emotionally and socially unsympathetic to Aborigines and to their difficulties. She wanted all people to be treated equally and was impatient with Aborigines who did not conform to her notion of how a citizen should behave and resentful of the special privileges she believed they were receiving.

The other members of the group fell somewhere between these two positions – one of Italian parentage, who had been in the territory for twenty years, tended to side with the NSW woman, and another, raised in Canberra and resident in the Territory some three years, tended to agree with the first mentioned woman.

In this group, perhaps more than in others, different attitudes to the issue seemed more clearly to flow from the personality and the ethic of the individual (and perhaps their belief systems) rather than from any other demographic or socio-economic characteristic.

Group No. 10: Katherine White collar 35 and over

This group of eight Katherine residents included a mother and daughter who had lived on cattle properties most of their lives, a woman who ran a crisis centre, a horticulturalist who also had a nursing degree, a Mango property overseer, a tourist operator, the Chamber of Commerce manager and a hairdresser.

The first three mentioned women thought of themselves as free thinkers (rather than as radicals), were passionately supportive of the Aboriginal community, but at the same time were certainly not blind to their faults and to the profound and in their view intractable problems which existed. One of them included the former owner of a cattle station over which a large land claim had successfully been made. They saw themselves as very different from the majority of their fellow townfolk, whom they saw as bigoted and unsympathetic to Aboriginal people, and particularly those who sat around the town drinking and otherwise acting in what they saw as anti-social ways.

Others in the group tended to emphasise the problems which they saw with the Aboriginal community: some did this with empathy and some did not.

Group No. 11: Perth White collar under 35

This group of nine consisted of five women and four men, nearly all in their mid to late twenties.

With the exception of one man, a meteorologist, none had acquired a tertiary education although most had completed Year 12 and were in clerical occupations.

However, one young woman had emigrated from Sweden and was studying anthropology, although working as a figure-skating coach. She had spent some time studying Aboriginal issues and speaking with Aboriginal people.

As a group they were more tolerant and reflective on reconciliation issues than other groups of younger people in this study. While they expressed many of the frustrations common to the other groups, they leavened their responses with remarks that indicated an attempt to see issues from the Aboriginal as well as the non-Aboriginal perspective.

Part of the reason for this was that the woman from Sweden questioned some of their assumptions. Another part of the reason was that there was a sharp contrast between the views of two other articulate women who challenged each other and in doing so prompted the others to expand on their own opinions.

They also became engaged with the issues and showed a sustained interest in them. In this respect they were also somewhat different from some of the other younger people we spoke to.

Group No. 12: Adelaide Blue collar 35 and over

This group of nine members ranged widely: from those who were knowledgeable about our subject (two or three) to those who were not (the majority); those who were generous in their approach to those who were not; those who wanted Aborigines to conform to 'our' ways and those who did not; those who wanted the nation to apologise and those who did not.

In the main they knew little but were certainly not uninterested. They would like to be better educated. They were sorry for the plight of many Aboriginal people. They would like to see the nation's leaders 'do the right thing', although some were worried that an apology could open the floodgates to further claims from the Aboriginal community. One part of them wants to be generous, but they are worried about where this generosity might lead.

But overall they were baffled by the problem, which a number said was the most pressing problem facing the Australian community at this moment.

Group No. 13: Kalgoorlie Blue collar under 35

These eleven people were, for the most part, a collection of rugged characters, few of whom had completed secondary school. Nearly all were now doing manual work on the goldfields. One woman and one man were studying engineering at university but neither had completed a degree.

Their views were strongly held and somewhat vulgarly expressed.

Standing out in this company was an articulate and well-groomed young woman, rather Italianate, if anything, in appearance, who worked in a clerical capacity on the staff of a politician.

Only after most of the other participants had given vent to their unvaryingly negative views of Aborigines in Kalgoorlie did she announce that she was Aboriginal. She smilingly noted that many people took her for an Italian.

She then went through many of the points and assertions made, accepting a few and rejecting others. She spoke of her own experience as an Aboriginal person, saying that she had never received preferential treatment and challenging the others to support their claims that Aborigines routinely received preferential treatment from government agencies on such matters as housing and education.

This might have been expected to have a dampening effect on the fire of anti-Aboriginal sentiment, but it didn't. People went on entirely as before, pausing only to preface their remarks with bromides such as "with all due respect" or "maybe this doesn't apply to you".

However, even the most strident of the anti-Aboriginal brigade – a young woman with a nine-week-old baby at her breast – was at least prepared to tolerate differences in opinion, and she and the Aboriginal woman lingered afterwards, talking about babies and other matters of mutual interest.

For the young mother, at least, the evening appeared to have been an educative experience.

Group No. 14: Mount Gambia White collar under 35

These ten young people, only two of whom had any tertiary education, and most of whom had lived in Mt Gambia or its surrounding areas most of their life, did not know much and really did not care much about our subject.

They tended to have superficial view on the matter: Aborigines were seen to be 'all right' but 'they didn't do anything for themselves and why should they get special treatment when we don't' was their prevailing attitude.

They were neither particularly generous nor particularly sensitive to the complex issues involved. But more than that, they were not greatly engaged. Because of this we attempted to provoke them: we asked them to imagine what it would be like to be an Aboriginal living in a non-Aboriginal community. Most were incapable of even attempting such an act of imagination.

And yet, by their own lights, they were not without commitment to notions of democracy and a fair society in which individual freedoms were important. But the individual freedoms tended to be their freedoms, not other people's.

Discussion

THEME ONE: HOW AUSTRALIANS SEE AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

People were proud to be Australians and pleased with many aspects of Australian society.

They saw Australia as laid back, a model of democracy, innovative, good at sport, a land of opportunity, and generous to those in genuine need.

Virtually every group said that the development of a multicultural society was one of our greatest achievements. It reflected, in their eyes, our “fair go” ethic and our capacity to tolerate difference.

In saying this, however, our respondents revealed the conditions upon which our society was prepared to be fair and tolerant.

The first condition was that minorities must make some attempt to “be like us”.

The second was that people must be prepared to help themselves, not rely on handouts.

Immigrant groups, on the whole, were seen as having fulfilled those conditions. Consequently, they had been accepted by the wider Australian society, while being able to retain their cultural heritage.

By contrast, Aborigines were seen to have violated both of these conditions.

Many respondents could understand why Aborigines might not want to “be like us”. They had seen “us” take their land and do appalling violence to their people. Some, however, would not concede even this.

Lack of self-reliance, however, was something our respondents would not tolerate. In their view, people who demonstrated a handout mentality were contemptible.

Many blamed white society for what they saw as the development of a handout mentality among Aborigines.

This was something white society had brought on itself through a misguided sense of guilt about the past, through the false acceptance of ‘politically

correct' ideas introduced by 'do gooders', and for want of any better ideas about how to co-exist with Aborigines.

As we shall see, this attitude contained the seeds of deep suspicion about the possible impact of the reconciliation process. This suspicion was expressed explicitly in relation to:

- possible claims for compensation in the event that there was an official apology in the Declaration of Reconciliation;
- possible land claims in the event that there was an official recognition of prior land ownership in the Declaration, and
- probable further waste of taxpayers' money on the implementation of the strategies for economic independence and for redressing disadvantage.

These suspicions were expressed very widely.

For all that, the plight of Aborigines was recognised by every group as one of our great national failings.

How would you describe Australian society to someone who knew nothing about it? What would you say were our greatest achievements? What, if anything, are our greatest failings?

What people said

We're more accepting than other places.

We're a sad and paranoid country. Look at Koori issues and Pauline Hanson. The native people are oppressed and downtrodden.

It's appalling the way Aborigines are treated. But at least we've got some sort of conscience.

-- Group No.1: Melbourne, white collar, under-35

If you want something and are prepared to work, you can do it.

People have respect for everyone around them.

Being such a multicultural country (is one of our greatest achievements).

-- Group No. 2: Ballarat, blue-collar 35-plus

Easygoing.

Very multicultural.

Tremendous amount of freedom.

The 1967 referendum giving Aborigines the vote and making them citizens, and moves toward reconciliation.

-- Group No. 3: Sydney West , blue-collar, 35-plus

Multiculturalism.

Freedom.

We have a good welfare system. Everyone is looked after.

Too well looked after.

(Achievements?)

Innovative.

Good sports people.

(Failings?)

How we deal with the indigenous people.

We seem to have a Government that does not want to embrace what the general populace wants, that is reconciliation.

-- Group No. 4: Sydney North, white-collar 35-plus

Diverse culturally.

A free society, comparatively. Respects democratic principles, the rule of law, a civilised society.

Not without problems – relationships with the Aboriginal people.

(Achievements?)

Sporting.

A model of tolerance for the rest of the world.

(Failings?)

I think we've failed with the Aborigines. We've given them too much and the white people are getting upset. It's angering them.

-- Group No. 5: Moree, blue-collar, 35-plus

Democratic.

Multicultural.

We're a free country.

Gives people an opportunity to have a better way of life.

(Achievements?)

Sport.

Foreign aid. We're always giving money.

We've invented lots of things – Hills hoist, black box.

-- Group No. 6: Brisbane, blue-collar under 35

Easy-going.

Diverse in opinions, attitudes, culture.

There's no class structure. Everyone's fairly equal.

(Achievements)

We all help each other, pitch in.

(Failings)

Our Aboriginal problem is just disastrous.

We seem to have been inclusive with a number of different races, but the one race we haven't been able to bind into it is the Aboriginal race.

-- Group No. 7: Townsville, white-collar, 35-plus

Lucky. Like the social security system. There's a good and bad side to that. It can encourage people to go surfing all day.

(Achievements)

Sport.

Good at pitching in and doing things.

Help people if they're in trouble.

(Failings)

The way we treated the Aborigines. That's the major failing of our society.

-- Group No. 8: Mt Isa, white-collar, under 35

Simple, laid back, relaxed.

Being laid back can be a bit annoying. Competition isn't very strong. It's not striving enough.

(Achievements)

Multiculturalism: basically I think we have done it very well compared to other countries.

Our doctors and breakthroughs rival America's.

-- Group No. 9: Darwin, blue-collar, under 35

Multicultural.

Relaxed and unpretentious, accepting of other people, so long as you're a good bloke. There's the usual racism and bigotry too.

(Achievements?)

Our self-sufficiency – medically, educationally, agriculturally. Fred Hollows.

(Failings?)

Environmental protection.

We're hopeless at recognising initiative. They wait until America buys our good ideas, inventions or scientific discoveries.

Failure to recognise our past – Stolen Generations, Catholic church and child abuse; recognise it and get on with it.

Group No. 10: Katherine, white-collar, 35-plus

Laidback.

A fair society.

Classless. More even than other societies.

A First World country.

(Achievements)

Sport.

We don't have the very rich and very poor.

Anything's achievable if you want to work at it.

It's a land of opportunity.

(Failings)

Our treatment of Aboriginals. We've been criticised by Amnesty International over the deaths of Aborigines in jail.

-- Group No. 11: Perth, white-collar, under 35

Diverse. Many cultures.

We don't have kangaroos running down the main street.

Democratic.

Relaxed.

Friendly.

We can't be bothered making waves.

We're racist towards each other. Look at the number of different communities you have.

It's first-generation, mainly, but when the kids grow up, they're more accepted.

That's right. In the 70s I married an Italian and it was regarded as a mixed marriage by both sides. But we've come a long way. Our kids are much better than we were.

A lot of the racism these days is brought up by the system giving handouts and being abused. Like the Aboriginal communities get grants, loans and a lot of things given to them, whereas the white person has totally swung the other way. And you've got all the land rights and it's got right up people like farmers and the mining industry and a lot of people who rely on them for jobs.

(Achievements/Failings)

One of our real failings is our inability to come to terms with what our relationship is with Aboriginal people, whether we colonise the place or invaded it or what.

Is it our job to come to terms with our historical past? I don't think it is. I think it's time we all accepted the past. I agree with the Prime Minister. Why should he say sorry for something that happened 200 years ago? It's not for him to say that. The English are the ones who colonised, invaded, whatever word you use.

We still have white and black. It's segregation in this country.

We just keep repeating the same problem.

-- Group No. 12: Adelaide, blue-collar, 35-plus

Very relaxed.

Friendly.

We give people a go, but quite often we give people too many goes. Those boat people should be sent back where they come from or be blown up in the water.

We have a lot of ethnic groups. Everyone assimilates a lot better. In the UK they have these Pakistani areas and Indian areas.

We like to think we're tolerant. A lot of us are. There's also the very red-necked. They beat up on social stereotypes and bag them when they see them, although they don't know them.

If you're willing to work, there's nothing you can't turn your hand to.

We give people a fair go, but they have to want to have a go.

Most people don't give a rat's arse. You don't see people going down the street marching. We're not going to start throwing bombs. And it's pretty well known around the world. They (boat people) target Australia. It's a helluva long way to go. We're good guys.

(Achievements)

Sport.

Sciences, medicine.

We're pretty big on helping foreign countries. If there's a crisis somewhere, we send aid, no matter where it is.

Australians are quick to help someone who can't help themselves.

(Failings)

The cane toad.

And the rabbit.

Aboriginal people. Everything we've done to them. Not so much now but taking their children and putting them in reserves

-- Group No. 13: Kalgoorlie, blue-collar, under 35

Multicultural, for a start.

And relaxed.

A lucky country. A lot of opportunities for jobs. Free to do what we want. Go anywhere we like.

People need to understand that this is the way we do things, and if you want to live with us then you treat our environment the same as we do. Otherwise we don't want you here.

(Achievements)

Sport.

Democracy.

No civil wars.

(Has Australia always been internally peaceful?)

No. The Aboriginals. That's not internal peace at all. They want their land back and they want us to pay to go onto their land.

-- Group No. 14: Mt Gambier, white-collar, under 35

THEME TWO: ATTITUDE TO ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS

Non-Aboriginal Australian's attitudes to Aboriginal Australians are made up from a number of strands. We may categorise the main strands, and the groups who hold them, as follows:

'The nice to be nicers'

These are people who do not have much personal knowledge of Aboriginal people but whose attitudes are based on their liberal or left of centre ideology. They support Aboriginal claims because they believe that Australian society has dealt badly with the Aboriginal population, and they further believe that this society must make amends, as much for its own sake as for the sake of the Aborigines.

'The informed supporters'

These are people who know a lot about the lives of Aboriginal Australians, who know that many Aborigines live lives which are fulfilling and that many do not. They feel that many Aborigines are victims of society and feel the need to work together with Aboriginal Australians to help them develop a life which gives them self-respect and hope.

'The uninformed majority'

These are people who see Aboriginal Australians in stereotypic images: either as noble tribesmen or as depraved and dependent wasters. They are likely to emphasise Aboriginal anti-social behaviour of one form or another: from drunkenness to destruction of houses or cars, as though it was the norm, as though it did not apply to non-Aborigines as well, and without asking themselves why some people behaved in this way. They assert that they are not racist: that if Aboriginal Australians were prepared to live and work like they do they would accept them without question.

'The racist minority'

These are people who are emotionally antagonistic to Aborigines and to other minority groups. They are often people who see themselves as marginalised by their society, or who have indeed been marginalised, and who thus lack social or personal self-confidence or self-respect. They need an 'out group' against whom to direct their social discomfort. Sometimes they are people whose emotional antagonism

seems to flow from an aggression whose wells are deep and difficult to understand.

Apart from this categorisation, common themes which are expressed about Aboriginal Australians include:

Aborigines have been treated badly by Australian society.

Many Aborigines have low self-esteem and low-self respect.

Many Aborigines will not take responsibility for themselves and are addicted to welfare.

Much of the money given in welfare to Aborigines is wasted.

Aboriginal Australians are given welfare in excess of non-Aboriginal Australians, and this is not fair: all people should be treated equally.

Many people who call themselves Aborigines are not Aborigines, and adopt the label in order to claim welfare or other benefits.

Many land claims are at best frivolous and at worst vexatious and economically irresponsible, and are often designed to disrupt development of one form or another.

Aboriginal people cannot live in two societies: they must opt either for a tribal society which is self sufficient (based on traditional pre-occupation behaviour), or become part of the emerging multi-cultural society and accept the norms of this society.

What people said

This Melbourne group exhibited many of the features found throughout Australia: a sense of concern, lack of real knowledge, paternalism, impatience, at times goodwill, certainly ambivalence.

I feel sorry for them.

Looks like it's always someone else's fault.

I think they get set up to fail (Sydney housing co-operative).

It's up to you to pull yourself out of the shit.

Yeah, at an individual level, but they've had their land taken away from them.

But no one forces them to drink. Why blame other people.

I tend to agree but I guess they weren't educated to use their money wisely.

There are not enough support systems. A lot of Australian's are racists.

We should preserve their way of life.

They need support systems. It's OK to give them their land back. . . .

I'm against giving the land back.

Terra nullius. 1992 High Court decided this was wrong.

*Should be grateful the English colonised . . . Not the French or Spaniards.
They slaughtered half the Aboriginals!*

You can't apologise for what happened a long time ago.

You can.

It's important they be integrated and have the same opportunities as everyone else.

They supposedly do, but I'm not sure.

They do if they want them.

Since 1972 we have spent in excess of \$20bn. They've always got Canberra to fall back on. Give them some freehold land and let them make their own mistakes. Welfare is what they've taught them.

Do you think there's the same opportunities?

Koori friend has been brought up as well as me or any of my friends.

I grew up in country NSW. They were no different from the rest of us. Did just as well.

I went to school with a white person who claimed she had aboriginal background.

You can be one sixteenth class and still claim.

-- Group No.1: Melbourne, white collar, under-35

Getting too much for nothing. I know a few and they're good blokes, but others ripping the system off. A minority of 5 or 6 per cent and getting billions

of dollars a year and do nothing with it. They give 'em good houses and they wreck 'em.

Social services shd be equal for everyone, but Aborigines certainly milk and system and get more than you or I.

And this sorry business

And it's not us. The British came over and did those things. It wasn't us. So why should we have to apologise for something they did.

The Govt is trying to look good overseas. But we don't treat our poor as bad as some countries overseas.

There are poor whites as well as poor blacks.

Money doesn't solve the problem and it creates a problem. If they earn it and earn self-respect . . . a job doesn't just give you money, it gives you self worth and a lot of other things. They'll take that money and drink it. Vicious cycle of abuse, drinking, waste of money.

Be prepared to be equal and be treated as equal.

The most racist of the lot are the black people themselves. Police say if they're white we can escort them off the property, but if we're black we can't touch them.

-- Group No. 2: Ballarat, blue-collar 35-plus

My wife's part Aboriginal. They were hard done by, no doubt about it, but there are genuine ones out there who reconcile. But the Aboriginals have got to want to help themselves and get off that gravy train. They say, the white fella owes us this. And they want to take, and not give anything back.

The unforgiveness.

It was before I was born. It's got nothing to do with me or my children. They had national sorry day at school but I don't agree, I'm sorry. We give them every opportunity and they don't do anything.

In NZ they've got their Treaty of Waitangi, which is their reconciliation thing. If you want a free and equal society you have to treat people fairly and equally, and we are not treating Aborigines equally with us. Like social security.

All Australian citizens should be treated the same, but they're not.

Group No. 3: Sydney West, blue-collar, 35-plus

*We've been here over 200 years. What do you give to make them happy?
You've got to draw a line.*

Like everybody who's given something for nothing, they say, "What else is there?"

On the outskirts of Taree there was an Aboriginal housing estate. When I drove past a year later, there was holes, dogs, broken fences. The old estate's now condemned and they're building a new one further back.

The trouble is now that if you've got two drops of black blood, you're considered Aboriginal, which I think is just ridiculous.

There aren't any real Aborigines left.

They were quite happy living their own life in the bush and the white man just moved in and ruined the whole thing.

Mean by no real Aborigine?

I feel we stuffed up, basically. My mother grew up in Dubbo next door to Aborigines, the pure ones. And they were so black and just wonderful, terrific people. But I don't think they wanted to be "civilised" in the way we know it.

Very few tribal Aborigines living in the centre of Australia. That, to me, is the true Aboriginal.

You can be 100% white and still claim to be Aboriginal if you are accepted by an elder in the group. It's a business.

We give them money because that does something to relieve our guilt, and gives us something to complain about.

The money goes to the wrong people.

Of course it does. Money from government always goes to the wrong place.

-- Group No. 4: Sydney North, white-collar 35-plus

I think we've failed with the Aborigines myself. We've given them too much and the white people are getting upset. It's angering them.

I feel the same thing. They get all different extra aids that white people don't. The authorities don't want to touch them. A white person would be behind bars quick-smart.

I don't really agree. We may have gone from one extreme of taking everything from them and now have a contorted system which are not available to everyone but I don't think we know what we want in relation to Aborigines.

The people who make the policy are seen as divorced from the people who have to live with it. There has to be some coming together of the Aboriginal and white society.

We gave them a lot of things but they've gone off the rails. Lost touch with their heritage.

My daughter wants wants wants, and I don't want her growing up easily getting everything she wants. Giving the Aborigines free housing and health is not the answer, there needs to be another mechanism. I don't have an answer but unless they value things they aren't going to look after them.

They are given everything from Day One and its bred into them that they are entitled.

They are not taught to respect things that are either their own or someone else. You've got to live with them to know.

(Has Moree changed?)

The town at the moment is taking an active role in trying to promote employment among Aboriginals.

The Cotton program. Seems to be working.

But it's still a bit ghettoised on a social level, even though there is contact at work. But there appears to be a lot of positive will in Moree. But there are standards of behaviour tolerated at the high school which are damaging to all students, particularly on the part of Aboriginal students.

It's a lot better since the Aboriginal was shot in the Imperial Hotel 17 or 18 years ago, but you still get a few little nasties coming in. But we have no trouble in this club.

When they are at work in the daytime they're fine, but they slip back at night when they are mixing with Aborigines, their speech, for a start. Among a few their behaviour differs.

-- Group No. 5: Moree, blue-collar, 35-plus

The half-castes have got a problem.

White Australians don't have a problem with Aborigines, Aborigines have a problem with white Australians. 1/16th Aborigine and their on full pensions.

They get so many handouts. We have to work for house, education. The more they get the more they expect.

They keep asking for more and more and they'll keep getting it.

My aunty was given a full wage while doing an apprenticeship (Aboriginal aunt adopted into family), although had all the same opportunities as us, she was given it on a platter. She's got a chip on her shoulder.

Why?

Because they think they are special. OK, they were here before everyone else arrived but it was many moons ago, it was not us that fought them back then. They should not leave in the past.

I don't think the Aboriginal culture was tolerated in the beginning, things are changing now. About 200 years ago our culture was forced on them and then alcohol and other things -- their bodies were not immune to. So we have brought some on ourselves but all these benefits are wrong. And out west you don't have a problem; where the true full bloods are. The problem is from both sides.

Full bloods?

They're not taking advantage. But so many people in the city are just sitting around getting drunk all the time but they are capable of getting education.

Majority?

*I'd say it's a majority
A fair percentage.*

The coon cheese in the paper last Sunday. It wasn't called coon cheese because of an Aborigine, but someone put it together and suddenly it was an offence.

It was ridiculous.

The founder's name was Coon, and some Aboriginal guy kicked up s stink and wants to take it to court because he finds it offensive.

Why is black offensive and white not?

They are not proud. If they call me a white fella, that's exactly what I am.

Put yourself in the position of someone who is the object of prejudice?

Everyone in this room would've been picked on at some time in their lives.

I was picked on today. But I wouldn't change the way I feel about myself because of what someone else said about me.

If the discrimination was genuine it would be fine.

A lot of people who have adopted Aboriginal children have said they grow up with a chip on their shoulder.

It's like we owe them for whatever, invading their country.

Most people turn adversity into opportunity, why can't they? Some are producing art and having tours, why can't they do more of that?

A lot of them don't want to work. They get things handed to them on a platter when their young.

Never seen one positive story; we're downtrodden and oppressed, (Aborigines TV programs) never features athletes or politicians, they always highlight bad stories.

(Three said they had Aboriginal friends)

They can't believe how the others behave. They're the minority. They are out there doing their days work.

I have Aboriginal neighbours. (Story about kids in nappies on frosty morning and neighbour went in with some kids clothing and was told to 'fuck off racist bitch'.

They are more racist than we are.

I taught a couple of them to drive. They were decent, a dancer and an actress.

Steve Renouf got his jaw broken for working when he went back to his home town.

When Cathy Freeman held up the Aboriginal flag, that was great.

It is an Australian flag.

She was supporting her community and the country.

If you are proud of who you are you can achieve whatever you want.

-- Group No. 6: Brisbane, blue-collar under 35

We've never had the education we should have about the Aboriginal race. It's a cultural shock to me, some of the things I've been picking up.

I was shocked to read that in Adelaide, where a lot of Irish came in, they would bury the children in the sand and make their parents watch while they kicked their heads off, and used them as a soccer ball. And I never knew that, and I was really really shocked. I thought that was really awful. And just chasing

the Aboriginals to catch them, raping their women. I didn't learn anything like that at school.

Total gap.

I grew up in Melbourne and didn't know Aboriginals existed.

No I didn't either. I went to Lakes Entrance and saw a group of them there and was informed they were Aboriginals.

We were told the Dreamtime stories, but they appeared very childish and silly when we were at high school. (What do you think of them now?) There's obviously meaning behind them that we didn't pick up and weren't told about.

I had a little friend, Patrick, an Aboriginal boy, and we went to a birthday party together when we were in primary school. In secondary school I played basketball and we had Aboriginal girls in our team. We never thought of anything different.

I come from Barwon and there were a lot of Aboriginals in the town. My mother's written books on the different tribes around Barwon.

I grew up in Townsville and there were a lot of dark families and we played with them. They were no different. There were about six girls they took off Palm (Island), which is a bad story. They'd never been in a white community before, and put them St Margaret Mary's (Catholic secondary school for girls) in South Townsville, and I keep in touch with them still. How they felt was just so awkward for them, it was really sad.

We adopted one of the Lost Generations – that's what he'd say now, but he adopted our name and everything. I'm still in touch with him. He lives in Perth and he's a policeman.

Do you see him like as if he's your brother?

Oh yes. We grew up together. Also when I was in the Army we had many black colleagues, and they're just the same as anybody else. And some of them were straight from the bush, but they adapted to us and we adapted to them. There's no difference.

Yeah, we had one in the Army, he could do anything. He was a recovery man, mechanic, and we got on to talking about some of their cultures, pointing the bone and all that, and we were quite naïve. I didn't believe, looking at him, how serious that was.

Was there any racial prejudice against those blacks?

No.

I'd find that hard to believe. Even from Barwon I know a lot of people our age who just . . .

No, see we worked in infantry and we had to be mates, it had to be that tight, and there was nothing.

The Aboriginality problem is huge here in Townsville. I've always thought – and what you've said bears me out – the problem is really not racial. It's about poverty. There are mountains of alcoholics and 'parkies' who just sleep around the park.

There are people trying to do something about it and, yes, they are on unemployment benefits, and much of the problem has come from Aboriginals who have been sentenced into the prison, because there is no system to take them back to their communities. And the imprisonment rate per capita is much higher for the Aboriginal community than for the white community. Poverty and education. Education both ways.

You can't put nomadic people into a house and expect them to know what to do.

They have to be educated by their own people, because they don't believe we are helping them.

They need to be educated into the Aboriginal ways, not to be thrown into a classroom and made to learn the white man's ways. I've been through the mission up north, near Cooktown. Heartbreaking. The lack of self-esteem. And they're all living in brand new brick homes that have been constructed for them. They'd rather be in a tee-pee out in the scrub, I'm sure. They seem to have lost respect for themselves so they don't have respect for anything else.

We've done that to them.

Yes.

The other important thing is the white people's expectation of them. They expect them to be black white people, they don't expect them to be black black people.

That's what I'm saying – the education has to be both ways. We had an excellent week at school when one of the teachers got an indigenous person in, and the kids were fascinated – the story of his life, of his family.

Yes, our kids have had that too, and they've come home fascinated, asking me if I know how to work a didgeridoo.

But we're not always doing the right thing. One of my sons, a friend of his is an Aborigine and he copped a special award at school for being an Aborigine, and he said, "What's this?" And he was pretty well disgusted that the school differentiated him from being a normal person.

It's fine for them to pursue their traditional education, but we also need to see that they are taught basic nutrition and good health habits, such as diet and vaccination.

At no point does anyone accept that 98 per cent of Aboriginals are at least 50 per cent white. Legislatively there is no acknowledgment of their Caucasian roots. Within ATSIC what acknowledgment is there of your whiteness? This friend of mine has talked to me about how disgusted she is at the way ATSIC treats black people. She calls them some really rude names. She says they don't care about the black people. They care only about the jobs and the money that they get. And I was shocked. She said they couldn't give two hoots about finding her a mechanic's apprenticeship. And she was really keen.

I have a friend, a teacher, who's Aborigine, but he gets really upset with Aborigines who believe they're Aborigines to the point of abusing the system.

Do many Aborigines have jobs in the town?

Very few.

One person goes off to work and when he comes back they all just take from him.

Whoever gets the money has to share it with everyone.

Murrandah Yanner's a classic example of it. He's chairman of the Carpentaria Land Council. The Aborigines have norms in their society just as we have. But the trouble is nowadays that's not there. It's only aspects of the tribal ways which are being utilised, not the full aspect.

They're usually sharing it for the wrong reasons anyway – alcohol or cigarettes, not health care.

Don't they get paid to go to school?

When I grew up, there were Aboriginal kids I went to school with, played sport together. I have quite a bit of interaction with them now, across the board. Personally I have never ever had a problem with racist comments by an Aborigine against me. And I've been in situations where I've had to say to blokes, "Clear out, you're not cutting the mustard." And I think the thing is I've always told them up-front there's two things I won't tolerate. One is coming to work pissed and the other thing is turning up late. And I've never had a problem with it. Some of the Aboriginal blokes in the yard are really

excellent. The strength of the relationship is, I treat them as an individual, he treats me as an individual, and colour never enters into the question. On that basis, I've got no problem whatsoever with reconciliation. But when some bloke says to me, "G'day mate, I'm black, I'm special, you treat me special", he can go to blazes. He's an Australian the same as me. He can get out and do work the same as I can, or he can bludge, but if you want to bludge, then you reap the consequences. The trouble is when people start putting these barriers up and saying, we're a black nation and we're a white nation.

It can be hard for them to get a job. A lot of people are prejudiced against them. My father wouldn't employ anyone who was dark. But then he wouldn't employ males either!

Look, when the Diggers went abroad in 1914, they stopped off in Ceylon. C.W. Bean wrote about how they went ashore and saw how poor the people were and were wanting to help the disadvantaged, set up a union almost, sort out the situation on the wharf, and all the rest of it. But after a couple of days ashore, when they saw what the society was like, the Australian soldiers were quite derogatory about the Singhalese, and said, "If that's the way you want to live, be damned if we're giving you any help." So it wasn't that they were essentially prejudiced against the Singhalese, because their initial action belied any prejudice, what they were prejudiced against were behaviour and society's standards. That has applicability to what we're talking about here.

People in Melbourne and Sydney say to us, "You ought to say sorry". The current generation of people have done nothing wrong. I would never say sorry because I've never done anything .

I agree.

-- Group No. 8: Mt Isa, white-collar, under 35

Racism?

Territorians are very racist towards Aborigines.

Yeah, but I think it's in a concerning way.

50% of the NT is owned by Aboriginal people. It's 'Gimme, gimme, gimme.'

It's issue-based racism, not because he's black.

Most can't say no to alcohol. They get more violent than an average person.

No. Blacks get drunk in public; whites get drunk in private.

If their house burns down, they don't care. It's all funded by the Government. But I must admit it's small percentage of them. I know where to get a brand new Landcruiser. They just left it in the creek bed.

They go to the Government and get a new one if it breaks down. I don't know for a fact but I'm told they get loans out and pay for a certain period of time and the Government pays the rest.

This is fact: if kids don't have money for lunch they can go to the school canteen and get lunch free.

They don't seem to be responsible or work. But we are taking the easy way out by giving them what they want.

We're still trying to find the best way to go about it. It's just a really long process.

They don't have schooling drummed into them.

What? Go to a white fella's school where they're using their second language?

So did a heap of Italians and Greeks. I didn't know how to speak English when I came here. I kept up my Italian. My parents are learning how to speak English.

We've just thrown money and more money at them.

I agree -- too much money through the wrong channels, but if we don't try . . .

Some work for their money just like you and me.

A minority I'd have thought.

It's hard to be brought up with values if your parents have no values at all. And also no hope of a job.

They do get put down a lot. If a white goes for a job 9 out 10 will get it. But not if you're Aboriginal.

I don't care about your colour if you prove yourself.

I agree. If he's got the qualifications I don't care what colour he is. Aborigines think it's because they're black. It's not. It's because of the way they live and treat Australians.

With my boss it has a lot to do with colour. You'd like to think it wouldn't but it does.

White people have the whole house thing in our mentality, and we do these things in the house. What looks good to us may not look good to them.

They don't appreciate what they're given.

My sister's exactly the same!

-- Group No. 9: Darwin, blue-collar, under 35

We're a blokes society and blokes don't like to face up to the emotional side. I don't think many people in this town are sympathetic to the Stolen Generations.

A couple of hundred years ago, the British Government dumped a heap of people here they didn't want. They caused the problem, and they can solve it. So they didn't feel responsible and we don't feel responsible.

Bigoted and racist?

Anyone who wasn't white Australian, anyone who's different. If you're an Aboriginal good bloke you'll be accepted

*.
If there's an Aboriginal at the bar he'll be looked at as a drunkard; if a white man's at the bar, he's having a good time.*

There's prejudice against Aboriginals here.

It's not overt, but you hear it 24 hours a day in conversation. I used to live on a cattle station, and we sat around at sundown discussing the black fellas. People put their anger and resentment on the black fella, someone who's lower down the scale than you are. We don't have sufficient self-esteem ourselves. I campaigned against land rights. We had the only blanket sacred site claim in Australia over our homestead and were forced to sell to Aborigines because we couldn't work the property.

If an Aboriginal lives the same way we do, its easier to call him a mate. Neither is the Aboriginal likely to accept whites. But it's the whites that have all the power.

I accept that, but racism isn't always a power thing; it's an attitude or feeling. Aboriginal not someone simply because they of a particular race. It's definitely behavioural based. It wouldn't matter who was in the gutter with their pants off, you would dislike them equally.

But there are attitudes: you don't have any better expectations of Aboriginal people.

People (of both races) in Katherine don't mix.

It's two-sided.

The sub-text of racism is injustice and unfairness.

There's an expectation that children of Aboriginal parents should go to school, but that's not their standard. Some Aboriginal communities are very strong in their own culture.

It's a lack of empathy. Lots of people say they get a free lunch, why should they, but they are not seeing the bigger picture, the whole struggle to get to the school ground.

We are told they need special help. (Do you accept?) Yes, oh yes. The Aboriginal people have a very sorry lot.

This is a really big battle for me to come out on what I know is the right side, but yes I believe in affirmative action because they're so far behind (land claim woman). My battle is with the Northern Territory, how we were taught to think, but then we become the baddies and you're always justifying, even though you hadn't been as good as you should. The republic, I was so pleased when they got done. This is part of understanding the Pauline Hanson stuff, see. I've been brought up in the Territory and there's a part of me -- I know it's not right, I try to fight this back -- that fully understands the reasons why. Not just the land rights issue but all the other reasons. People feel they're left out, especially up here.

In the Northern Territory everyone lives at a disadvantage, and they're coming up here telling us we're white supremacists.

-- Group No. 10: Katherine, white-collar, 35-plus

We've tried to do the right thing, probably mistaken. The Stolen Generations.

I think that was correct by the standards of the day.

There are two different standards: there are Aboriginals and there's us. Take Austudy, for example. Why is there an Abstudy? Why are we treating them different? There shouldn't be a difference.

As a collection agent, I've seen government departments pay loan payments because they're struggling. If my home loan is behind I've never seen that available to Caucasians or Asians.

It's like we always owe them something. We're always giving them things to make ourselves feel better for what we've done to them. But we really haven't done anything to them. We tried to do the right thing.

You can't say "nothing".

We have done things to them but I don't think we've gone the right way about solving the problem and integrating them into our society.

We took their land. I don't really know how I feel. Maybe not every culture changes the way we change. Maybe that's why they have separate Abstudy and so on.

One of the biggest problems is alcohol. I've lived in country towns like Carnarvon and 99 per cent of them would be drunk by 10 o'clock in the morning.

(Is it possible to have equal treatment while at the same time recognising cultural differences?)

Well, every other nationality does. The Italian community, the Greeks, the Asians. Why can't Aboriginals? They seem to make life hard for themselves and for everybody else. They have a chip on their shoulder. I'm not racist, but they do walk around as if they've got a chip on their shoulder. Something needs to be done to help them blend in with our society, or stick to their own and act civilly. Fair enough, when we first came here we made mistakes, but we've progressed and they seem to want to stick there, holding a grudge. What do you do?

The problem stems right from the top, with Aboriginal activists thwarting what we do to try to make them part of society.

Why do the Aborigines get so many benefits?

They get different social security payments to everybody else.

They get all these allowances to help them live, not to buy alcohol. They don't want to be part of society.

-- Group No. 11: Perth, white-collar, under 35

I think it'd be nice to resolve the conflict. I haven't been to Victoria Square yet when I haven't seen a load of drunken Aborigines hanging around. That appals me. Not only is that a symptom of this country but how it must look to visitors to our city as well.

My father used to work with Aborigines a lot in his job. He said the Aborigines lost their identity when they came to towns, especially the elders, and they're just trying to find some purpose.

When I was in Corrections we had a lecture from an Aboriginal person rather high up in government areas. It was a very good lecture up till his last sentence, when he said: "We have a problem. I don't know what you are going to do about it." I don't think it's the system that's failing. I think they've got the wrong people in the wrong places to make the system work properly.

I think we have to get them to help themselves more.

Some of them don't want that.

But when this mentality comes down from the top – that we have this problem jointly; what and you going to do about it – that's going to filter down to the people who need the help. That's why they're lying around in Victoria Square.

I feel sorry for them. We destroyed their culture. And this next generation don't know what their culture is. It's too late now. We can't put the Aborigines back to where they were 100 years ago. I don't know what we do.

It's disheartening to the white people to hear stories from around the country about how the system is being abused. We're putting in our hours of work, paying our taxes and all this money is spent but it makes no progress.

To a certain extent, yes, but there are white people, long-term unemployed, have no intention of ever getting a job, spend their money on the pokies or alcohol, but they're not particularly visible because of the colour of their skin.

-- Group No. 12: Adelaide, blue-collar, 35-plus

The method of repair is stuffed. Throwing money at it – that's all it is. Give 'em everything on a silver plate. Think that'll win their respect. Obviously they were hard done by by the white race generations ago, but throwing money at it doesn't fix anything.

I'm actually Aboriginal. My mother's Aboriginal. My family, some of them, do depend on the dole, don't help themselves, don't have any respect for themselves. But some of us – my brothers, myself -- we've worked for what we've got. Everything we have . . . we've gone to school, we've got an education, now we're out in the workforce and we're doing something for our children. So people obviously can't say, "Oh, you're Aboriginal, blah blah blah". We want people to know that just because we have a different coloured skin, we're not different.

You can't help the ones who don't want to help themselves.

People have no idea I'm Aboriginal. They think I'm Greek or Italian, and I often have them coming up to me and speaking in the local language and I look at them completely dumbfounded, because I only understand some of it, and that's my fault because I haven't taken the time to learn it. But I lot of them do bring it on themselves. I'm not disagreeing with that. I have no sympathy.

Do we have any percentages on how many are useless gits? All I've ever seen are maybe a dozen or fifteen Aborigines in a job.

I don't agree with that. A mate of mine, his son plays for the West Coast Eagles. He had to come up here and start from scratch. He's worked in the mines, just like me and my old man.

I'm not having a go at them. I'm just trying to let you know how ignorant I am.

All we ever get are negative reports (in the media).

Even if they cleaned themselves up, no one would take them on because people already have a bad view of them.

I've never once had a problem being an Aboriginal either at high school – I've never been teased – I grew up with all my cousins and, God, if you looked at them you'd know straightaway they were Aboriginal people. But not once have I ever been told I couldn't do something because of where I am from and who I am. I've never been told I can't do something because I'm black. I think that makes you more determined to do it.

-- Group No. 13: Kalgoorlie, blue-collar, under 35

They are treated right now. They get a lot from the Government that other people don't get.

Everyone should be equal. They get a lot of benefits. I agree with equal opportunity. I don't agree with them getting any special treatment.

-- Group No. 14: Mt Gambier, white-collar, under 35

THEME THREE: KNOWLEDGE OF, AND ATTITUDES TO, RECONCILIATION

Across Australia, north and south, the reconciliation *process* – as distinct from the *idea* -- barely registered on the radar screens of ordinary people. They knew little or nothing about the process, the Council, or the Draft Declaration.

Confusion abounded. The process of reconciliation was confused with the recently failed referendum on a Preamble for the Australian Constitution, or with the Mabo case, or with the Prime Minister's 10-point plan for native title.

This confusion over *process* is profoundly damaging to the *idea* of reconciliation, because people cannot disjoin reconciliation from issues of land ownership and native title.

In northern Australia, especially in regional areas of high contact between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, this confusion is almost fatally damaging.

People in northern Australia are more aware than those in southern Australia of the idea of reconciliation. Many said they lived "reconciliation" every day. They said that did not need a label for it. They had been to school with Aboriginal people, had grown up with them, worked alongside them, socialised with them.

Many were dismissive of a formal reconciliation process. Others said that formal reconciliation would have some symbolic significance.

All were agreed, however, that any attempt at formal reconciliation imposed by "southern" academics, do-gooders, bureaucrats or politicians was bound to fail, because such people knew nothing about the day-to-day reality of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

People in northern Australia feel particularly vulnerable to what they fear will be the economic consequences of reconciliation, because they see it as inextricably bound up with land claims.

They are suspicious that "southerners" would heedlessly trade off land rights and other benefits to Aborigines as part of the reconciliation process, thus increasing – at their expense -- the already existing positive discrimination in favour of Aborigines.

They saw in this the seeds of national disunity, as well as personal disadvantage.

Therefore, many reject out of hand any concessions in the Draft Declaration which they discern as providing opportunities for clever lawyers to make claims for land or for compensation on account of other wrongs -- the Stolen Generations, for example.

Many question whether a formal process of reconciliation is worth the risk, especially since they see themselves as living the idea reconciliation every day.

They also question whether reconciliation will make a jot of difference to the plight of those Aborigines whom they see as in the most desperate circumstances, those "parkies" or "long grass people" who appear to be caught irretrievably in a cycle of welfare dependency, substance abuse, violence and loss of human dignity.

For other Aborigines -- those living as part of mainstream society -- they see "reconciliation" as an irrelevancy.

In southern Australia, knowledge of the process of reconciliation was even more vestigial than in northern Australia. However, the idea of reconciliation did not carry with it the threat of proximate economic loss as it did in the north. Even so, people in southern Australia were concerned about the economic consequences of any formal reconciliation process, and this dampened their support for the idea.

In all parts of Australia there was an almost inexpressible exasperation with what respondents called "the Aboriginal problem". People wanted it fixed, solved, put behind them. If reconciliation would accomplish that, then they were all for it. However, few thought that it would. Many were deeply suspicious about the involvement of what they called Aboriginal activists, whom they regarded as not "real" Aborigines to begin with, and as opportunists seeking to advance their personal interests without regard to the welfare of "real" Aborigines, and certainly without regard to the true welfare of Australia as a whole.

The negative view -- expressed by the bulk of our respondents -- was that formal reconciliation would be a process in which the white community was once again lacerated for past misdeeds, and milked of further money which would be squandered in exactly the same way as the billions which were perceived to have been spent ineffectually on Aborigines already. These people considered formal reconciliation to be a divisive, rather than a unifying, influence.

The positive view -- usually expressed by white-collar women and by a few of the better educated men -- was that a formal reconciliation process might be at least an important symbolic gesture. It was not a process which could, on its own, solve all the social, health, educational and behavioural problems

associated with Aboriginal people, but it might encourage Aboriginal people to think that white Australia really did care, and it might encourage white Australians to face up to the past with greater honesty. These people hoped that, as a result, formal reconciliation might be a unifying influence.

What do you think of the idea of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians? What can you tell me about it? Have you heard about a document of reconciliation? What, if anything, do you know about it? Whose idea is it? How do you feel about the idea of a document like that?

What people said

(Reconciliation)

Three had heard about the idea, but none knew anything about it.

I don't know.

Is that when Australia says sorry?

Didn't he (John Howard) come out with the 10-point plan instead?

(The Council)

Is Mansell tied up in it?

The Aboriginal embassy in Canberra?

It's got not just Aborigines on the council. I'm pretty sure it's elected by the Aborigines themselves.

(The Declaration)

No one had heard of it. They confused with the constitutional preamble:

It said something about mateship and had to be changed to kinship or something.

Wasn't it written by the famous Australian writer?

Keneally?

-- Group No.1: Melbourne, white collar, under-35

In Group 2, no one had heard of the reconciliation process.

Just this stuff of the Aborigines asking for us to say sorry.

When they took the kids off them, they weren't taken off in malice.

They were trying to be nasty. They were trying to stamp out the Aboriginal race.

They don't seem to blend with society.

Is that because white society is sick of giving them things.

Is it that or is it that we're sick of the situation?

It was generally agreed that the latter was the case.

There are very few full blood Aborigines left, and the 32nd -casts or whatever are getting all the money.

One respondent had heard of the Council; no one had heard of a Declaration.

-- Group No. 2: Ballarat, blue-collar 35-plus

In Group 3, two or three had heard of the reconciliation process. To some, it was synonymous with land rights, for which one or two had some sympathy.

It needs an attitude change on both sides.

They want their land back at the same time and a lot of people don't want to give them the land back.

It only means something if that comes with it. It's easy to say sorry, that's just a word, isn't it. But if the sorry comes with what's owed to them, maybe they'll change their attitude.

Mambo (sic), wasn't it? He was the first to put a claim in.

There are lots of landowners, recognised as the traditional landowners, and there are others: all of a sudden there's a big suburb out there and they want that land, with everything on it.

I think reconciliation is about making amends, not about land or money or anything.

One respondent had heard of the Council and of the Declaration. He was a listener to Parliamentary broadcasts on PNN. His knowledge was fragmentary.

There's been some arguments about the words. It's basically a Government initiative, with ATSIC and people like that to try to find a form of words to put the bad parts of our history behind us and go into the future.

Others knew nothing about the matter, but were prepared to countenance it if everyone was treated equally.

The missus, being involved at school, if she knows about she hasn't mentioned it to me. (The respondent's wife was Aboriginal).

Sounds good.

Sounds too easy.

It's not going to be easy, by any means.

Great idea. It's got to happen sometime. Both parties have to give a bit. That's what life's all about.

Yeah, as long as both parties stand by it. It's attitudes that are the main things that have to change. I want to see fairness on both sides. But I travel by train and I see Aborigines get off at Mt Druitt, climb over the barriers, swear at ticket attendants and think nothing of it. I'm not prejudiced, but I don't see too many Caucasians and Asians doing the same thing. But the Aborigines, especially the younger ones, just think it's open slather.

Yeah. They feel like they're owed.

There's an anger to them.

But where does the anger come from? It comes from the past.

If you want a free and equal society you have to treat people fairly and equally, and we are not treating Aborigines equally with us. Like social security.

All Australian citizens should be treated the same, but they're not.

-- Group No. 3: Sydney West , blue-collar, 35-plus

In Group 4, no one had heard of the reconciliation process, but again it was assumed to be connected with land rights. There was also a view that reconciliation was a piece of window-dressing for the Olympic Games.

Mabo, that's going a long way towards it. Some Aborigines are being greedy about it.

They're looking at all the prime properties.

It's to do with the Year 2000 and the Olympics.

No one knew anything about the Council or a Declaration.

-- Group No. 4: Sydney North, white-collar 35-plus

Group 5, in the high-contact area of Moree, were much more aware of the reconciliation process than were people in Victoria or Sydney.

You hear about it quite a lot. On the news; some politicians talk about it, our community here has said it (sorry).

It means to come to terms with the past and to accept those rights and wrongs and take a fresh approach to the future together.

It seemed to happen a couple of years ago and came to a dead halt with Pauline Hanson. The reconciliation movement has been pretty quiet for a couple of years now.

Three had heard of the Council, but knew nothing about it. They confused it with ATSIC, about which some had a low opinion.

Some Aboriginal leaders live off division. Mercenary, fairly powerful leaders, adopt standover tactics in their own community. Their way of life is putting down white society and accusing any Aborigines who try to bring white and Aboriginal society together as an Uncle Tom.

There was also puzzlement about why the Council should be brought to an end on 31 December 2000.

Reconciliation is going to take a hell of a long time.

-- Group No. 5: Moree, blue-collar, 35-plus

In Group 6, half had heard of the reconciliation process and half had not. They had no confidence, however, that it would make any difference. If it were to proceed, it would have to be on the basis of equality among all Australians. Again, there was resentment about perceived favoured treatment for Aborigines.

The Government's going to give them a whole heap of money to pay them back. They'll still have no education because they don't want it.

They don't want it, that's right. They don't want a house, they don't want white society. They've got a right to that. Why should we drag them out of the bush and force them?

It's the ones who sit in Brisbane who say we want this and that but don't want to live the original life.

In Lismore they have government houses, new furniture, brand new car. In a month, the car burnt and the furniture trashed.

I can't see why the tax payer should pay for things that happened hundreds of years ago.

It's not a money issue. They want an apology.

They won't say thanks for any apology.

It's all one way.

We should all be on the same and equal footing, the same benefits.

All racism is bad.

This groups knew nothing about the Council. One or two confused it with ATSIC.

They were open to the idea of a document of reconciliation, but said there could be no quick fix.

It would take a generation or more to become the way of life.

But it would be worth it.

-- Group No. 6: Brisbane, blue-collar under 35

In the high-contact area of Townsville people were used to hearing about reconciliation, and were aware that it was being given attention in the schools. However, it was not something the adult population had signed on to. Again, the issue of preferential treatment for Aborigines was seen as a barrier to reconciliation.

Yes, there's a lot (of talk about reconciliation) at school.

Only the children are starting to talk about it.

Yes the kids in the primary school. It's starting to gel. But the parents aren't supportive.

You get into a fight if you start talking to an adult about it. They're absolutely convinced that (Aborigines) are treated so much better than we are, the major thing being that if an Aboriginal breaks the law, they just get away with it. The other thing is medical, dental benefits, coaching. I can't see why, if people are disadvantaged, you'd make a fuss about giving them some sort of help.

I had friends who adopted an Aborigine, and the two kids, one white, one black, had to get the bus to school. One – the Aborigine -- got free bus travel and the other one didn't.

Yeah and if they get into a hire-purchase agreement and pull out, they (the retailer) just write it off as a bad debt.

They were open to the concept of reconciliation, but were inclined to see it as something which could only effectively take place at the individual level. Some felt that at a personal level, they already lived the reconciliation ideal. A formal process might assist, but on its own would not be enough. Again, people expressed the view that reconciliation had to be a two-way process.

To me, reconciliation is about just walking up to an Aborigine in the street and saying, "I'm terribly sorry about what my culture did to your culture". Has anyone ever done that?

I don't think we should say sorry.

But we should acknowledge it.

I'm bringing up my kids to be more tolerant.

They need to know more than that some people are teaching their children not to be racist. There needs to be education on both sides. I didn't know what racism was until I came to Townsville and I was absolutely horrified at the racism expressed to me by black people. I don't blame them, because if I was in their shoes I think I'd feel the same way. White people and black people need education drastically.

I reckon with the Stolen Generations people thought they were doing the right thing.

A hundred per cent. There's no difference between black and white. In my family, when my mother was pregnant with her fourth child, my father ran away and they put us three in the home. When she had the baby, they said, you can't look after that baby and they adopted it out. She lost that baby. And they wouldn't let us kids out of the home, and I was stuck in that home for 15 years. They thought they were doing the right thing. No one needs to say sorry to me.

The white society should be made to acknowledge what went on.

I work pretty closely with an Aboriginal women's movement. The members of that council I've known fairly intimately for more than 30 years. I was absolutely amazed when someone stood up and said something about reconciliation. And what had happened was, this old black lady and I hadn't

seen each other for a few years, and someone had taken a photo of us. We were sitting holding hands. She has Alzheimers now. And someone said, "Oh, that's like a reconciliation photo", noting the black and white hands held. And those women said, "Reconciliation bullshit. We've been mates for years."

Quite a few had heard about the council but none knew anything about it.

-- Group No. 7: Townsville, white-collar, 35-plus

Group 8 in Mt Isa felt put upon by the "southern" elite, and equated the idea of reconciliation with an apology, which they were not prepared to make.

People in Melbourne and Sydney say to us, "You ought to say sorry". The current generation of people have done nothing wrong.

I would never say sorry because I've never done anything .

I agree.

They had heard of the Council, but knew little about it.

To be perfectly honest I can't tell you anything about it, except that when I first heard of it I thought this is another way for the Government to waste my money.

Does the Governor-General have something to do with it?

-- Group No. 8: Mt Isa, white-collar, under 35

Group 9 in Darwin had thought little about reconciliation and knew little about the Council. The whole reconciliation process was new to them.

Was that the sorry vote?

Something in the past 6 or 7 months?

I heard of a council through ATSIC. I don't know if it's the same.

-- Group No. 9: Darwin, blue-collar, under 35

Group 10 in Katherine expressed many of the complexities inherent in the reconciliation process. They were aware of the process, and a few had taken part in local reconciliation meetings. One such person had seen a native title claim succeed over her family's station property and yet struggled to bring herself to support what she clearly believed was the need for reconciliation. Again there was resentment at "southern" self-righteousness, keenly felt because this group clearly saw themselves as empathetic with the needs of Aborigines.

It's a lack of empathy. Lots of people say they get a free lunch, why should they, but they are not seeing the bigger picture.

We are told they need special help. (Do you accept?) Yes, oh yes. The Aboriginal people have a very sorry lot.

This is a really big battle for me to come out on what I know is the right side, but yes I believe in affirmative action because they're so far behind.

In the Northern Territory everyone lives at a disadvantage, and they're coming up here telling us we're white supremacists.

This is part of understanding the Pauline Hanson stuff, see. I've been brought up in the Territory and there's a part of me -- I know it's not right, I try to fight this back -- that fully understands the reasons why. Not just the land rights issue but all the other reasons. People feel they're left out, especially up here.

I went to a reconciliation meeting recently, no Aboriginal turned up.

A lot of money is being spent and no one understands it and it's going nowhere.

There are no easy answers to the Aboriginal problem. Just giving them money means they are set up to fail because they don't have the skills.

-- Group No. 10: Katherine, white-collar, 35-plus

In Perth, people said there was not much talk about reconciliation. The R word provoked negative and cynical reactions.

(What does the word Reconciliation mean to you?)

Land rights. Saying sorry.

Compensation is the first thing that pops into my head.

What do you want from us? We can't give them any more. If you give them the prime mining lands, the economy goes down. You've got to be reasonable.

I don't feel we need to reconcile with them. Their behaviour is just different to ours.

Several respondents grew up with Aboriginal children. Some spoke warmly of them.

My sister's boyfriend is an Aborigine.

(How do the family feel about that?)

Horrified. They're all absolutely horrified. Just because he's Aboriginal. When they spoke to him on the phone they didn't know he was Aboriginal and they said what a nice man he sounded.

I was talking to this girl in the hotel one night and getting on with her quite well. As soon as she told me she was part-Aboriginal, my opinion instantly changed. It was more, "Oh . . ." It wasn't that I didn't get on with her after that, it's just that I didn't want to When I was growing up there were Aboriginal families in the streets, and they were blind drunk and there was screaming and brawls. There was blood all down the doors from their fights.

One had heard of Council, but knew nothing about it.

-- Group No. 11: Perth, white-collar, under 35

I heard the term. Maybe you can explain exactly what it means.

It's on the news at times; not lately, though.

Isn't something to do with stolen children?

They didn't do a treaty like they did in New Zealand, so it's never been established how they (the white settlers) took the country. I think it's got to do with working out that treaty process, and what their rights are.

Saying sorry is just a starting point. It's just a gesture.

Few knew anything about the Reconciliation process. Two had heard of the Council but knew nothing about it. There was utter confusion about it.

Did that come about as a result of the Mabo decision?

The chairperson keeps resigning in recent years because he hits a brick wall with the Government.

-- Group No. 12: Adelaide, blue-collar, 35-plus

We didn't make the mistake. We can't right the wrongs. And I don't believe in John Howard saying sorry.

The only thing that'd happen then is that it'd give them a legal right to sue. Even when he said whatever he said, about 250 cases went straight up to the court the next day. All thrown out of court because of a technicality.

I kept my daughter out of school the day they signed that sorry book. Why should my eight-year-old daughter say sorry for something she had nothing to do with? And she doesn't know what they're talking about.

I don't agree with money compensation, and I don't believe Howard should apologise, nor should anyone from this generation because it's history. But the stories need to be told. People need to be more aware of what happened.

I totally understand that.

You can't deny it happened. But we can't accept responsibility.

Tell me one continent where this didn't happen one way or another.

(Reconciliation meaning?)

Makes you think about having to say sorry for something I didn't do.

Makes me think I'll be paying more taxes so they can spend more money trying to buy back their love, friendship or respect. I see them every day on the streets and they don't do anything to make me like them.

(Is reconciliation talked about?)

A lot of what's talked about is negative because, for example, Austral can't expand their offices because of native title.

Some of the land with native title claims is sacred. A lot of it isn't. We have sacred ground which some miners are trying to take over at the moment and we're up in the air about that. Sacred ground means a lot. But where I disagree with the native title, if it's not sacred, then so be it.

My husband used to drill for Western Mining, and if they didn't find gold there, there was never a claim put on it. But if they found a good tail, you could bet your bottom dollar within two weeks of people knowing it, there'd be a land right claim on it. Now, how can they call it a sacred site when it worth nothing before there was gold under the bloody ground?

A lot of that's happening down south.

Two had heard of the Council, but knew nothing about it.

The only reason I know about it is because I did Aboriginal studies at uni.

The Aboriginal respondent had done some work for the local Reconciliation group.

-- -- Group No. 13: Kalgoorlie, blue-collar, under 35

(Reconciliation?)

It's about saying sorry.

It's about learning to live together, them accepting us and us accepting them, getting on with it.

No one had heard of the Council.

-- -- Group No. 14: Mt Gambier, white-collar, under 35

THEME 4: REACTION TO DRAFT DECLARATION OF RECONCILIATION AND ASSOCIATED STRATEGIES

A small minority of respondents -- almost entirely white-collar, middle-aged women, and one or two better-educated men -- accepted the Draft Declaration of Reconciliation in concept and in content; indeed they were uplifted by its ideals, its language and the very fact that a symbolic act on this scale was contemplated.

Among the great majority of respondents, however, reaction to the concept was at best neutral, and reaction to much of the content was decidedly negative.

That is a broad-brush picture. The reality, as we found it, demands a more finely detailed exposition.

Reaction to the document varied according to the following factors:

- ❑ Geography – northern Australia and southern Australia.
- ❑ Age – the twenty-somethings and the middle-aged.
- ❑ Socio-economic position – largely defined by education.

The strongest proponents of the concept of a Declaration are to be found among middle-aged tertiary educated people in northern Australia.

They are also the most thoughtful about content.

We speculate that the reasons for this are:

First, they confront every day the appalling conditions which afflict a substantial proportion of the Aboriginal communities in the high-contact areas of the north. This violates their most basic values about the worth of human life and their sense of human dignity.

Second, they want something done, both to relieve these personal violations and to enable Australia as a nation to grow. They believe that the division between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians is an impediment to a genuinely united Australia – the ideal of “one nation” as many of them put it, only too well aware of the irony involved.

Third, they believe they understand the complexities of the issues better than people in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne, and that this imposes on them a responsibility to take a constructive attitude.

Fourth, they have seen the corrosive effects of these issues on Australian society over a long period of time and understand how fundamentally important it is that they be addressed.

None of this restrains them from speaking their minds about the content of the draft Declaration, as we shall see. For now, however, we confine ourselves to remarks about their basic disposition. They demonstrated a clear capacity to distinguish between the concept of a Declaration and the content of this particular draft.

The strongest opponents of the concept of a Declaration are to be found among younger blue-collar men and women in northern and southern Australia.

The less-educated young are impatient with anything to do with Aborigines, native title or reconciliation. They just want it all to go away. They are not interested in why the situation is as it is. They know scarcely any Australian history or politics, so they have no grasp of the context within which the reconciliation project is set.

If they live in southern Australia, they have scarcely seen an Aboriginal person. They carry around with them the stereotypes of the Aboriginal person as a grasping opportunist for land, a drunk, or a trouble-making activist.

If they live in northern Australia they cannot see past the “parkies” or “long grass people”, disgusting in their behaviour, bludging on welfare and getting preferential treatment from government services.

They are quite incapable of separating the concept of a Declaration from the content of the draft. In short, they don't like the content so they are opposed to the concept.

The well-educated young are another matter. They take a similar position to well-educated older people. They are engaged with the issue, understand the context and support the concept of a Declaration.

Between the extremes of the well-educated middle-aged of northern Australia and ill-educated young of northern and southern Australia, lies the middle ground occupied by ordinary working people. They are people in their thirties and forties doing unspectacular white-collar or blue-collar jobs in cities and towns in the north and the south.

Among them, the major barrier is what the economists call “downward envy” – that is, people who are battling are envious of the benefits conferred on people who are worse off than themselves.

They haven’t given much thought to reconciliation but are easy to engage on the issue because they feel that “something must be done”. They are ready to accept the concept of a Declaration if only because it represents “something”. They don’t pretend to know whether it will do any good, but they generally reckon it would do no harm – so long as the words were right.

It is the words themselves to which we now turn.

Apart from the small minority who accepted the concept and the words without demur, our respondents had strong and mostly negative views about the content of the draft Declaration.

Taken as a whole, the Draft was seen as:

- divisive;
- backward-looking;
- based only on the Aboriginal perspective;
- requiring a series of concessions from non-Aboriginal Australians without any corresponding “give” by Aboriginal people, and
- a high-risk document which would probably be used as the basis for claims for land and monetary compensation.

The last-mentioned point was especially strong in regional high-contact areas.

For a more detailed picture, let us take it paragraph-by-paragraph.

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.

This is uncontroversial. People particularly like the reference to our many origins. They like the idea of speaking with one voice. Some think “the gift of one another’s presence” is over the top, but then Australians are a pragmatic people.

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

Trouble. People question the use of the word “unique”, saying everyone is unique in some way, and why should Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people be singled out – again. The reference to ownership of land alarms many people, who say it would be used as a springboard for land claims.

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

More trouble. Some people – especially women who have worked closely with Aboriginal communities in northern Australia – say that some customary laws, especially as they relate to young girls, are barbaric and would be totally unacceptable to the wider Australian community. Others saw it as divisive, indicating one law for Aboriginal Australians and another for non-Aboriginal Australians.

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

This is basically uncontroversial. Some people like the quasi-religious quality of this phrase; one or two think it presumptuous to impose one culture’s spirituality on another. Many think it simply an instance of verbal self-indulgence.

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

Very controversial. A substantial minority of respondents have no trouble acknowledging what they see as an incontestable historical fact. The majority, however, reject it, saying no one knows for sure whether consent was obtained, and that in some cases it probably was.

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.

This was perhaps the most popular statement in the entire Draft. In particular, people are ready to “move on together at peace with ourselves”. People also agree that we must have the courage to own the truth. In the light of their objections to other passages in the Draft, however, the question arises: whose truth?

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.

By far the most unpopular statement in the Draft. Not only do most people feel hostile in principle to the idea of apologising for something they – and in many cases their forebears – did not do, but they do not believe that

acceptance of any such apology can be forced. The very formulation of the paragraph – “one part of the nation . . . the other part” – they find offensively divisive. Even the few people who are disposed to apologise do not like that.

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

Very popular. Many respondents say they want to know the truth about our past, want to acknowledge wrongs committed on both sides, and move on in a unified way.

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

They certainly do. They want an end to what they perceive as special treatment for Aborigines, who they want to see shouldering their responsibilities and thereby being in a position to share opportunities – not according to their aspirations, but according to their qualifications and merit.

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.

Two problems. First, people want this statement to apply to all Australians; second, they are worried by what “determine their own destinies” might mean. An extreme (and very much a minority) view is that it means some kind of apartheid. The wider and more moderate view is that it suggests some kind of self-determination that would weaken the body politic of Australia.

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.

Accepted in its entirety and without demur.

Here is a draft of a Declaration for Reconciliation. What are your first impressions? What, if anything, do you especially like about it? What, if anything, do you especially not like about it? Are there are parts of it where you think the meaning is not clear? Are there any parts of it which you find difficult to accept? Are there things which should be added to it?

What people said

Group 1 were young white-collar people in Melbourne. One or two revealed a streak of cynicism about land rights, but others were sympathetic on that issue.

One young man, a second-generation immigrant, rejected the concept of an apology on behalf of his parents as well as himself.

“Consent of original inhabitants”. I’m against this. I’m against this whole apology thing.

It’s a different generation – if we were there at the time with the knowledge we have now, it wouldn’t have happened.

We’re not English; we’re not the perpetrators, it wasn’t our forebears who did it. We never stole their land. (Respondent whose parents are Macedonian immigrants).

I don’t understand the term “customary laws”. It’s dividing us. We’re one country now.

We all should have the same laws and legal system, otherwise we’re splitting black and white.

It may not have always been their country anyway.

So who owned it before them?

Maybe the wind. Maybe the wind is being downtrodden by the Aborigines.

I like “face truth, heal wounds”.

It’s about land as well and I haven’t seen anything that mentions native title. One of the biggest issues for Kooris is land.

Native title can be extinguished by a dog pissing on it. Just to get it you have to prove a continuing connection when they were pushed out into genocide camps.

That’s a bit harsh.

Then you’ve got Christian missionaries ramming Christianity down their throat for a couple of hundred years. There’s so much land. . . .

Let them buy it like everyone else.

People are given land for mining. Why can’t people be given land for living?

I like “share rights and responsibilities”.

I like the opening sentence. It's a unifying statement.

-- Group No.1: Melbourne, white collar, under-35

Group 2, older blue-collar people in Ballarat, contained one or two people – women – who were sympathetic to the concept and liked some of the grander declamations. Others – the majority – were affected by the phenomenon of “downward envy” referred to above.

Why should I have to apologise?

Respect customary laws . . . They should respect us. The more handouts they get the more they want. They don't respect that money. They just use it on alcohol.

I think it's a very moving declaration. A bit like a wish dream. It sounds good but I don't think it would ever eventuate. I can't see us apologising for something we haven't done; I can't see the Aboriginal people accepting the apology and moving on.

I see it has the poor hard-done-by Aborigines. Instead of talking about people on equal levels, we have to recognise this and that of theirs. What about them giving something back.

I'd like to go right back to the start and see if they speared our bloke or we shot their bloke first.

There's been some speculation about when they came here, from the islands or somewhere.

And they can take our home if it's sacred burial site. We can't do that. So the equality thing will never work.

The vision needs to be equal. This is all one-sided.

We've done wrong thing all the way alone; they've done nothing wrong. That's what it's saying.

I like “justice and equality for all”.

Underline “all Australians”.

The first par is OK.

“Our journey begins; share history”. I like that.

I like “enjoy taste the spirituality and rejoice in its grandeur”.

The 2nd-last par – what injustices have to be stopped? It leaves it wide open.

And the disadvantages? When I fill in a form I see myself disadvantaged because I can't tick the Aboriginal box.

There's a lot of Australians living in poverty as well as Aborigines.

It's not our fault that we were born in a country where our ancestors did the wrong thing.

-- Group No. 2: Ballarat, blue-collar 35-plus

Group 3, another group of older battlers from Sydney's west, who had had more exposure to Aboriginal people than their counterparts in Ballarat, were more receptive. However, the objections to an apology were just as clear-cut here as elsewhere.

Two parts of this wouldn't be accepted by many people. One is, "the land was colonised without the consent of the original inhabitants". And this admission of guilt.

I thought it was very well put together.

Yeah, yeah, it was.

I think it's fair.

I like, "Our nation must have the courage to own the truth".

People would understand that a lot of small things are implicit. I think that's good.

Written down on paper, it means more.

It's a pretty soft way of saying what's happened in the past.

I like the idea that this is where the new journey begins.

There's an apology here, but what for?

It's an apology and an acceptance of wrongdoing, but it's in the past.

There should be something in there which says, "For our children's sake." Not talk about them as black or white.

-- Group No. 3: Sydney West , blue-collar, 35-plus

Group 4, a white-collar group from Sydney's affluent northern suburbs, had mixed reactions. Some were strongly in favour of acknowledging past wrongs, but stopping short of apologising; others would not go even this far.

It could be interpreted many different ways, and for that reason I'd approach it with caution. "The right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to determine their own destinies"? The Nazis had something similar to that at some stage.

What's the problem with that?

We agree to continue on together in this land, so does "determining their own destinies" mean, piss off?

How many Aborigines would be able to read this?

"Living together" is the word. You're looking to make a future together.

They're talking about things we've done wrong, and apologising . . .

I like that.

But have we done something wrong?

Once people recognise that something wrong was done, they have to acknowledge that.

We should go forward, not keep going backwards. That happened in 1788. We didn't do it.

Exactly.

There are a few things I think are good: respect their traditions, which I think is great; but I think it is ridiculous to express sorrow and profoundly regret. We have to move on. We can't live in the past. What's done is done.

I like it. I think it's good. It expresses regret at what happened. We didn't do it but I still think it should be acknowledged.

To me this is just a glossy, all words and no action. None of that will happen.

But this is just a statement of intent and the admission of some realities. If I do something to you that really eats at you and hurts you as a person, you're not going to move on until there's some recognition by me that I did that. It's symbolic for all of us.

It's a two-way street. We don't always get sympathy from the Aborigines either. I mean, I wouldn't want to walk down Eveleigh Street (Redfern). They're not very receptive to the Australians, the whites. Even the police can't go in there.

There'd be parts of Minto and Fairfield West where there are no Aborigines where I'd be equally terrified of going.

"Our nation must have the courage to own the truth". I like this statement.

That's a good line.

It's too much in the past. It's like a relationship. If you keep going back over the same thing, you don't move on.

Injustices? What injustices?

Deaths in prison?

We don't do that; they do it to themselves.

-- Group No. 4: Sydney North, white-collar 35-plus

Group 5 in Moree, the first non-metropolitan high-contact group, baulked in a big way over land rights. In other respects, however, they saw merit in the Declaration.

"As the original owners" – the Aborigines didn't own the land, they belonged to it.

Original inhabitants is fine, because even in their own culture they didn't own the land.

I don't like that either. I like the first paragraph. There should be a more general statement. We should be promoting a unified society. It doesn't emphasise the future enough. It's too focused on the past.

Documents like this are going to be used as the basis for land claims. Let's not beat about the bush.

You hear of them obtaining a land right and selling it.

It's always prime real estate.

What defines wealth in this region is the ownership of land . We can't deny the Aboriginal people some path. It's easy for people in Melbourne to come out with all these wisdoms because they're divorced from it. There should be funds for Aborigines to express themselves by purchasing land and every Australian, not just those around Moree, should pay for it. There should be some duty on all real estate sales to some Aboriginal acquisition fund. Rural Australians feel as though they're made the scapegoats by the city slickers.

It's not our fault what happened years ago. We should be all equal. And yet they want something extra.

We've had our property for 130 years. Six thousand acres. And I'd hate them to come in and claim half of it. If you've had a home for 130 years . . . I don't think that's right.

A friend in Collarenebri has had a claim against him for 15,000 acres and he's going through a court thing now.

And financing it with taxpayers' money. They can go to the High Court. It doesn't worry them, it's not their money.

How can you get reconciliation if you bring in the (land) ownership thing?

It'd be just fireworks straightaway.

I totally agree.

If we're going to have reconciliation we cannot turn our backs on this land question.

We can then address this land question in a separate exercise later.

This should be briefer. It has a lot of very good thoughts.

-- Group No. 5: Moree, blue-collar, 35-plus

Group 6, were young blue-collar people in Brisbane. They were among the most forthright in their comments against the Declaration. A sub-group of three young women spoke out in favour of the document, but a majority, led by two or three young men, were contemptuous of it.

This was not the only time that differences appeared between men and women on this matter, but it was not common. When it did occur, women were invariably more supportive of the document than were men.

It's like a lot of polly talk.

I like it.

A bit of a spit and polish. Great veneer but what's underneath it?

I'd use it for toilet paper because their attitudes won't change.

I see it as quite good. I struggle when it expresses sorrow and profoundly regrets the injustices of the past. There shouldn't be an apology. Both should shake hands and apologise to each other because it wasn't all one way. Each had a fair killing of the other.

If we apologise and they accept and we get on with our lives that's a very cheap price to pay.

I wish we could live in harmony.

I can understand it, too. It's not like some government things.

Plain and simple.

Who's going to make this apology?

This is repeating itself over and over like a police interview.

How about all Australians. It goes on and on separating out Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. If you respect people's values because of the colour of their skin, that's racist.

What are the Aborigines saying they want? Money or an apology?

The full bloods have said they want an apology.

I think it's just an apology and think it's good.

You won't get the Aborigines to support it.

Group No. 6: Brisbane, blue-collar under 35

Group 7 in the high-contact city of Townsville consisted of mature people, many of whom had given considerable thought to these issues. This was the other group where the attitudes of men and women differed significantly. The land rights spectre loomed large in this group also, but there was a deep desire to advance the cause of reconciliation somehow.

We're getting there. We're growing up. We're heading in the right direction.

I think it's well written.

I don't like it. Paragraph two: "We value the unique status of the Aborigine". That's basically saying they own the land. They can sue us. Number five: "We acknowledge this land was colonised without the consent . . ." Again that allows them to say that's our land and sue us for being on it. And that stuff about rights.

I don't like the word "reconciliation".

I don't object to their being called the original owners and custodians, because after all nobody paid for it in the beginning.

It has a "nice" feel, but I don't think it's enough to make the Aborigines happy, and make me personally happy because there are parts I couldn't

swallow: paragraph two or five. I like the part that says, "Speaking with one voice . . ." Until we get all united and pulling the same way, there won't be reconciliation. That word has been bandied about too long and has become a politically correct word.

The only paragraph I jumped at was number five. Apart from that, I quite liked it. If it could be made more equitable, it could be something the kids could learn to say in school.

I quite like it and I don't object to paragraph five at all. We did come here and take it without their consent. We won't have peace with Aboriginal people until we admit we did take their land.

I like "respect and recognise" and all the positive things. "Our shared history". Some of it's a little bit vague.

Most of it is very well written, but my mother's generation wouldn't like the paragraph that says "without consent", and paragraph seven. I think that's asking a lot of both people, although I would have no problem saying sorry.

I like it. I think its value is in formalising a milepost in our history, that we're trying to progress towards a better state of affairs and it's worthy of documentation. I share the same uncertainties as to whether the Aboriginal people will actually get a great deal from it, but I think it's important to document it.

(Up to this point, all respondents were women; after this, all were men.)

I don't believe in this sort of document at all. I think it's a totally political stunt to make lawyers wealthy. And it'll cost millions to put it out. If you spent the money on the sewerage system at (an Aboriginal settlement) you'd help probably 500 or 600 people.

I'm a bit ambiguous about a document like this. It would make some people feel good; I'm not sure about the majority. True reconciliation comes from within each person. Until you solve that problem, you can write all the paper you like, but it won't make any difference.

I don't like it at all. I don't think it does anything. I like the very last paragraph. "Therefore we stand as a united Australia . . ." That's the only paragraph I like.

I found it very flowery. That stuff about tasting this spirituality and rejoice in its grandeur is just wank, to put it mildly. If it was scaled down and that flowery language . . . I like paragraph 2 and 3; acknowledgment, paragraph 5, is fine; customary laws, that's good; own the truth, move on; shared history is very important; last par is very good. I like the concept of the document. The

Yanks are almost sickening the way they can stand up and recite their pledge. We don't have anything like that. We've got no defined knowledge.

-- Group No. 7: Townsville, white-collar, 35-plus

Group 8, a young white-collar group in high-contact Mt Isa, were concerned by what they saw as the divisiveness of some passages.

I like the bit about how all Australians share equal rights and opportunities, that everyone needs to be responsible for themselves.

I think it's a very good positive statement, but it's also got some contradictions. Take paragraphs 2, 3, 4 and 5. They all cause division. This document gives a unique status, literally, to a minority group.

Are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders going to do anything to help the situation as well? They need to help themselves. It's not just us.

Customary law is a pretty brutal thing. If you're going to say everyone has equal rights, that includes equal rights under the law. You can't recognise customary laws and also have equal rights.

You can have customs, but not customary laws.

The rest of it sounds okay. Paragraph 5, "we acknowledge the land was colonised without consent" has to be said.

I can understand why you'd say that, but again that was not done by an Australian. A lot of things that happened in this country were not Australian.

Paragraph 7: I don't feel we have to apologise.

It's a bit over the top.

We've got to move beyond that.

I agree.

The past is the past. We can't go back in time and do anything about it. We just have to accept it and get on with it.

I don't like paragraph 2. I don't think they owned anything.

Ownership and custodianship are two entirely different things.

There were three distinct groups. The Tasmanian Aboriginals, the mainland Aboriginals and another group which was here before both groups. So the

mainland Aborigines are the johnny-come-latelies, the third in line, so they're not the original owners either.

-- Group No. 8: Mt Isa, white-collar, under 35

Group 9 were, for the most part, young and not very well educated young people in Darwin. Though provoked by one idealistic young woman, most could not see beyond their opposition to an apology and their prejudices against what they saw as handouts to Aborigines.

Sounds OK, but it's very general.

I don't understand what we're reconciling for. Are we being blamed for something?

The lost generation.

When we colonised some pretty bad things did happen.

I'm probably on the harsher side. I don't think I've done anything wrong. Christians do bad things to little boys. That's life. I was adopted. Am I going to sue my natural mother? Why are they always negative? Why not acknowledge positives like education?

The thing about the apology is just that it's a symbolic step. It makes it the past. It makes it a closed issue.

What's going to happen when we say sorry? What's the big deal?

They're asking the Government to say sorry. It's got nothing to do with me. I wasn't there.

How much is it going to cost us in compensation?

Yeah.

That's already happening anyway.

Heritage – what do they mean? Keep land claims? Keep getting payouts?

What are they giving up to accept this apology?

-- Group No. 9: Darwin, blue-collar, under 35

Group 10 in the high-contact town of Katherine had a lot to say, reflecting their day-to-day experience of the issues. It included a woman who worked in a crisis centre whose clients were mainly Aboriginal women and children, and another woman whose family property had been the subject of a successful blanket land claim.

Second-last par – it should go both ways. They should respect our right to live our way as well. It should be a neutral document.

It should be mutual.

I agree.

That's why there are so many barriers –we have to do everything. "Right of all Australians"

I don't like the recognising of customary law. It can mean wife beating, child rape. It's a really grey area. Tribal justice is destined to fail. They go crook at a woman who complain to police, and she has to sneak away and get to us (crisis centre woman). They've lost track of what their customary laws are. And the fourth par is just too cute for words.

Yeah, a marketing expert put that in.

It's airy fairy. The concept is good, we have to have something. But Australians are pretty gutsy and strong -- and this isn't gutsy.

It's over the top. But on the other hand, when you see the people down at Roper River that don't drink, yes, I'm really glad to have this relationship with black people. So when you say this in the best possible way, it's good.

"Our new journey begins": just say that and leave it.

But you have to say we came uninvited and say sorry.

I didn't do it.

Sorry is a really big word in their culture and they use it all the time. So maybe we're trivialising it.

Couldn't every one of us feel sorry?

Maybe feel sorry but not say sorry.

John Howard thinks there'll be financial implications.

It'd be nice morally but silly legally. Compensation is already going ahead for the Stolen Generations.

I reckon the legal implications aren't there. (This from a woman whose family property had been subject to a successful land claim.)

Saying sorry isn't going to stop them being alcoholics. If money was spent on programs and education so they spent their time differently, they wouldn't need to go and drink.

The draft is coming from the right direction, but it's too long.

It reads like it's been put together by some Mojo marketing executive.

-- Group No. 10: Katherine, white-collar, 35-plus

It's fine. I think it addresses the issues.

It's not too apologetic and grovelling. It just recognises

It made me feel guilty.

It does. It makes it sound as if we destroyed them.

When you've seen what's happened to them, do you not feel bad about it?

Yes, but it's not us. It was a long time ago.

Yes, why are we still paying for it? It needs to be brought to closure.

How long are we going to keep apologising?

I think it needs to be done once and for all.

Will a piece of paper solve the problem?

Equal rights: what Australian doesn't have equal rights? I thought we all did. "According to their aspirations" is pretty damned broad. Some people might not aspire to do anything.

It's far too long. If it's going to be a symbol of reconciliation you need a brief, all-encompassing statement – almost the first paragraph.

I don't think we should say sorry. We can feel sorry about what happened, but it wasn't us.

-- Group No. 11: Perth, white-collar, under 35

I liked it. It must be hard. I feel sorry for them and I feel that we did come and take over their land – on the other hand I wonder what they would have done with the country if people had not come. We have all come from somewhere else, so to me the real Aussie. Is the Aborigine. I feel when you talk about apologising it is not so different when someone's father dies and you say "I'm

sorry". I did not kill him but I still say I'm sorry. I'm sorry to hear that this has happened. I'm quite happy to say sorry but I didn't do anything.

I read '.... Value as traditional owners of land.' Does that lead to Aboriginal people making claims? This is where it gets fairly technical. If they wanted to return to their original life-style what are they going to do – shut down Australia?

We can all regret profoundly – but does this open up the way for more compensation?

The words are very worthy but how will it affect the man in the street who has just picked kicked an Aboriginal just because he is lying in the gutter?

Are symbolic acts important?

It could be important, but again its how it filters down to the lowest level – the grass roots level, that's where its important.

If para. 3 was accepted, young Aborigines would get a lot of pride back. That's what a lot of them lack, because they have been so looked down upon as a lower class.

Maybe we can agree on some rules of behaviour.

It needs rules at the grass roots level.

At the moment the vagrancy rules are the same for white people as for Aborigines.

But are they enforced the same?

Should they be?

Yes.

Everyone should be treated the same way.

Good. But I don't think the Government is going to come at it. To clean the slate and start afresh. Something festers, and until something is done about it it won't get better. It's got to be addresses one way or the other.

As a statement of justice it is good, but the second last para. 'address disadvantage and determine their own future' I feel that's what we have been trying to do and we're still in a mess. I just feel the Aboriginal people are the most massive problem as a nation we have got, and its just about got too hard. I feel a real sense of frustration with it.

Group No. 12: Adelaide Blue collar 35 and over

It's good.

It's crap.

There are parts I like and other parts I don't like. I like where it says "speaking". Everything after that I don't like.

I think it'd be quite reasonable if it had something to do with reality. But that's not what has happened; it's not what's really happening. If that was really the case, then what we were saying about Aborigines not getting jobs and the way we treat them, would be wrong. We'd all be mates. All past problems would be healed and they wouldn't be asking us to say sorry. It's a fairy tale.

*Does that mean the payments stop? That they'll get off it and get on with it, sort of thing?
"Determine their own destiny".*

It's someone else's point of view. It's not my point of view. But it's supposed to be my point of view.

I don't agree with pretty much the whole thing.

I agree with some of it, not all of it. It needs to be re-thought. The whole idea of reconciliation was to get the communities together again, not divided groups of this culture, that culture.

That second paragraph should be in there at all. We should respect – it doesn't matter if they're Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Indonesian, Japanese – we should respect them equally.

I don't like this "at peace with ourselves". I'm at peace with myself. I haven't done anything wrong.

It'd be nice, but it seems like something out of a fairy tale. It'd be nice if they'd determine their own destinies. But I'll give you an example. If my husband was on the dole, I don't get a school allowance, I don't get a shoe allowance, I don't get a dog allowance. And if I was black I'd get more for the single mother's pension than if I was white. Why?

That's not right. If I was a single mother I wouldn't get a dollar extra.

Are you telling me, straight and simple, that if I was black I wouldn't get a Homes West house quicker?

I had to wait three-and-a-half years to get a Homes West house.

If I was dirty and smelly and stinky, they'd give me one to live in

You're totally trying to stereotype Aboriginal people. I have just moved into a Homes West house and I'm really excited about it. I've waited three-and-a-half long years, and had to live with my mother for that period – and that's not nice, trust me. And I've moved into this new house and straight down the road, not more than five houses down the road, there's a non Aboriginal family, the father's Japanese, and they have been waiting one-and-a-half years, and they've got four children and they're doing fine. I didn't get put in a Homes West house because of the colour of my skin. I had to wait like every other person.

At Centrelink they have a form, are you Aboriginal?

How do you reconcile when you've got crap like that?

The first thing I thought was that it (the draft) was written by a white politician for politicians. It's absolutely useless. It's sounds all nice and pretty and flowery, but You got to try to provide solutions rather than come up with theory and crap. The mining company I work for, Mt Morgans, there's an Aboriginal community nearby and they wanted Land Rovers and this and that. The mining company said we'll give you a school bus and a bus driver. That's providing solutions, not half a dozen Landcruisers or giving them the cash.

-- -- Group No. 13: Kalgoorlie, blue-collar, under 35

The most important sentence would probably be, "And so we take this step: as one part of the nation expresses its sorrow . . . so the other part accepts the apology and forgives". We need to move ahead.

It's true we feel sorry about happened in the past, but I don't think they're just going to say, "Oh, okay."

I agree with most of what it says.

Where it says in the second paragraph that we should respect them, it should also say they should respect us.

Yeah, it should be a two-way thing.

-- -- Group No. 14: Mt Gambier, white-collar, under 35

THE STRATEGIES

People's attitudes to the strategies closely reflected their attitudes to the Declaration and to the wider issue of Aboriginal affairs.

Strategy 1: Economic Independence

Most people were inclined to say that this was just another set of handouts under a new name. A minority focused on the words "independence" and "self-reliance" and approved of it on this basis.

That's the only way you're really free.

I agree. Once they've gained financial independence, they can't blame the government.

They can also backflip and collapse.

The media always portray them as downtrodden. The government's giving them money. Where's it all going?

Media always put the most outrageous things on TV and they don't want to show people doing well.

I'm sure there are Aboriginal professors and millionaires out there.

Neville Bonner was a high achiever.

Cathy Freeman.

So there's a handful.

-- Group No.1: Melbourne, white collar, under-35

I don't want to give them more training for taking more off us! They'll get smarter in the law and then use it to take more off us.

Are they prepared to do the extra training? Give it a go? Undergo reforms and changes? Otherwise we're just wasting our money. I don't think they will. So long as they can get handouts and special conditions, why work, extra study, work long hours? Their whole attitude has to change so they want to be part of this country.

-- Group No. 2: Ballarat, blue-collar 35-plus

They're not disadvantaged. They're given more advantages than all other people now. There's this lovely childcare centre, but the kids can't go there unless they're Aboriginal.

It's never enough, never enough, no matter what the white man's Government gives them. It's a real bitter thing.

Some schools, the P & C work their butts off, but at disadvantaged schools they don't have to because it's all handed to them. We all pay school fees, and I know it's optional, but the first thing they ask when you walk into a school is, "Are you Aboriginal?" And that's a big plus. But I'm an Australian.

There's still that rebelliousness, like, we're entitled.

The public housing is also slanted towards the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander part of the population. You can guarantee they'll be in a house within a week. But the reverse is the prison population. The percentage of Aborigines in the population is about 4 per cent. The percentage in prison is about 15 per cent. That's injustice and racism.

Instead of using words like "better", "increased" or "greater", why not use the word "equal"?

That's good.

I like that.

I agree. It sounds as if we're giving them everything on a silver platter.

And it makes me feel inferior.

They've already tried these schemes. You've got to have education to run a business. They've just given them money and said, "Go run a business. Go bloody broke. We don't care".

-- Group No. 3: Sydney West , blue-collar, 35-plus

Is this going to create their own destinies? I wouldn't think so. This is what has been happening before.

It's just total fantasy. They are not knowledgeable enough to want this white civilisation. We are pushing them. Maybe they don't really want it.

The ones who live in Redfern have different needs who live in the Northern Territory.

They can get all this from our system, the white system. Don't give them a separate system.

I agree. They shouldn't be separated.

Equal rights? They're not equal. They're something special.

Yeah. Mate, you're Aboriginal? You can have this. You're Greek? No, you can't have that.

A friend of ours went to the Northern Territory. He was absolutely stunned. He said, "Now I know where my taxes go." Cars, buildings, they just get what they want.

-- Group No. 4: Sydney North, white-collar 35-plus

Garbage. That's what they're already on.

We're all giving out . They get all the grants and capital it's all welfare anyway.

I don't agree with that. It's saying it's not going to do it through welfare programs.

This might just be great on paper, but if you are an Aboriginal, are you going to change your attitude?

This is just feeding the problem.

-- Group No. 6: Brisbane, blue-collar under 35

All those dot points, bureaucracy will probably hinder those. Some of those things have been happening. They're all motherhood statements. How they're actually implemented is the important thing.

-- Group No. 7: Townsville, white-collar, 35-plus

They've got to start with education so they can go and work for the money like we do.

They've already got more opportunities than white people. Why document them all again?

They've got to decrease the welfare, same with the white people. It's too easy. People need to make the effort to go out and work.

What's needed is a fundamental shift in values, and this declaration of reconciliation does not address that fundamental shift in values.

-- Group No. 8: Mt Isa, white-collar, under 35

If they wish, they can go to uni and ask for anything. They always have a preference over Joe Blow.

That's being racist towards us.

-- Group No. 9: Darwin, blue-collar, under 35

I think it's all crap. Everything there is there for them now if they want to achieve it.

Within the past couple of years there was a printing business which had ATSI money put into it and it went to the wall, and the media should take it on themselves to promote successes in Aboriginal business, not failures.

There was a white guy behind all that who was a shonk. He tried to get insurance through us.

-- Group No. 11: Perth, white-collar, under 35

Things can only change very slowly.

A certain amount of money will be wasted – if some is wasted but the level isn't too much it's of benefit to the whole community.

Thursday Island runs beautifully.

The out-back Aborigines have pretty well got themselves sorted out – its in the suburbs where the problem is.

Group No. 12: Adelaide Blue collar 35 and over

It makes sense but I think they've got the chance to do it now. I don't think anyone's taken that away.

They can go and get money from a bank, they can drive a car, everything we can do.

But they've got no financial independence. They don't go and earn their money and learn how to budget for themselves. That's what they need to be doing. So I agree with that.

-- -- Group No. 14: Mt Gambier, white-collar, under 35

Strategy 2: Addressing disadvantage

People accepted the statistics about poverty, health, employment, housing and imprisonment, but said it was the Aborigines' own fault. Plenty of money had been flung at these problems and they still weren't fixed. In some instances, the phenomenon of "downward envy" reappeared when the word "disadvantage" was mentioned. More commonly, people said that the Aborigines already were given plenty of advantages over non-Aborigines, so how did the ideal of equality fit in?

They've spent \$27 billion over 20 years among 300,000 people. How much is that?

It says they are the poorest, unhealthiest. Migrants, we came here with one suitcase. What's stopping the Aborigines doing the same?

These are the statistics. You can't get past them. There needs to be support systems. You need to understand culture. It's not a money problem.

-- Group No.1: Melbourne, white collar, under-35

If that's true and I think it probably is, they should be somehow managed and helped to get out of the poverty. If the council can do that, I'm all for it.

It says worst housed, but what they get is better than what I've got, but they use the floors for firewood.

They have no respect for it because they haven't had to work for it.

Also, when you look at a little Aboriginal child watch their father drink and break things, what are they going to learn? Forget whose fault it is.

But you can do that only if they are prepared to go along with it.

A lot of Aboriginal people up the top have taken the money, and it hasn't got to the poor Aborigines.

-- Group No. 2: Ballarat, blue-collar 35-plus

If they put everyone on an equal part. You're on the ladder and you don't move until you . . . you know.

We're still apologising. We never stop apologising.

In 1967 when the Government gave the Aborigines the vote, they gave them all this, too much too fast. That's why we've got this problem now (husband of Aboriginal woman).

There'd be a bloody war if they stopped it.

It'd stop the white people resenting it.

-- Group No. 3: Sydney West , blue-collar, 35-plus

What disadvantage?

All we're hearing here is that they are not living as we think they should.

If it was to apply to other Australians, there would be some eligibility criteria. So some body will be created that will just feed money in and create the same impression as is happening now.

This doesn't make sense to me: "Statistics show they are the poorest" Look, if my great great grandfather left school in year 4 and didn't work in his entire life and was an alcoholic and beat his wife, does that mean my father has to do the same thing as he did?

-- Group No. 4: Sydney North, white-collar 35-plus

Everyone has to take responsibility for themselves for some extent. We can't go into their homes and make sure their diet's adequate.

Life is self-perpetuating. A kid is likely to relive the parents' life.

Absenteeism among Aboriginal kids is way disproportionate at my husband's school, because parents don't place importance on education.

They don't care. It doesn't matter later on because they know they're going to get money whatever happens.

-- Group No. 5: Moree, blue-collar, 35-plus

We're all disadvantaged somehow.

Absolutely.

Makes me laugh. It just shows they're going to get this, this, this and this, and they've already got it. Are we going to get the same?

Equity for all!

Justice and equity for all is just a joke.

They get houses given to them and they destroy them because they don't have to work for it.

We could have some positive things in this document as well – what we get from them: the culture, appreciation of nature.

-- Group No. 6: Brisbane, blue-collar under 35

I don't expect to see it in my lifetime because it's going to take a long long time.

We have to get some help here. We're pouring money into a dead hole unless we educate them. We have to get their health up.

-- Group No. 7: Townsville, white-collar, 35-plus

What are they going to do: just throw more money at them?

I agree with everything that they say there, but the only people that are going to help the Aboriginals in the situations we're talking about there are the Aboriginals themselves.

I totally agree. You can build them houses, but they have broken windows, holes in walls.

The Aboriginals who get ahead are those who step out as individuals. I can take you out now and introduce you to an Aboriginal RN who's quite a capable, competent, clean, tidy, efficient, economical woman. I can take you to various soldiers and introduce you to blokes who are capable, competent, kindly. It goes on.

-- Group No. 8: Mt Isa, white-collar, under 35

We're giving them welfare, they've got access to health cards and all the rest of it. This (strategy) doesn't make sense to me. I mean, unhealthiest, least employed Ok, employment relates to training and education, but Aboriginal kids get paid to go to school.

They just don't know what to do with it, that's the problem.

That's our fault. If someone said to you, "I'm going to give you an extra \$50 because your name's Paul", would you say, "Oh no, don't give me that \$50"? It's our fault for creating it in the first place.

-- Group No. 11: Perth, white-collar, under 35

Depends on what actually happens. It is what we have been trying to do, but it is not working.

[Examples given of providing inappropriate housing and then being surprised when it is destroyed.]

What we should do is actually take into account how these people actually like to live and provide them with a shelter which is just a cement slab and a roof if

that is what they are comfortable living in – and use the rest of the money for the walls and things on having visiting doctors check the kids eyes and things like that.

We are too busy trying to force our own ideas on to them.

Group No. 12: Adelaide Blue collar 35 and over

They get all their health care, but if they choose not to use it

It's sad, but it's not only Aboriginal people who are locked up in jail, or who are really poor. And white people make the same choices, whether to live off the dole or not.

But if they want to work, it's up to us to give them the opportunities. It has to work both ways: We have to give them the opportunity to do it. There are racist people who won't have them in their workplace. If there were two people with the same qualifications, I reckon the white person would more than likely get it.

I know a lot of them who get job preferences because of what they are. The police force is one of them.

-- Group No. 14: Mt Gambier, white-collar, under 35

Strategy 3: Recognition of rights

The should be able to elect true Aboriginals to represent them.

ATSIC are a minority group that are hated because of what they called "the dash for the cash".

-- Group No.1: Melbourne, white collar, under-35

Anybody can get to be a politician. Whether Australian, Greek, Italian or Aboriginal. It implies they're making room to allow Aborigines to become members of Parliament. It suggests special consideration. The seats are already there.

There could be a special fund, and you could make room for more of them in Parliament. So long as it's equal.

And so long as they're qualified. Whether they're Aboriginal or whatever. I see no reason for making special consideration to allow one section of the community to have privilege over others.

-- Group No. 2: Ballarat, blue-collar 35-plus

You'd have to have Aboriginals in the Parliament. Getting them in there is the problem. Do they want to go in there?

The practicalities are going to be one hell of a thing to work out because of giving them more than non-Aboriginals get. Do they get two votes, or one vote and another one in a special Aboriginal seat?

(A respondent described the New Zealand system of Maori seats.)

I'd have no problem with that.

That's a good thing.

I reckon if I was an Aboriginal I'd be happy with that.

-- Group No. 3: Sydney West , blue-collar, 35-plus

It's good. They're a unique group.

No. So are the Greeks, so are the Italians.

Hang on. People immigrate here because they made a choice. It isn't clear to me that the Aborigines had a choice.

When you start pushing for certain people to be in Parliament, backroom deals, it irks me.

But political parties are pushing for more women in Parliament. What's the difference?

-- Group No. 4: Sydney North, white-collar 35-plus

This is all something to make their chip on the shoulder grow.

Yeah I think it's just showing all the things we've done wrong.

We've all got the same opportunities. It's up to the individual.

You've just got to go out and grab it.

-- Group No. 6: Brisbane, blue-collar under 35

A great wish list.

In your dreams.

-- Group No. 7: Townsville, white-collar, 35-plus

Self-determination – what does that mean?

Marrandah Yanner would see self-determination in a way that most Australians would not accept. He means it in terms of the homelands, in other words, Aboriginals take over the lands that they traditionally owned.

There is no question they were dispossessed of their land. But the point is, the blokes you're giving the land back to are not the blokes it was taken from.

We talk about equal rights, but if we got drunk and fell asleep in the park, the police would come and tell us to go home. But Aboriginals do it every day and the police do nothing.

It's the same with juvenile crime. They get away with murder.

-- Group No. 8: Mt Isa, white-collar, under 35

They have better rights than ours.

But there are no Aboriginal interpreters when they go to court. There are so many dialects. So they don't have equal rights.

-- Group No. 9: Darwin, blue-collar, under 35

Representation in the Australian Parliament? If you have Aboriginal politicians promoting the idea that this land belongs to them – it belongs to all of us – then I don't know what sort of representation you're going to have in Parliament. We're all Australians, not just the Aboriginals. It doesn't stick well with me.

-- Group No. 11: Perth, white-collar, under 35

Haven't they got the same rights as you or I? Do they need to have more rights than you or I? They need to have the same rights as everyone else. They need to be treated the same as everybody else. So that they know that they are the same as everybody else.

Don't they have that now? If they choose to have the advantage of the education system we have it is there. Surely it is up to them.

I think the wider community have lost rights over the past few decades. The government has pulled back and given it to private enterprise but not with the Aboriginal people – it can't find private enterprise to do it for them.

It seems that Aboriginal people therefore have more rights. We must be careful we don't takke it too far.

In the UK you could not look at a black person and we must be careful that we don't fall into that trap here and over protect them.

Group No. 12: Adelaide Blue collar 35 and over

They're segregating us, really. That's like putting them on a higher pedestal.

They're dividing us, and they should be bringing us together.

They should recognise us all as equals.

-- -- Group No. 14: Mt Gambier, white-collar, under 35

THEME 5: HOW SHOULD THE DOCUMENT OF RECONCILIATION AND THE ASSOCIATED STRATEGIES BE HANDLED

A number of themes emerged on this question.

Perhaps the strongest reflected the pragmatism of the Australian culture: people said that reconciliation, if it were to be real and effective, had to be demonstrated in practice. They argued that high sounding resolutions, if they were not backed by people acting together, would be of little value. They also wondered whether, if people were acting together, and were seen to be doing so, resolutions or declarations were either necessary or desirable.

These comments came from many people who were committed to reconciliation – from police, people in industry and people in local government.

They were also made by ordinary citizens who distrust what they see as high sounding but perhaps hollow rhetoric, almost as much as they distrust people in power. They often see people in power, particularly if they are in distant places such as Canberra, as having little knowledge, and perhaps little concern, about the day to day lives and needs of 'ordinary people'.

A second theme to emerge was concerned with consensus and validation. People argued that a Document, to be effective, would need to achieve widespread, if not overwhelming, popular support. They were therefore

attracted to the idea of a popular vote (as they had been for the Head of State in a Republic). However, they realised the dangers inherent in this approach – if overwhelming support were not achieved, the cause of reconciliation could be seriously retarded.

They were not greatly attracted to the idea of ‘individual’ support, and could not see much sense in either tabling the document in parliament or in giving it legal status, although some advocated both. Quite a few were worried about the consequences of the latter course: as with an official apology, they wondered whether it would lead to further costly demands by Aboriginal leaders, for which they, as taxpayers, would ultimately have to foot the bill.

Many, perhaps because they had not thought about the matter, were quite unsure about what should be done. But there was a widespread view that, in some way or other, the problem should be resolved and put behind us. The question was: How?

People were relaxed about the idea of some kind of informal status for the Declaration – either having it on a public register which individuals could sign, or having it endorsed by the Parliaments, but not in a way which would make it legally binding.

At the same time, there was a widely held view that these gestures would make little difference to the cause of reconciliation.

By contrast, people were distinctly uncomfortable with the idea of giving the Declaration some kind of formal legal status, either through an Act of Parliament or by inclusion in the Constitution. They were concerned on two counts. First, they were worried by the legal and economic implications, especially in relation to land rights. Second, they said that if the voting in support of such legislation, or in any referendum, was not overwhelmingly supportive, the cause of reconciliation would be set back years.

Many people suggested that if a much shorter Declaration could be created, it could be used in the schools as a statement which children would recite, much as they used to recite a Declaration of loyalty to the Crown. This idea was allied with a widely held belief that reconciliation needs to become an important strand in the education process, expressed through a more honest and complete teaching of Australian history and a more comprehensive teaching of civics.

Much of what people said in response to this question is reported descriptively below. A representative selection of quotes from various groups are then used for illustrative purpose.

In Group 1, four respondents said it should be made an Act of Parliament and inserted in the Constitution. Others preferred to leave it to individuals to sign a declaration voluntarily.

In Group 3, five wanted it included in the Constitution and others wanted it made an Act of Parliament. The majority could see no point in having it as merely a voluntary gesture.

In Group 4, most people thought that legislation or constitutional change would be unachievable. A minority, however, said there should be some sort of solemnising of such a Declaration.

What people said

If it goes to a vote and they lose all hell will break loose. They'll say we lost again because we're black

-- Group No. 6: Brisbane, blue-collar under 35

An Act of Parliament so everyone would know it was very wrong to discriminate against Aboriginal people.

The notion of my being able to go down to the local council and put my pen to paper is a very personal thing.

Yeah, I'd like that.

People like Rotary would get behind that.

It allows each individual to make a conscious choice.

*But what if the people didn't go down and sign it?
Referendums don't work.*

*I think an Act of Parliament and letting people sign their names.
But I personally wouldn't feel any obligation to go down and sign.*

-- Group No. 7: Townsville, white-collar, 35-plus

It's a personal thing, so I'd get everybody to sign it. But most people wouldn't be bothered, and how would you tell them about it, anyway? In the paper, or TV or in the post?

If only individuals sign it, it's a question of relevance. If it's accepted by Parliament it becomes more relevant.

Any one of those. If it fails, it fails.

But there would be a hue and cry if it failed.

I agree.

But if we say sorry, are they then going to ask, "How much are you going to give us?"

Group No. 8: Mt Isa, white-collar, under 35

Too general to be an Act, so there wouldn't be a lot of point.

It should be accepted by Parliament, and the people should have a say as well. A vote.

Make a vote out of it. Get it out of the way. As one nation we have spoken.

Yeah, but without giving it legal status.

If it's not going to have legal status it's not worth the cost.

You need more detail to be legal.

But it'll get too complicated.

They have to put in the fine detail so we know what we're agreeing to?

It's like the Preamble – pointless in this format.

-- Group No. 9: Darwin, blue-collar, under 35

It would be nice to recognise some of this in the Constitution when we get a new republic.

It would be good to start at the grassroots as well and have the kids in school learn a bit of Aboriginal culture.

My concern is they're never going to find the right one (form of words). It's going to be a complete waste of time. (If they did?) Put it through the schools.

I'd just like to know what is it going to achieve, if anything?

I definitely don't want a referendum. We can't even get a referendum on capital punishment and things like that.

Huge costs. A waste of money.

Might just be a statement by the Governments, not made law.

I think the schools. The generations to come have to be taught.

*The same. I know we learnt all about the wars and that, but nothing about
Aboriginals.*

(Any symbolic value?)

Do most Australians know what we did wrong? I don't.

*We've said it, we've recognised we've done the wrong thing. How many
times do we have to say it? Get a bit of paper and say, "This is what we're
going to do for Aboriginals, and this is the last thing".*

-- Group No. 11: Perth, white-collar, under 35

Mr and Mrs Average should have a say in it because it could affect their lives.

*Let's keep this out of the hands of the parliamentarians – it will go on for the
next 50 years.*

I think it should go to a vote.

*I think the government should bring this to the whole population. I would like
to see it endorsed by government at the highest level – after consultation. This
is the biggest issue in Australia.*

I would too, after a lot more publicity.

*If it was going to be publicised like the Referendum it would have to answer all
questions in depth. For example, are there any legal implications; how does it
impinge on the rights of other Australians.*

*The whole point of reconciliation is that it is a process – about people talking
about this issue. Talking about the TV ads. about it at work.*

--Group No. : Adelaide, blue-collar, 35-plus

*Parliaments should agree that these things exist, kids should be taught about
it, and we should sign it if we want to.*

There's not nearly enough education on Aboriginal history.

*If the vast majority of people sign it, then it should be put to a referendum and
passed and put out of the way.*

*What's signing going to do? It's nothing. If you feel sorry in your own mind,
what's signing going to do?*

At the end of the day, do most people give a shit? I don't.

-- -- Group No. 13: Kalgoorlie, blue-collar, under 35

I think we should have the right to sign it as individuals or have a referendum.

What would signing it achieve?

Only the people who really want to do it are going to go and do it. Many wouldn't make the effort.

So you'd really need a referendum, but a lot of people wouldn't agree with that because it would cost a lot of money.

-- -- Group No. 14: Mt Gambier, white-collar, under 35

COMMENTS FROM DEPTH INTERVIEWS

The Mayors

Respondent 1

Race relations

I believe they're quite excellent. But there's a problem talking about the Aboriginal people as if they are a single unit. They're not. Some of the aggression or discontent is with a section of them who are the problem people.

The problem are a minority, a couple of hundred people who are alcoholics, and not so much a problem as people who need attention. And they're not getting the attention they need.

Probably 12% of the population of 22,000 are Aboriginal. The majority would be in work and living like the rest of the community. Twenty-five to thirty per cent of our workforce would be Aboriginal.

Governments think you can legislate reconciliation, and you can't. You can't make people love each other. The only way of doing that is having them shoulder-to-shoulder and being together, and experiencing each other and trusting each other. Working together is a bond.

Sometimes Aboriginal people pull their own people down. Somebody's in a job, they've got a house and going fairly well, and before long there's 10, 12, 16 people living in the house, and the breadwinner doesn't go to work any more because he doesn't want to leave his family, or he's sees no future in his going out to work while everybody drinks there.

It's a bit a tragedy that the culture does that sort of thing.

Talk about Reconciliation

Not a lot. My council have a desire to get things to start happening. Reconciliation is tied in with so many other Aboriginal aspects. People see reconciliation as being of the handout mentality, part of the native title claims and all the rest of it. And it's a bit the same with the Aboriginal people themselves. There's no simple solution.

My wife went to school 45 years ago with Aboriginal children and she's still in touch with some of them. There's no reconciliation problem.

When I was driving a cab, I gave a lift home to an Aboriginal bloke one night. He was a bit dejected, didn't have any money. A couple of months later – I'd

forgotten all about it – I got a call to go to the rank where I'd picked him up. He was there with some money for the trip. I said, "No, forget about it." But he said, "No, I owe you." He had pride and self-respect. That's the real Aboriginal.

The reconciliation process is not sensitive to that sort of thing?

It's doomed to failure.

Know Aboriginal Reconciliation Council?

I know some of them, yeah. The trouble is, some of these people wouldn't know an Aboriginal person if they hit them with a bit of wood. They sit beside them and they think they hear what they're saying but they don't hear because it's so hard to hear what the Aboriginal people are saying.

What a lot of them are really saying is, "Help us".

They have to get rid of the people who are supposedly the experts in Aboriginality and go back and talk to the real Aboriginal people and find out what their needs are.

The spokespeople?

It's no different to the white society. The same thing happens there.

Your politicians and bureaucrats won't communicate with the Aboriginal because he's an inferior being and he's too hard to communicate with. They say, "That's a good idea, isn't it?" and the Aboriginal will say, "Yes". He doesn't want to upset anybody. And they think they've given him what he wants. It's so wrong.

That's the thinking that's got us where we are. We'll throw them a handful of money and that'll sort them out. And it's so wrong. We're killing off these people.

Document

Yes, providing it's not done in a condescending way and that we're responding to the needs of the Aboriginal people.

I don't think anyone (in the non-indigenous community) would have any problem with it.

Strategies

It might be good stuff, but how are you approaching it? You have to attain economic independence by education and adopting a set of values.

Retrieve cultural strength impossible so Aborigines must accept dominant culture?

Their culture can be their strength but it doesn't feed them. Now I'm Irish and I know about my heritage and all that, but I'm in Australia now. I look out in the morning and I see the red red rocks. It's not the green hills. The pride of where we come from isn't a shield that we can hide behind. It has to be a strength.

The truth is, the Aboriginal world is gone. If they want to survive in this world and do the things they want to do, they can't live on Kentucky Fried.

The living in the bush, the sharing of everything, some of those customs are excellent. The sister looking after the child; the mother never smacking it. That bond between mother and child is excellent. But if the Aboriginal people want to live in urban Australia

Options

If this declaration came from the real Aboriginal people, not the people who speak for them, it would have a chance of success. If government were to legislate or try to put it to a referendum, it's going to fail, because people don't trust governments. Australians have always had that rebellious streak. They'll be quite happy sitting down with an Aboriginal person, but no one's going to tell me I have to do it.

You can't legislate it. It's got to come from the grassroots and from individual people.

Respondent 2

How would you categorise the state of race relations in this town ?

I think the community does try very hard, though at times it becomes very difficult because the anti-social behaviour of some of them really bothers the community and consequently as much as everybody tries, they are not so happy about the situation.

Is there is a proportion in the town community who are Aboriginal and who live integrated into the town community?

That is small, very small.

So the big majority don't live like that, but do they live on outstations or what?

We have a big fair every year for New Year, and the communities bring them into town, leave them and then forget to take them back again and that is when we have that anti-social behaviour.

Then there may be funerals. They come in for that, or they may just come in because there is a bus coming in or they might come in because, from what I believe, there may be some problems at the community.

Are the outstations dry?

Yes, so when they come in here of course they start drinking.

And is that the root cause of the anti-social behaviour?

Oh yes, yes. We have different families -- I am not very au fait with it all -- but we do have different families and just recently we have set up a task force between the council and our health section at Aboriginal Affairs, we have an aboriginal Councillor, we have an aboriginal liaison officer.

We have set up this taskforce to overcome some of the problems that are happening because of the anti-social behaviour at the moment, but we are finding that really we have maybe 20, at the most, real fringe dwellers who have no families and nowhere to go.

They will camp at what we call "skinny park", which is in Wilson Street near the Town Hall. They love camping there but it doesn't look very good and they will move over to the railway bridge and camp under the railway bridge.

They are a small number. Do they threaten people or is it just aesthetically not pleasant to look at?

Oh sometimes when they are drunk they wander on the road and then people worry about running them over, or they will have a fight amongst themselves. But mainly what happens then is that the communities come into town because of New Year's Eve and they go and drink with the fringe dwellers and of course that causes even more anti-social behaviour, and when they get into big mobs then they will go anywhere where there is lawn and a tree -- you know, somewhere pleasant -- but often that pleasant place isn't really an appropriate place to camp.

Why? Because it is somebody's garden or something?

Yeah, somebody's garden, a university campus. "Skinny park" is just a nature strip basically right in the middle of the CBD. Recently our biggest problem has been Edwards Park which is a park owned by the council, and the residents across the road, who have lived there for a long time, have been making numerous complaints because of the anti-social behaviour, not because

they are basically just camped there, but because to be quite honest they defecate, urinate and fornicate, and that is just as blunt as you can get.

One man and his wife were in the garden and she had to go inside because she couldn't cope with the language and other things. The abuse, the bottles being hurled, the rubbish they leave behind.

What would be the nature of the abuse?

Oh they usually abuse each other, but sometimes if you are walking past they will abuse you too.

Do they abuse you in racist terms?

Some of these people in the community don't, but we have another group of younger Aboriginals that do, yeah.

Right, and on the white side, are there white people who abuse Aboriginals?

I haven't come across that but I am sure there may be that sort of thing, but most people -- and I am not trying to be prejudiced here -- but most people try and look away.

What I am trying to wrestle with is the nature of racism and whether, if it was a drunken white couple defecating and urinating and fornicating in the street, people would feel any different?

Most people have said to me, I don't care if they are black or white, it is their behaviour I am worried about, but if I was white and doing that I would be arrested. But if they are arrested the police say we are accused of being racist. So that is the biggest problem, people don't care if they are black or white, if you are doing that behaviour there should be something done about it.

Now, it can't be sorted out by arresting them and putting them in gaol, that is not the answer, and a lot of people do understand that too. They just get sick and tired of it when it is across from their house, or in their back yard, under the peppercorn tree. So we have already set up one camp in South Boulder where the people coming in can stay. It has got water and toilets and shelter.

Now when we get a big influx of all these communities coming in, South Boulder gets overflowed. And because they are different families, not all of them are going to go to South Boulder, so we are trying to do one at Lakewood for the bigger community where they can just take their trucks and their sleeping bags and camp.

This is a joint venture of the council and aboriginal community leaders?

K. Yes, yes.

And the aboriginal communities are happy with this arrangement?

Yes, yes, they have been cooperative. There has been a lot of criticism that we weren't doing anything, so we said, all right, what do you want to do, and it has been hard to get it off the ground, very very difficult.

What have been some of the difficulties?

Oh, finding the right area. And then when we put the shelters up and the water there was criticism that that wasn't good enough.

From the Aboriginal people?

Some of the Aboriginal people. Not the actual people who were there, other groups.

Does the white community say why are you spending all this money?

No, we don't seem to get that reaction. I think they are happy to see that they have got somewhere to go. I get people ringing up and saying, oh the poor buggers have got nowhere to go anyway, we understand that, but please do we have to look at it from our front yard? So they are sympathetic, a lot of people are sympathetic about it.

So we are trying to set up Lakewood, and set one up at the old gun club which is in the north west for another family group because you just can't have them together or they will kill each other.

Most of them when they come to town they know the rules, and are pretty good. If we say to them you cannot go there but you can go there, they will pretty well stick to it, and this is what we are still in the process of sorting out. But you have still got all these families that don't mix with each other so you are going to have to have at least four camps, so they can all go together to different camps.

I believe our friends in Port Augusta have got a very similar problem and are doing similar things.

Does the word "reconciliation" get used much around here? I mean among ordinary people.

No, I wouldn't have thought so.

What about among the elite in the town, the leadership people?

Oh yes, yes it is discussed often. .

And in what circumstances is it discussed? Is it discussed because the Federal Government or the State Government take initiatives which you then have to pick up and carry forward or what?

Yeah, I would say so, yeah.

Is there a local reconciliation committee or board?

Mmm, not that I am aware of. I mean we have had discussions about reconciliation and we have had some meetings and I think there have been government initiatives and stuff like that.

What are the sort of issues that are talked about when you have these meetings?

Oh we have had some recently like you know having the Aboriginal flag flying at the council offices, things like that, just having more Aboriginal consultation with the council. As I said we have got out first Aboriginal elected member of council.

What is the attitude to the concept of reconciliation?

I think particularly in Western Australia and particularly the goldfields, our biggest concern --- that hasn't helped reconciliation I can tell you -- is that we have got something like 32 native title claims over the city and it has held up development considerably. I am talking about residential development, industrial development and drilling/exploration, which of course is a big part of our economy.

They have put it over the whole city. When we go to do a park and gardens or something we have got to negotiate with native title. So anything that is freehold is fine, but by putting it over the whole city, there might be a little piece of land, a little piece of reserve and we want to do something with it, then we have got to and negotiate. It is getting easier, I must admit, over the last few years, it is getting a little bit easier. They are talking, whereas before they wouldn't talk to us.

Is there much knowledge about the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation?

I would say among the layman no, probably not, and a lot of our elected members only know what gets presented to us at council.

And does much get presented to you at council?

Reasonably so. Our CEO is very good with the reconciliation and he is probably the person -- who unfortunately is not here, he is on leave -- you

should be talking to, because he is the one that used his initiative and gone on with getting the camps set up, reconciliation issues and everything like that.

So in addition to getting the follow-up of federal and state activities, there is also quite a deal of self-starting initiatives that have been taken here?

Oh yes. The other problem that we have is that we have a younger Aboriginal population, here, who live in the town, and they get paid to go to school by the government and that causes a lot of resentment, that causes a lot of resentment.

What do people say about that?

They say it is reverse racism, it is reverse discrimination. And they feel these younger ones feel that they can do anything and get away with it, and that does cause a lot of resentment in the community amongst the younger ones as well.

In what way do the younger ones try it on?

Vandalism, not turning up for school, just wandering the street.

And that is where our children have got the resentment; not us, we sort of accept it, tolerate it, but our younger ones don't, they consider themselves equal, and so therefore they do have that resentment. You can understand that. They are all brought up to be equal, they don't look at people by the colour of their skins but now when they see this, they start to.

(Shown Draft Declaration.)

People say to me they understand that the Aboriginal people were here first, but why do they have to keep on about it so much? I mean, my family has been here five generations too. My family has been here since Western Australia was colonised. Yeah, the Aboriginal people were here and no-one has got a problem with that, but recognise Australians too.

What is the overall impression that you take away, having read that?

Well, I can understand the reconciliation part of it, but there are some words in there that wouldn't sit well with me. We go on and on about all of this. It has happened, okay, let's get on with it. Why are we going back all the time? When the children were taken, I think that was terrible, absolutely terrible and I was in that age group and it would have been the most devastating thing that ever happened.

I wouldn't sign off on that.

On the assumption that they arrived at a form of words that you felt was reasonable, the next question is what might be done with it. (Options put.)

Well, well, an Act of Parliament. You would have to get the wording pretty well right to get it into Parliament. I don't think a lot of people would go for that. In the Constitution? Well, we have just tried to change the Constitution and we didn't get very far, did we, so I think that could be very difficult to do. Personally speaking I would really have to have a long hard look at any constitutional changes.

How do you think the community would jump?

They wouldn't go for constitutional change. I doubt it.

What do you think would be their reservations?

People are very hard to persuade with anything. People would rather be negative than positive in our community about anything. Every time we, the city council, has a referendum it never gets far. We, particularly our locals -- I am talking second, third, fourth generation -- don't like to change.

When there are incidents, you know when say police get involved . . . ?

Our police are very very careful. They really are conscious, completely conscious, of the racist tag, so much so that as I said they don't arrest a lot of Aboriginal people. They would rather deal with them in another way than have to arrest them.

What's the employment picture like here in the town as a whole?

It is pretty good. It has been a bit low recently because of the downturn in gold price.

What is the employment for Aboriginals like? I mean are there any programs?

Yes there is. There are some employment agencies set up in the town particularly for the apprenticeship schemes, that sort of thing for the younger ones, that is improving continually. Even at the college here, university which is part of TAFE as well they have set up programs for that. At Curtin University there is the a Centre which is an Aboriginal centre for learning. June Williams runs that.

And also the Chamber of Commerce: they have got some programs going and the mining companies.

Chambers of Commerce

Respondent 1

You can't help people who won't help themselves. It doesn't matter who they are.

People in Moree recognise that some need encouragement, the ones who could run off the rails, who could stay on the rails with a bit of encouragement. They're the ones that need to be encouraged.

Then you have the ones above that level who are obviously not going to run off the rails. Those people are largely successfully employed.

State of race relations

It's an attitude problem – their attitude and our attitude. There has to be something in between. It's hard to achieve any kind of reconciliation unless both parties are willing to do it.

Is there a willingness?

I believe there is, but there's always a percentage who are not willing.

If they're in work, it solves nearly all the problems.

Are there statistics for employment?

More and more. About 30-odd per cent are in work.

The general employment prospects in Moree are good. If you can't get work in Moree, you're not trying. It's the most productive agricultural area in Australia.

Private sector employment?

Not quite at the same rate, because it's not quite so easy for them as for a government department. When your livelihood depends on it, you need to be pretty sure it is going to succeed before you put somebody on. You can't have this discrimination stuff. If they're going to be employed, it has to be on exactly the same basis as everyone else. No different. They are Australians. It's got to be that way.

Talk about reconciliation?

Not much. Don't think so. You know what Australians are like: they'll do things, but if it comes under a banner, they say, "Aw, yeah, maybe." You can't ram it down their throats.

Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation?

No, don't know much about that.

Document of Reconciliation?

No, don't know anything about that.

The Aborigines who want this have got to stand up and be counted and show a bit of leadership. But the ones who are at the top end of the scale want to separate themselves. That's a problem. They don't want to be dragged back.

They might take responsibility for the middle group (the ones that need encouragement) but not for the bottom group. They want to stay away from there.

What distinguishes people in each of the three groups?

Family, largely. Family background.

Chamber of Commerce have any policy?

We've supported the Cotton growers activity (Aboriginal employment program) but we haven't taken any practical part. We haven't done a lot in that regard. Everyone's got businesses to run and they haven't got time.

Draft

Australia needs to be united because we're not highly populated. Defence purposes. The more you've got to do it, the better. Don't think it can never happen again.

The New Zealanders seem to be pretty united. The Maoris seem to be a proud people. Are there any comparisons there?

Share responsibilities, yeah, go along with that.

Injustice. Is there injustice at the moment?

Equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities – I don't think you'll get any argument there. Can't get any fairer than that.

But opportunities only every going to be offered to those who want to take them up.

But they've got to give something. They just can't take all the time. Until they give something, they won't gain any respect.

Do with it?

(Flags designed by Aboriginal students and TAFE and flown in the main street. There were a few comments when they were flown, mainly by little old ladies living in the past. Very small minority. We don't want to stifle the Aboriginal culture.)

When you say you live in Moree the first thing people say is, how are the Aboriginals up there? It was a target. Best leave that alone. If you're going to succeed with this reconciliation, how about not have any muckraking!

Respondent 2

I think people are trying. I do not think it will be achieved just by delivering a document. People like me like to see action rather than a document.

We need programs that empower Aboriginal and Islander people in some way.

We need to have a regard for their culture, which we don't have. We're not taught that.

We need a real understanding of how they think, and they do think very differently.

A lot of frustration stems from concern about the crime waves perpetrated mainly by Aboriginal and Islander youth. Police deliver these people into custody, but the justice system, simply because of the notion that you can't put Aboriginal youth in jail because they're going to commit suicide . . . the perpetrators know they can get away with it.

The other side of that is, a lot of people understand that a lot of these youth don't have a lot to look forward to, and that they are also suffering from low self-esteem, they weren't encouraged to have motivation or direction. It's a shame when you see them going through school and then just dropping out. Some intervention much earlier in their piece, and the whole community has a role to play.

There are some huge cultural divisions and we have to acknowledge that, and make the most of them.

Reconciliation is about having programs that will educate each side about the other at a young age?

At a very young age.

But we European Australians don't want that to override all our fundamental principles as well.

Many Aboriginal and Islander children do not participate in pre-school programs or those early years when you get to know other people.

The parents do that deliberately because they feel they're different. We have a pre-school for Aboriginal and the separation starts there.

We need mentoring programs, women mentoring women. They haven't had the confidence to go out and learn. I would love to see a mentoring program as part of a national reconciliation and every community have one.

It's so important that it comes from both sides.

I've had some experience talking to women on Palm Island, and while it was viewed with some suspicion, in the end we enjoyed what we could think of would be the end of that.

Joan Sheldon, as Arts Minister and Women's Affairs, when she was Deputy Premier had a women's advisory group. Part of my brief was to look at what was happening to women in this region from a business perspective, and from what I saw, I identified the women of Palm Island who were part of that group and recommended to government that there should be a mentoring program. However, the Government changed and as far as I know it hasn't proceeded in the way we envisaged it. It's been funded but I don't know how it's proceeded.

I had hoped that I would partner the chairwoman of the Palm Island Council. Helping her develop business skills, because they have no training. They have a lot of advisers, but they're not running their own affairs really. They are sick and tired of the white man coming over and telling them how to run their affairs. They haven't learnt to do it themselves.

The women of the island have great hope for their young people.

A woman running a refuge there for bruised and battered women told me she really wanted to be a lawyer. That's where it stops because there's no avenue.

What does the Chamber of Commerce do in terms of Aboriginal employment?

Absolutely nothing. Our charter is to look after the business community. They have not seen evidence of indigenous people wanting to contribute to society.

Race relations

What we all feel is disgust when we see them drunk, fornicating in parks, and little children . . . we all feel an abhorrence at that.

That's at their behaviour. But there's not – not that I'm aware of – antagonism. There have been skirmishes between Aborigines and white youth, gangs of them, but I wouldn't be afraid of Aboriginal people.

Local paper?

I think they've turned their back on it. I don't think they report on indigenous issues. They report on incidents of cars being stoned and having their tyres slashed on Palm Island. There's no real accusation. They do it fairly well.

And the police. I think the police are very good indeed.

Unemployment is quite low here. I would say there's probably full employment here.

Talk about Reconciliation?

The Chamber has discussed it. We had Fr Frank Brennan come and talk to us about it. We've had a number of public luncheons where we talked about reconciliation and how it might move forward. (How was Frank received?) Very well indeed. A lot of information. He talked about the political nature (of the issue) and the compromises that have been made; talked about what he thought the way forward was.

The clergy came that day, and a number of Aboriginal people. It was wonderful.

There is great antagonism, towards Marrandah Yanner, personally for a number of things he's done to the business community – he's just a thug and I don't mind anybody knowing it. He doesn't represent the Aboriginal people at all. The sooner they get rid of him as a spokesman the better. He has done some dreadful things to businesses in the area – property damage, criminal behaviour. He's just got off on one charge.

BHP Cannington have gone a long way down the road to developing a mutually beneficial arrangement between their mine and the various Aboriginal tribes. They've done that themselves because they knew they were in for a very hard time, given the experience of Century.

BHP spoke to the land-holders first. That's all they want: they want that consideration of being spoken to. And there's a retail shop for Aboriginal artefacts, and they have regular conferences with all the tribes over anything they want to raise. They've done some great work.

Document

I've got a problem with a couple of paragraphs.

"We acknowledge the land was colonised without the consent of the original inhabitants." I do not like that. I think that's looking back; it's not looking forward. Most Australians want to go forward. They will say, "How do we know that? Who's to say it wasn't accepted at the time?"

And it says, "Our nation must have the courage"; it doesn't say, "our nation has the courage"

I love the first paragraph, "speaking with one voice". I think the second paragraph is fine. A lot of Christians might have trouble with the next one.

It's all one-sided.

For this generation to have to say "I'm sorry" will be very hard for a lot of people.

We have started the journey.

I don't know what "custodians" means.

"According to their aspirations": they might want to have economic conditions equal to whom? I'd be very worried about something like that going in. It means "whatever we want", doesn't it.

"Participate as they choose": what about "as they are elected"? There has to be some right to participate, as for the rest of the community. I'd be very concerned about that.

"Increased representation in the Australian Parliament": how do you do that without altering the Constitution?

It would be up to party political devices to put Aboriginal people up for pre-selection, I imagine.

Options

If it went to a referendum and was rejected, that would be the worst thing for Australia.

If it were applied to the Constitution in some way, we'd have to be very careful about the wording. I'd be terrified if some of that wording was applied to our Constitution. This puts things on future generations and we're still saying sorry we did all these terrible things.

This document has to be the piece of paper that moves us forward. Worded the way it is, you'd find a lot of people not signing off on it, not wanting to put it on their walls and not wanting to have any part of it.

It has got to be a document that is embraced by all Australians, not just the apology part. Because it won't go anywhere. It will just stay as it is. And we need it to move forward without recriminations. Do away with the recriminations and celebrate the way forward, rather than . . . see, there's a really dark cloud hanging over this. Too much digging-up-the-past stuff. People won't acknowledge that. It's awful, isn't it. I wish we could. But most of us won't own up to it. And you don't want a document that's going to put us back ten or five years.

The Police

Respondent 1

State of relations

Contrary to a lot of media reports, I don't see any major areas of conflict at all. Most of the policing issues that arise here with respect to the indigenous population are confined to their own factions. You'll see Aboriginal fellows fighting, but very rarely will you see Aboriginal and white fellows fighting.

With attitudes, most crime and social disorder does emanate from the Aboriginal population. That's not a racist statement. It's just a plain fact of life. And most of it from the youth and the very young, as young as 7 or 8 years or age.

So there is an attitude of dismay and probably intolerance towards the Aboriginal people because of this. It's aimed at the behaviour, I think.

That percentage does the Aboriginal population represent?

Difficult to get an accurate figure but anecdotally about a third. It's a tiny minority of indigenous people that we come into contact with. If we could relocate about 20 people from this town, we'd have very few problems.

A lot of the problem is lack of parenting skills. In some cases you're into your second, third or even fourth generation of parents who are substance-dependent.

Historically there are barriers between the police and indigenous people. They're barriers we're trying to bring down, but they're very deeply rooted.

Are Aboriginals doing anything themselves on this problem?

Oh yeah, a lot of work, within the communities and among the agencies of the town, many of which have Aboriginal representation. For instance, the manager of the Department of Community Services is an Aboriginal lady; the Aboriginal Legal Service, that we have close links with; the street outreach people.

Nardoola?

Yes, controlled by the Department of Juvenile Justice. It's a halfway house, live-in, for youth on community service orders. Aimed towards education, developmental, rehabilitation, rather than punishment. It's a very good concept. The problem has been in getting good staff.

Indigenous representation on main town institutions?

To be honest it would be quite minimal.

You don't find much interaction at a social level, visiting one another's homes. That'd be pretty rare. We've got a few indigenous people working here, but I had a barbecue and said come around, there'd be a reluctance. Visiting a white fella's house moves people out of their comfort zone, and it's probably the same the other way.

We have a Local Area Command Aboriginal Consultative Committee (LACACC). We went through a consultative process, and about 60 people turned up, about half indigenous people and half police. We formed a committee and that is now the LACACC. We have a strategic plan and the committee meets quarterly or on a needs basis to review progress.

The main points were that we would try to raise awareness of the Aboriginal culture among the police so there would be better communications (hands over photocopy of strategic plan).

Know of ARC

I've publicly said sorry here. On Sorry Day I was invited to speak at the town hall. I was quite happy to say sorry on behalf of the police service, irrespective of what other political views there were. We're the instrument of government, but sometimes we don't agree with the philosophy behind what we're asked to do. We do the dirty work, and over the years a lot of wrongs were done, and an apology was in order.

There was no opposition to it by anybody here (in the police). In fact there was no adverse comment whatsoever, and it was certainly well received by the Aboriginal community.

It suggested to me that there are a lot of people out there who want to see this reconciliation take place.

People want to learn from the past but not linger on it. They want to move on.

The media love to pick up on Aboriginal unrest in the west, and the people here, including the Aboriginal people, despise the media for this. It doesn't reflect the true situation.

A TV crew came here once and put \$200 on the bar and got people drunk, and then filmed the subsequent fights. I don't think they'd be game to do that today.

Document

That's excellent. That sums up the whole notion of reconciliation. Sums up the sins of the past and gives a bit of direction for the future.

Community reaction?

You'd get a few rednecks but by and large that'd be pretty well accepted.

If you were thinking of formalising it legislatively, people might say they'd like to see it a little more balanced. Something to say they've (the Aborigines) have to participate in this as well. It's not a one-sided statement. There has to be an equal commitment from the Aboriginal people to make this work.

And some people would think, hang on, could this lead to some sort of litigation, land rights. There'd be a lot of suspicion if you were going to formalise it in legislation.

What's very prevalent in the indigenous community is a blame mentality. If something happens to them it has to be someone else's fault. They can't say, that happened to me because of things I did or didn't do.

Respondent 2

Race relations

We have a consultative committee including a range of community and Aboriginal organisations. We meet regularly and that's been a very productive way to raise issues of concern and work on joint strategies.

During NARDOC week we had the raising of the Aboriginal flag outside the police station here. We looked at that as a mechanism for giving recognition. We thought that and to let people within the broader community here understand the moves our service had made in terms of trying to achieve a basis or a foundation on which reconciliation could be built.

The commissioner came up here and made a statement recognising the issues that had separated us in the past, some of the wrongs that had been committed, some of the areas where relationships between police and Aboriginals and Islanders had been adversely affected by either enforcement of the law or the authority positions that those police had, and what we needed to do to overcome those legacies.

We have Aboriginal Police Liaison Officers. They are all Aboriginals or Islanders. We involve the community in selecting those and the development of policies. We also have a sizeable number of Aboriginal sworn officers. The PLOs are not sworn, don't have the powers of a police officer. The emphasis is

on liaison, in terms of both helping police understand issues with respect to their culture, their people and the organisation, and also they work with the community, building bridges and understanding.

We have an increasing number of Aboriginal and Islander people who are becoming sworn officers.

Wider state of relations?

I have a commitment to see that we can be used as a resource constructively to achieve (better relations between white and black in the community).

Much talk about Reconciliation?

There has been. I'm not sure I'd say there's been sufficient. I'm part of a church where the priest is very committed to it and involved, and encourages participation.

Draft

It's got what you'd expect to be included in a declaration.

The emphasis on recognition of the oneness of Australia's people, acknowledging we want to move forward but recognise what's gone before.

There are some parts which could be worded better.

*"And so we take this step: As one part of the nation expresses its sorrow"
I don't have a major problem with the thrust of it. But there are some things that I could imagine could potentially not be as acceptable, as with the Prime Minister's preamble (to the Constitution).*

*"We value the unique status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original owners"
I can imagine some people could see that as a launching pad for land rights.*

The second-last one: the fact that you're mentioning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people only. To me, everyone should have that right. Why single them out?

I don't have a problem with the thrust. It's just a matter of getting the wording right.

What do with it?

It might be a combination. The most important thing about this document is that it is owned and internalised, so it really does lead to a change in mindset and action. In other words, that we really believe that this says something on

our behalf, not just empty rhetoric, but affects our social interaction on a personal and organisational level.

Some (options) have the potential to be counter-effective. If we were to try to get a document in law, and it didn't get unanimous or majority support, we could be set back considerably.

Likewise, with the register, if people don't sign it, it doesn't necessarily mean they don't support reconciliation. It could be just general apathy or that people don't want to be on public display as having taken a stand.

Leaders ahead?

I wouldn't be surprised.

Parkies?

There's a prison here and people come from remote communities and some, when they get out of prison, elect not to return to whence they came and then live here. They congregate in these areas. Some attempts have been made, which have been less than successful, and we've got a diversionary centre that's had a difficult implementation period. Rather than putting people in for being drunk, we take them to the diversionary centre where they can be assessed if there's a medical problem. And if they agree to be involved in a treatment program, we can refer them to that.

We're still experiencing some difficulties. We have a new manager who's doing some good work in building up the occupancy rate.

There's also some work in setting up an alternative venue for people who want to live in that sort of environment. (Happy Valley?) Yes. I'm not sure I'd say that it has worked. It's been adversely affected at the moment because of a native title claim (over the site).

Unemployment?

Fairly good employment level. (Aboriginal?) I don't know. Would you put the 'parkies' in the unemployment range?

In private sector?

Oh yes, you see them in stores. And we have some excellent people who have joined our service. One was the Premier's bodyguard. We had a difficulty in the early stages in not having sufficient numbers to allow them to feel supported, and that real bind when they had to police their own communities, which created tensions. So we had to get sufficient numbers, put in additional support mechanisms. There's usually five or six in an intake.

Respondent 3

How do you see this society and the interface between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians?

One of the things that you learn when you come to a place like the Northern Territory and working with indigenous people, is the word partnership, and I have tried to bring partnership to policing here in the Territory, particularly with the indigenous numbers here. In recent times I think that we have had considerable success in reaching levels of understanding which I think in the past would have been a lot more difficult to reach, if you didn't go into this partnership arrangement.

Now is that on both sides, from the non-indigenous side and the indigenous side?

B. Yes it is, very much so. Let me explain it to you by a practical example which is occurring right now. The Tiwi Islands, Bathurst, Melville, etc. They have had a number of tragic suicides in the last 18 months/2 years, and when they looked at their policing several years ago they said to me we would like to police the Tiwis ourselves, will you help us. They are a very forward-thinking community the Tiwi Islanders, and in fact built their own police station which the government has leased back. We helped them, we worked with them in building their own police station across there, and they have 2 Aboriginal community police officers who the government through the police force train. We equip and pay, of course, and the whole idea in the partnership is that the community across there will provide the accommodation for the police officers and also the vehicle support. It is now interesting, some 3 years later, that they want a white police presence across there because they have suddenly realised that they can't cope with the problem by themselves, and they were fairly critical of me in the first instance when I went across to a meeting a few weeks back where they said, not in these words, these are my words, you have abdicated your responsibility as the Police Commissioner.

By not providing us with?

By not providing us and we have had all these tragic suicides. I reminded them of course of what the situation was, and we had a very robust and vigorous discussion. Since that time we have had meetings, here in Darwin and back in the Tiwis, and we are now back working in partnership where they have a better understanding, I have a better understanding, because they said, we are sorry, we did say what we said several years ago that we wanted to police this place, it hasn't gone the way that we would have wanted, and what I have said of course is that I must have a responsibility to police the Tiwi Islands and so we have got a white police officer across there working with the Aboriginal police officers.

Were they partially successful?

Yes, yes. They have been partially successful. They are not the only community that are doing that. We have a major program and you will probably hear more of it tomorrow when you talk with Commander Burke in another area of the Territory, where we are in fact working in a long-term project hopefully with the end result where they will be responsible for their own Aboriginal police.

When Aboriginals do their own policing, do they do it according to the non-Aboriginal law, or do they import their own law in the process of their own policing?

They use all aspects of the law, including white man's law which they are trained in. They also use their own laws within their own culture providing those laws are appropriate and providing that the actions that they might take are appropriate in the context of their community. So if somebody is causing a problem within that community and commits what could be said to be relatively minor offences -- it might be criminal damage, it might be minor assault -- the community will handle that in their own way. If it is young people they will take the young people out bush, they will train them, they will teach them, they will encourage them, and more than often you won't get a complainant coming forward reporting that crime.

And do they know that you have got some comfort with that providing it is done properly?

Yes.

So have you talked about these sorts of things?

Only in a very general way because you must understand of course that Aboriginal business is just that, particularly where it concerns the elders of the community, the elders don't take lightly to people coming in as a matter of course and being part of their culture.

Now that is positive and you have given me two examples. Are these examples of Aboriginal communities taking charge with you of their own affairs widespread, or are the examples you have given me lovely examples, but isolated?

No, I am developing Aboriginal policing in the Northern Territory in its own right. When I came here I was troubled by the fact that within my own police force I didn't believe there was enough ethnic diversity including Aboriginals. Mind you, I have to also make the statement, who is Aboriginal anyway, and that is very important to recognise. I will have a lot more Aboriginals in this

police force who don't want to declare themselves, and that is their business, nor should they have to be asked, that is not important.

It is a personal matter and is of no import as far as I am concerned. But I was troubled because how could I get additional Aboriginals into mainstream policing? They didn't have the literacy skills, they didn't have the overall skills to go to the college to be trained as we would train white police officers. I suddenly realised, I don't know why it perhaps took me quite as long as it did, but Aboriginals do mainstream policing in their own way, particularly in their own communities, so we have concentrated on developing the Aboriginal within their own right and we are pretty proud of that to the extent that the developments in recent times have had them win a major national award because, you see, we are now training the Aboriginals in terms of their own vocation. We are getting Commonwealth money, we are now teaching them literacy skills, we now have an accredited training course for Aboriginals. They develop the course with us, and then they take it further than that in terms of the program that they need to take back into their communities which they know will succeed at the end of the day. At the end of this interview I will show you a beautiful document which I think says it all. In one of our communities where that Aboriginal community police officer is policing that community with all the force and all the proprietary of any white police officer, he is succeeding because he is one of the community.

How is it seen by the non-indigenous population? Is it understood?

I think it now is starting to be understood simply because we are starting to get runs on the board. For example, last year, with our assistance, one of the major programs they developed was a road safety program. Kick a Goal for Safety, they called it. They developed it around a football theme -- as you know they are mad sportsman, love sport, go to the Tiwis and the first thing you see are kids with balls in their hands. They have cut the road toll of Aboriginals in half, and I have got no doubt that the majority of the saving of lives has been because they have been out there policing their own communities.

Out in the communities of course you also have white people who assist -- you have got the health sisters, you have got the education people, you have got the council people that help, so you have got a base of white people of course who are supportive of the community in various ways and they bring back the messages very very strongly, of success or otherwise. If it doesn't succeed we will get that message back equally as quickly.

Some people have said to us, look, why should the Aborigines get more than I get? Why should they be able to get money out of social welfare that I can't get? I am battling, I can't afford to send my kids to school without any payment but they can. Why should my taxes go to pay for people who sit on the side of the road? Why should I help people who go into new housing and kick the hell out of it, and so on.

Well without a doubt there are those views up here, and you would also appreciate that somebody like myself that has had 43 years in policing, that I have also seen the same situation with white people. I think the difference up here of course, is that where you have 28 percent of your population indigenous there has to be far more understanding of what the problems are all about, because if there isn't that understanding all else fails, and when you look at a small population of 250000 for a big place like the Northern Territory and 28 percent of those people being indigenous there has to be a far better understanding and interaction in terms of approaching the sorts of problems that you talk about. So I guess you have got both ends of the scale, you have got people who on one hand will be critical, you have got people on the other end of the scale who say well this is part of what we are about up here in trying to do something about the problem.

Is there much talk of or knowledge about the process of reconciliation? Is there knowledge of the council of reconciliation?

Yes, yes, very much so, and indeed from my point of view as Police Commissioner one of the things that I believe about the Northern Territory is it makes every endeavour to practise what reconciliation is about. Whether it succeeds or not is another question, and that is in most instances up for others to make a judgement on. But there can be no better way of looking at reconciliation up here in the NT but by doing something about it. So from my point of view and the people that I interact with in government, our endeavours are based about a number of common themes, one of which we are well aware of is reconciliation and as a small example, and it is only a very very small example, for me as a Police Commissioner to host the Commissioners' Conference last year as I did here in the Territory, to go to the Larakea people who own this land and say to the Larakea people I would like you to welcome us on to your land, and the Sunday evening before the conference was started was just that, I invited the Larakea to come and to welcome us, and that was something that was interaction on both sides which I think brought respect, not only from them, but also from the group of Commissioners from around the country that were here.

(Shown Draft Declaration.)

I have seen this document, and I have certainly had several letters from Evelyn Scott in terms of the whole work of the Committee. I guess to some extent I may start to sound just a little bit like I'm repeating myself, because until you come to a place like this and realise that you have got to do something in a positive way -- and I use the word partnership -- none of this will go anywhere at all. There has to be an understanding, there has to be a recognition and if that means occasions that I have to move sideways from my point of view or they might have to move sideways, I guess it is a little bit like what happened on the Tiwi Islands, where we both gave ground at the end of the day to achieve what we felt needed to be achieved. Action speaks louder

than words, and I would like to think that I at least from this position here could leave this place when I finish up at the end of the year with people saying, well he at least did this, this and this, something positive and not just talk about it, because I think that perhaps that may be one of the difficulties, that too much is talked about reconciliation without people doing things.

Would you further argue that a declaration such as that could retard the process of reconciliation because they are seen as words and not deeds, or have no retarding but no positive effect?

My view is that you have got to ensure that those words don't necessarily become the be all and end all. That there is a recognition that there is a need for a set of words, but just as important, if not more importantly, that there is action that flows from those words. And so rather than that document becoming a so-called almost 'Bible' of words, also attached to that it must be it is almost like the things that flow and have been done from that because if action hasn't taken place as a result, they are words on a piece of paper. But at the same time, I think there is the need of course to have a foundation that you have got to work from, and that surely is a foundation.

(Referred to strategies.) Do they start to get close to what you are thinking about in terms of action?

Yeah. I guess they do.

One of my Aboriginals will be travelling overseas in March to attend the Global Cultural Diversity Congress in Cardiff City in March of this year and he is going to present a paper on diversity and racial equality issues, and it is going to be about police services and indigenous people in the Northern Territory. That is an Aboriginal Community Police Officer called Mark Casey who works down on Daly River.

And that dovetails with all of that.

Let me also ask you about a sensitive question, I know you won't mind. It has in the past been said, both of the New South Wales police force and the Queensland police force and the NT police force, that they they didn't understand Aboriginals and they were at times rough in the way they approached them. I don't know whether that is true or not, but how do your own people, non-Aboriginal people, react to a difficult environment where they have got to police in a difficult context.

Good question, very good question, because that is one of the things that I wondered when I came up here. It was answered for me when I visited all my remote police stations and most of those police stations do have an Aboriginal community police officer, some of them have 2 working there, and what I saw there, not so much reassured me but I guess might have even taken me back a little bit, because I saw white police officer and black police officer working side

by side. I saw white and black police officer interacting in a way that I guess I hadn't really seen previously and I believe that the main area of policing in the NT -- and I would be accused of being bias, but I have policed in other parts of the country -- the main area of policing in the NT is the best in the country by far, because there is a better understanding, there is a better affiliation and there is a better relationship. There are exceptions of course, there will always be exceptions, but I have said to my colleague Commissioners that remote area policing up here is so far in front of other police forces of other jurisdictions it is just not funny. I believe that.

Given that is true, is there a way in which those men and women can be utilised for other parts of the country? Is that asking too much?

No not at all, and in fact we have already taken, and Mark Casey has been one of them, we have taken out Aboriginal police officers into other jurisdictions and we have had training seminars and in fact we will be hosting later this year a major seminar in the Territory where we will be inviting other jurisdictions to come up here and I guess experience what we are doing up here. There is no better way than coming up here, going out and seeing and learning and asking.

(Respondents showed a document written by an Aboriginal officer assigned to police his own community.)

It is a little gem. We had trained him in traffic enforcement and he wanted to let the community know that he now had a traffic infringement notice book and he wrote it out that he now has a traffic infringement book and that means that if you drive without seat belts on you get fined \$20. And then he went right down the list of things, and when he went into that community, that community knew that he meant business. And the final part of his document said something like, "And you men better stop bashing your women because I know you are doing it and it is just not good enough and if you keep on doing I will be going to have to take action against you". I think we had given him the confidence to do things that he hadn't been able to do before within his own community. And that community, which is down the other side of Alice Springs, have now developed their own sobering-up shelter, they now have their own night patrol, they now have their own drinking areas, and he used to creep into drinking areas, and he would provide radio communication between the drinking areas so that if there is a problem they can radio through and he will then go out in the police vehicle and do something about it. And the other thing that he does, with other members of the community, he makes sure the kids go to school of a morning. And when you go into that community it makes you feel good. Now that doesn't mean to say it is always going to be like that, but I have just felt that if you are able to give the support and the direction and the partnership and not just take it all away from them, that they can do very well.

Do they want to join the white society, the white values, the western values as it were?

Well first of all I think that the elders and the older people are comfortable and want to be comfortable and live within their own culture and better themselves within that culture. But some of the younger people are not that way inclined and they see what the white people have and they would like very much to have a part of that. They struggle to try and have those younger people understand the community and cultural values, and some of the problems in the community come about as a result of that conflict. So it is a very complex situation.

Industry

Respondent 1

The relationship is probably quite strained, from what I can see.

There always seems to be a lot of community backlash on crimes committed by Aboriginals. There doesn't seem to be a lot of sympathy for Aboriginal people.

I've spent a lot of time in the Northern Territory. I've had a lot to do with indigenous communities. I think they're accepted, but I don't think there's much sympathy for them.

Different from NT?

It's a bit hard to say. There's a very big drink problem here. We had similar problems in the Northern Territory.

Is the majority of the Aborigine community employed, stable, is there only a minority with a drink problem grog etc?)

I haven't been here long enough, but we do employ a lot of Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal people here and they're good employees. I guess the unruly side (of the Aboriginal community) is more visible. There are lot of families who are driving around in cars and whose kids go to school, and they seem to be assimilated a bit better than, say in Tennant Creek, where there are camps, whereas here they live in houses.

Is a wish to go 'walkabout' an issue in employment?

I really don't know. This afternoon I'm interviewing an applicant for a position of indigenous affairs manager who will liaise with all the local communities. I want to do it because I don't know enough about it. We're not close enough to the indigenous community and we need to learn a lot more about it.

Any opposition from Head Office?

Oh hell no. We have quite a good indigenous affairs program at Macarthur River and we've had some good relationships at Cloncurry. This place has been here for 75 years and we've got a long way to go.

Industry has to support educating these people and assimilating them into the workforce.

Influence of family and kinship responsibilities?

Can't speak for here but in Tennant Creek they certainly were susceptible to that. A lot of them do get pressured, and absenteeism is a bit of a problem. We were reasonably lenient, but at some point we had to put our foot down and a lot of people lost their jobs.

Strength of Aborigine culture?

I think it's all about their feeling of worth. If you and I were sitting around with nothing to do, we'd probably get sick to death of it and get stuck into the grog. I think we have to provide opportunities for these people so they get a feeling of worthiness and their self-esteem picks up.

We all lose a bit of our culture. The Italians come out to Australia and they lose some of their culture but they keep parts of it. I don't see it as being any different to that. I don't believe in the past 200 years we've destroyed their culture. They had a pretty hard life before we came here, subsistence living and reasonably nomadic. What we've done wrong is we've tended to put them out to the side a bit.

Reconciliation?

I heard a bit about it but I'm not sure we're seeing any results.

I think it's an honourable thing to strive for, but I don't think we'll get it until the leaders of the Aboriginal community stop having a big chip on their shoulder about what's happened in the past and start looking forward.

I think there's a lot of anger about the Stolen Generations, and I can understand that. But the people who did that at the time thought they were doing the very best thing for the Aboriginal people. They were pretty kind hearted souls who went out and tried to do the right thing.

But there seems to be an anger against us for what happened in the past. I think we've got to try to draw a line in the sand and look forward.

Now the stuff about apologies and all this sort of stuff isn't going to change things. Even if John Howard said sorry tomorrow, I don't think it'd change anything.

Council?

I know that my old boss is on it, Robert Champion de Crespigny. As I understand it, it's a group of business and government and Aboriginal leaders who are trying to come to terms with the whole thing.

Document

They're being too apologetic. The past is the past.

I don't have a problem with the clauses talking about where we go forward, and the acknowledgment that the land was inhabited by the Aboriginal people before we came is fine. The fact that it was "colonised without consent" – do we have to be specific about Aboriginal people? This is an incredibly multicultural country now, with lots of different races and creeds and I don't see why we have to keep harping on the Aboriginal people. It's just too apologetic.

What do Aboriginal people think about it?

Strategies

Economic independence – I've talked about the importance of jobs and worth, and I really think that is a key part of it.

There's too much money going into the administration of these things. There not enough money getting in on the ground. They spend a huge amount of money – is it \$2 billion a year? – and when you go out to the out-stations and the camps and you see where these people live, it's quite obvious the money's not getting there.

And if you look at the number of white people who are employed to administer those funds, it gets soaked up in salaries and wages and what white people enjoy, and not to where it should be going.

Where private enterprise has gone in and managed it properly and given people opportunities, some fail, but some really rise up and it changes their lives. It's fantastic to see. It's really quite rewarding when you see it work.

The strategy to address disadvantage goes hand-in-hand with that. Education and health are critical.

These people have to learn to do things for themselves too, not just wait. I don't know how you do that, but don't just spoon-feed them. I think we try to do too much for them.

You've got to provide the assistance where there's lots of initiative shown, and promote that, but not do it for them. Like kids. Doing things for kids. If you want to pick the plate up off the floor, they'll let you do it, until you say, "Hang on, now you've got to do that."

Strategy to promote recognition – I don't have a problem with any of that. The cross-cultural awareness programs that we had in Normanby and which we're going to have here next year as part of our induction for employees so that every employee who comes here will learn about Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islanders and the fact that they have to respect it and why. I think that's really good stuff. When they're living and working with these people they'll understand a bit about them.

I think if we do those other things, reconciliation happens.

Some people say we're a racist society, others say we're remarkably free of racism. What's your observation?

I think we are remarkably free of racism against other cultures. I think there's a bit of racism towards the Aboriginals because people think it's unfair we tip so much money into them, but nothing's happening. And you get the likes of hotheads like Charlie and Murrandah Yanner who don't do their cause any good at all.

But at the most remote site I ever had was out in the Tannami Desert 700 kms north-west of Alice Springs and we had Aboriginal people working there.

(Options?)

I think if you asked people to sign up to it, it would polarise the community. Probably the same with a referendum. We don't do referendums well here!

Maybe it's got to be made part of the Constitution, part of our law maybe. I really don't know. It's a hard one. There are a lot of expectations with native title and all these other things, that these people are going to get all their land back. And I think they've forgotten that there are other people here as well that deserve to be considered. Now, they might say that we never considered them in the early days, but I think we need to be really careful about that.

It creates a lot of animosity among the people of Australia who're worked their butts off to make it what it is.

Respondent 2

What are your observations about the state of relations between Aborigines and non-Aborigines in Kalgoorlie?

Oh pretty ordinary, very ordinary. There is a lot of red-neck people in town, and I guess some of the things that happen around town tend to encourage that to some extent.

You mean some of the behaviours?

Yeah. There is a real problem here. People's perceptions are not going to change until they see something positive coming through from the Aboriginal side of things, and there is enough negativity there to feed the red-neck sort of approach. I am not saying that is right at all, but that is the unfortunate.

Any Aborigines working here?

Yeah, we have got a few, only a few. We probably have 5 or 6 at any one stage, usually in specific jobs where they have an affinity, working with the land, rehabilitation, seed gathering, this type of thing they are very good at. We have tried. We do sponsor an education organisation to actually put Aboriginal people through some training for the industry, that has fallen a little bit foul I think because of the downturn in industry.

We have put some effort into supporting it and we have tried to take some of the people on as they graduate, operators or truck drivers or whatever. All I can do is to try to give people jobs and help them with education, because I don't think there is anything else I can do, but it hasn't been all that successful.

What would be the problems?

Well as I say, the downturn in the industry meant we couldn't put people on, and the ones we have put on have had an attendance record. You have a disciplinary code of practice, and if people do one thing wrong, that is one strike, two strikes, three strikes and they are out.

And that is the same for everybody?

Yes it is. I would like to think that there could be a way around it for others, but then you start having favoured groups.

You have got to get a nucleus of these guys or girls, because if you just get one or two and they are isolated and no-one to talk to them, they need some peer support, and if you get five or six and they can talk to each other I think it might have a better chance.

What do people around here think of this idea of reconciliation? What does it mean to them?

I think people really don't know what it means. One man's idea of reconciliation might be totally different to the next door neighbour's. They look at the problems they have, not where we want to go, so I think they look at it in the very short term, they look at some of the social problems here, and they think, well, we are not going to have reconciliation until we sort some of these things out. Or they look at the damage done to shop fronts and blood on the floor and blood in the streets, all these sorts of things. I will be honest. I went to a car park in K Mart the other day and there was a guy urinating in the car park, and this is ten o'clock on a Saturday morning and my wife said that is why people don't want to come down here, and I can understand that. So people don't look beyond that. I don't think they actually look at the bigger picture of reconciliation.

How do they get on with the guys on the staff? I mean how do their fellow work mates get on with them? Do they treat them as equals or not?

I think so, yeah. I think Australians would treat anyone as an equal if the guy comes to them, and you get a very positive relationship. If the Aboriginal guys can make the effort then they will accept them, but it doesn't happen that way. The aboriginal guy is usually a little bit shy, and he won't look you in the eye, that is not his culture, and so he doesn't get over that barrier.

Is native title an issue?

That is a big issue. There is a claim across just about every spare square inch of Western Australia.

What does that generate by way of attitudes? In your experience of the way the industry looks at reconciliation, does it affect negatively the way they look at reconciliation, or do they separate the two?

They take a bigger picture perspective that there is a need for reconciliation, because I don't think any of these things are going to be solved in court or by legislation. Until you get the hearts and minds of people you aren't going to go anywhere, and I think that they recognise that. Nonetheless, I think that they have a lot of problems and difficulty at Federal and State level just sorting these things out. So you tend to separate the two, I suppose, to some extent.

Do people talk about it much?

I think they did two years ago. I think it has become "oh shit, not that again". I think people are all so used to it. We are suffering serious problems here.

(After reading the Draft)

It is a wonderful vision. The average man in the street is going to have some objections to this and I guess there would be a few things that would make me raise my eyebrows.

Certainly the first one (paragraph) I think is fine, I don't have a problem with the first one. I think we have to accept that they were the original owners and custodians. The second point, I can't see a problem with that. I guess the third point continuing traditions, if they are cultural issues I don't have a problem, it is when it strays into access to land or there isn't a common means of having access or whatever the case is, I think that is where the challenges would start to come in. The fourth one, I guess that is a bit warm and fuzzy, I guess that is fine. The next one about acknowledging the land was colonised without their consent, yes I think that is a matter of history. I don't have a problem with the next one. I don't have a problem with apologising for the past, I don't know why John Howard did have a problem. I think we didn't do the right thing and let's admit that and let's go on with life, let's not let it hold up the future. The next one, okay, all Australians enjoy equal rights and opportunities, that to me is the important thing, but how do we ensure that there are equal rights for everybody, and I think the European Australians or white Australians have as much right to explore the land and to live off the land as the Aboriginals have to use that land, and there has got to be a way through it that has not been found at the moment, it is not being searched for.

You said, gee there would be a lot of people would raise their eyebrows over a lot of that./ What would be the bits that other people would raise their eyebrows at, in your view?

People would have concerns that we are kneeling down to pay homage to a cultural sort of situation here, and I think that they will say 'yeah, I will meet you half way, I will do that, but I am not going to go on my knees and grovel just because you were here before the white man was. I mean we have been here 200 years now and we have put our stakes down here too. So I think people would have a problem with the way this is put together. I think that is what the man in the street's reaction would be, and I am not saying every man in the street is the same or every person is the same, but I think that they would have that problem - yeah we accept the past, but the past is the past, and let's go forward in the future, and I think that is how most people would prefer to see that, and this tends to dwell a little on the past. You were shafted, disenfranchised and all the rest of it, let's apologise for that, but let's put that there and how are we going to go forward? I think that is how people would look at it. Having said that, how do we do that? That is where the problem stems.

Has the document any value as a symbol or a gesture, or is it going to be seen by people as just empty rhetoric?

A lot of people don't really have a great deal of faith in the political process. They see these sort of things and say, oh that is another minority group that is being funded by the government and they come out with all this glossy stuff that is not going to make any difference on the ground. Guys are still going to urinate in K Mart car parks on a Saturday morning. I think that is how a lot of people would look at it. People are pretty basic and down to earth.

Do you have any sense that people can concretise the idea of reconciliation in any way? Can they see activities happening in their own neighbourhood or their own town around here which would give any meaning to the term reconciliation, or is it, do you think, just a pie in the sky concept to them?

I don't think they can at the moment, I think that they could be brought on board there. I think that people will accept reconciliation if they can see that there is genuine effort being made to give people work, to educate and bring people into the workforce. I think they would cop that. But I don't think that they are going to cop anything that is just another grand vision. I don't think the average man in the street can relate to that too well. I might not be doing them any credit there. I might be wrong.

Let's move on to these strategies. There are four of these. One is for economic independence. Any view about?

We have had quite an awareness of this in Kalgoorlie in the last twelve months. There have been different people come to me and say, look, as an Aboriginal company we want to work here, and then unfortunately they expect to be given work because they are Aboriginal. They are not competitive financially and they don't have a good sense of priorities, and that we have to do them in a certain time. We had a guy come here -- I get on well with the guy, I like him -- but he says, well, we want to get on, we need to do some business with you, and I said, look, can we work together? Yep, great. What can you do for us, Brian, and what can we do for you? And there were some areas of rehabilitation, clean up of countryside disturbed by mining, and he said, that is exactly what I can do. So I asked him four times: Brian, get me a proposal, a quote. That is the scope of works, give me a price on it, and it has got to be a fixed price, I don't want you to give me an open-ended thing, and he said, right, yeah, I am definitely keen because I can get some of my young fellows working on this ---- and I asked him four times and he has never ever come back and I have reminded him, and oh yeah I was supposed to have done that for you. So in the end it has just died, it has just died a natural death. But I think you have got to get that sort of thing going. Where have I gone wrong? Where has he gone wrong? How can we make that work? I don't know that there is a way, to be honest.

And yet others come to me. There are a couple of very smart operators around, Aboriginal guys, and they will use the system too to get what they can to go forward, and that is fine, I don't have a problem with that. But they haven't really come up with anything that is competitive financially or

commercially, and I have said to them, look, I will give you every opportunity to bid on this job -- and we are talking about leasing our entire vehicle fleet here, we have got 60 vehicles and we lease those -- and this guy wants to get into vehicle leasing. I said, if you can give me a commercial proposition, you will get our vehicle leasing. We are talking about hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. And I said, you have got to get some commercial backing from the bank and all that sort of thing, but if you get a run we will give you a run. He is smart enough to do it but it never comes to anything.

If we can get them to some economic independence -- and we haven't got it right yet -- I would be prepared to help people and work with people to try to achieve that, because until they have got economic independence, their own education and their pride, they are not going to go anywhere. And it is not going to be done by handouts. That is one of the things that has put the man in the street offside as well.

What about the next one?

It is a bit more down to earth. I don't think anyone would have any problems with that. This is saying, as I see it, we all have to get into bed together to make it happen, business, the people themselves, and I think this is good, I mean that is essentially quite useful, because that is the way we need to go forward.

What about the third one?

The first two to me are the really big ones. We have got to get back to the fundamental education, workforce participation, independence, pride. I am an engineer, I have done numbers and things like that and I think that we are going to get back to the hard, hard things like getting people employed, getting people educated, getting people out there doing it. Maybe I am wrong. I don't know what the right answer is.

Others

Respondent 1

GWYDIR VALLEY COTTON GROWERS ASSOCIATION

Moree about ten years ago had a high crime rate, Aboriginals couldn't get jobs and the townspeople were getting pretty depressed about the situation and they were asking the Government to fix its problems.

A few of us back in 1992 decided to get an Aboriginal employment strategy rolling. It took us four or five years to get approval to do it (from DEET), so

we got rolling in February 1997. The Gwydir Valley Cotton Growers' Aboriginal Employment Strategy.

Our objective was to get 100 Aboriginals employed in five years. Every business was fair game for us.

Today, we're a bit over 100. We've probably had 200 to 300 Aboriginals through our books. We haven't found anyone in the country who's better at it.

We focus on the middle third. We're not here to get jobs for all Aboriginals. There's about a third of Aboriginals who tend to look after themselves. We work with the middle third who are basically under-confident, have low self-esteem, tend to be a bit frightened, but they haven't turned to drugs or alcohol.

We call the bottom third alcohol or drug affected or plain bad attitudes or just got very low skills, because we've got no hope of getting private businesses to employ people like that.

We work on the theory that if we get the middle third employed, we're going to lessen the bottom third anyway.

Ninety-five per cent of the people who are out there (Aboriginals in jobs) do not get government subsidies. They are absolutely on the same terms as everyone else.

You'd be surprised at the degree of integration we've got into the town in then past couple of years.

We've had kids who have got criminal records and so on but that doesn't seem to be a problem at all.

What differentiates top third from bottom?

Basically their parents. They've got a role model in their parents.

One of the problems is that Aboriginal communities tend to be fractured. In Moree they've got about six factions but no leadership.

Another problem is the kids. The police are useless. They're always on flexi days or holidays or down at the academy doing courses. They're never there.

The catalyst for fixing Moree was getting a new general manager (of the shire).

Purpose of Reconciliation?

You've got a community in Australia – the Aboriginal community – who just don't get a fair go.

And in country towns like Moree the crime rate was getting worse, the Aborigines were grossly unhappy.

It makes a community a better place to live in.

Is this a shared view?

No, because most people don't worry about it. Most people think it's too big to fix.

Chamber of Commerce?

They're getting sick of us being on their back. We don't have enough black faces on the main street. That's the hardest nut for us to crack.

A Chamber of Commerce promotion on Moree doesn't even mention Aborigines.

If you solve the employment problem, you solve everything?

Absolutely.

[Do you buy that? – to Aboriginal offsider

To a degree. If you fix that, you fix other things as you go through.]

The biggest racists in country towns are the 50 to 70 year-old white women. The men are fine, as a rule. And the young are fine.

Even the hard-nosed people in the community who wouldn't employ an Aboriginal in a fit have come up to me and said, Dick, you've done a bit of good.

Self-interest – I want to live in a better town?

Sure. That comes into play.

Black people are respected and are not stereotyped any more.

Document

Aw, our new journey in the new millennium sounds pretty good to me!
(Laughs)

That's about the ninth paragraph down. I can't see much more to it than that.

[Offsider

I deal with the Reconciliation Board, travelling road-show throughout the State. They handed out similar documents there. All very nice. Know where they'll go? They'll go to ATSIC, they'll go to Land Council, all your white agencies. They'll read 'em. Yet you won't see an Aboriginal person, or maybe a very small percentage, reading it. It won't get out into the wider community.]

It doesn't reconcile. Where does it reconcile? Just a whole jumble of words. It's not meaningful. It talks about sorrow and hardships and that kind of thing. We don't talk about the past. The past is gone.

You get someone like Aiden Ridgeway on television talking about employment. He's a person businesses feel that they could deal with. That'd do far more with the business community. Simple little things like that.

Respondent 2

We have retained a lot of opportunity in our whole community, even though some of the loss may be adjusted among some of the elements.

Why has loss of opportunity occurred?

*Principally because the economic decision-making occurs remote from our area.
If we had the power of economic decision-making, we would act very differently.*

We need something of the principle of the log harbour – Stockholm – to be able to take sufficient of the endowment that we have here and transfer it back into local development.

Race relations

The relationship in this area is unfortunately and thoroughly contaminated by interference. Our ability to make local decisions about how we live and how we live together has got a better prospect of satisfactory solution than the way in which things are forced upon us by external people.

Examples?

They are manifold. A typical problem would arise when station property people are obliged – not forced – to send their secondary school children to boarding school. When people looked at Aborigines in comparison, they said, "Well, largely the Aboriginal secondary school person is unable to access the boarding school, for various reasons." Those people then went in and propped up that situation such that the Aboriginal child was being flown to the boarding school over the top of the station property kid who was travelling in a bumpy Toyota in 40-degree conditions.

The Aboriginal child was provided with pocket money with the station property was struggling to make its way. At the school, the Aboriginal student was supported in such a way that it was apparent to the other children that he didn't have to really try to be given credits.

The whole of that is a distasteful circumstance. It robbed the Aboriginal child of dignity. We witness the black child and the white child play together. A charming thing. But then the ability to distinguish – I have, you do not have – becomes very destructive.

If they weren't more equal than equal they wouldn't have had the opportunity to go to the school?

We have focused on perceived indicators of equality, which indeed aren't. The indicators such as method of transport, pocket money, the school certification in themselves are only flags and markers, not the substance. The substance matters, and it is found in things such as: Why do I want to be there? What is this for? What is my willingness to participate? Are my expectations fulfilled or frustrated? Is this suiting me? Can I tweak or twiddle it so it's a better unit?

They're the things we are not focused on. We're focused on the trappings. And put forward in such a crass manner that they then offended the others.

You could take the interference and find it within all sorts of other examples. The new mining projects that are arising in this district: instead of broad-based community consultation about how these issues of good proportion of Aboriginal employment might be handled, they were decisions that were made away – in Brisbane or Melbourne or wherever.

And then "experts" walked in to negotiate the process. The full board's conclusion was that by simply giving this employment opportunity equals 500 head employed equals proportional success. We can put it down as a percentage of the total labour force. Instead of coming through and finding out propensities and predilections. Are the people inclined to do, do they want to do? If training is required, how should that be gone about? Is it reasonable to undertake it?

Some Aboriginal young people will not train individually. They'll only train in company with someone with whom they want to train, with their own manners and courtesies.

We understand many of those sorts of things, but we're never consulted. We're never consulted until a brick wall is met. And then in some cases it's just a little bit late.

Race relations

When a relationship arises from a common necessity, patterns among people become dignified by that necessity. We are all living together, toiling together, the place ticks along and we all survive. There is dignity in the exchange of that – I'm a good stockman, you're a good fencer etc is all there.

The negatives arise because of poor behaviour in certain circumstances.

The manifestations – irksome as they may be – are not the problem.

When we say, "We are one people", let's be a bit choosy about that. We don't all have to roost together. We can respect, like, enjoy, find companionship, but we don't have to roost together. An enforced togetherness is just another manifestation of imposition.

Talk about Reconciliation?

Absolutely terrible trouble in understanding what the bloody hell the word means. I don't know. It's a troubled word.

Knowledge of Council?

It is perceived to be a "Southern Object", because the general result of activity that is spoken of as being part of the reconciliation process appears to be just those things we've used in the examples.

The term is substantially stigmatised.

Constitution of Council?)

I have only broad knowledge of that. I would look at ATSIC and the Land Council as having influence.

I can't name any member, I'm sorry.

Document

I find them basically offensive for two reasons. The first is that the wording is apologetic, and it's apologetic from the non-Aboriginal perspective. If the term reconciliation demands that, then the word is a misnomer. The apologetic demand that is in this is unacceptable.

It also carries with it a degree of enforcement. It is prescribing the peace. It's akin to the idea that "beatings will continue until motivation is apparent".

Examples of words

“Colonised without consent”. To me, that did not exist in the minds of the people when that was happening. The world was a different place. We are taking a current value and ascribing it to an historical circumstance. That’s offensive.

The final paragraph: “Therefore” – bugger your “therefore” – it’s not my conclusion. It might be someone’s conclusion.

The whole thing is not reconciling, it is conciliatory.

It assumes sides. It assumes an Aboriginal group and an non-Aboriginal group. It is an attempt to give to a side that is perceived to be lower.

Is a reconciling statement possible or desirable?

The sensory bit (in human nature) that says we must get it down in words I think in this process must be overwhelmed by the better process of symbolism, and that would replace something like this with an element that showed a black and white hand shaking and a statement that said something like, “Let’s get on with the job, mate”.

The apology is just unattainable. I find none of it (no demand for it) among the Aboriginal people I encounter day-to-day. The only place I would find it is an activist trained within the Aboriginal industry. His call for an apology is refutable. I can just wash it away and say, “Never!”

But a more genuine apology to an Aboriginal friend I can guarantee will not come because we work together. If I sit in my boat with an Aboriginal friend fishing, then that apology doesn’t come. It’s not needed. Nor could it be expressed, because the apology I would give is not yours.

Strategies

The well-intended wording is creating within the Aboriginal people a greater difference than has ever existed. The ones in the statistics are symbols.

The “do” things that are here are not the “do” things for those people.

Options

Reconciliation is about overcoming polarisation. But if you carry around a set of words, all you’re doing creating more degrees of polarisation.

So you are totally missing the point and you haven’t understood your objectives. You need to go back to school and find out what this bloody reconciliation thing is all about.

Having it in the Constitution – I would have trouble with that because again it polarises.

If we put up words that I signed but you didn't, put up apologies that was your apology but not mine, we have just enshrined polarisation.

We just need what the economists call satisficing. It's sub-optimal, but that's all we need – a handshake, hand on shoulder together, come on mate, we'll give it a good nudge.

Respondent 3

Race relations

Holy Moly! They vary. You've arrived just at the moment when one of my staff has been physically assaulted by some Aborigines up the street. He's just been in my office, very upset, a young fellow of 21, and they hit his pregnant girlfriend as well. Just drinking. So you probably got me at a bad time!

These are probably just people who have fallen out of society. They've probably been treated like shit and now they're treating other people like shit.

But it varies. You have your well-to-do Aborigines and you have your losers, the poor, uneducated, ignorant, in the parks etc.

Overall it's strained. Two reasons. Number one, the laws of the land are saying you've got to do this, that and the next thing, and when you try to tell people what to do and how to think, it's very difficult to say, "Yes, I will do that".

Meanwhile you're conscious that there's a moral dilemma out there and we've really got to address that. I guess that's what the laws are trying to do, but it's a bit arbitrary and high-handed.

The second problem is straight out harassment of whites in this town by drunken blacks.

The Aboriginal leaders in this society are good people.

There's an extremely high transient population of Aborigines here. I was talking to a bloke who came down here last year for a couple of weeks. He was a decent sort of bloke. He wasn't going to join the river people, as they were then.

People in our 'Group' talked about the drinkers not the others

You don't, because you accept them . . . "you accept them" – that sounds like them and us. I mean, you work with people. Look, three years ago I went to

the CES – God knows what it's called these days – I needed to employ a young lady. They lined up about four girls. I selected a girl and employed here and this lady said, "That's great. She's Aborigine". I said, "What!" I mean you just see people. You're not looking out for Aboriginality.

I hate these southern terms like "integrated". That we're integrated with them. It's not fair. We're just all living in one community.

But any derros, whether they are black or white, stand out because they are outside what we accept as the norm.

There are a hell of a lot of unemployed Aborigines and in current white man's terms they're unemployable.

I employed a fellow here specifically because he's an Aborigine and I wanted to give him a go. Lovely bloke. Only lasted a couple of weeks. But he's a drifter. He's fighting between trying to settle down and drifting. Not his fault. I tried to just talk to him. Some of them have such a duty to their parents, who may be drunks, for instance; or brothers or sisters who might be the same. But they want to make good for themselves – this fellow I'm talking about. He was just dragged down by it.

It's sad. Last century and early this century (the 20th) we set the standard and we've followed it since. We just thought that Aborigines would integrate. We were arrogant about that, and we've stuffed them. I don't know how we fix it.

The Aboriginal people in this town who've got jobs – and there's a hell of a lot of them – they don't put their hand up and say, "I'm Aborigine", they're just normal citizens.

Talk about Reconciliation?

No. See, when you've got a community that's lived together – this is a town of 40 or 50 nationalities – there's no skin colour, no nationality. It's only when you get the vagabond element that you get . . .

There's racism too, but it's two ways. It's not violent, except among kids in some of the gangs.

How does it show?

When I employed this young lady, a bloke said to me one day, "How's the gin going?" And she and I were great mates and I just couldn't believe it. It was just straight out – no animosity, he liked her – but he's a bushie and that's the way he spoke. It wasn't hatred, but it was a racist comment.

But there are people who hate the Aboriginal industry and the rules, and that creates what can be perceived as racism.

Do you have an editorial policy on this?

No. We're still developing an editorial policy. When I got here there was a sort of mixture of laissez-faire and outright bigotry. And that applied to politics or anything. We've got no policy.

Should you have?

Yeah, I suppose we should.

We've just been talking about whether we should have a page in the paper for Aborigines, but then you'd be called racism by whites, who'd say, "Why are you pandering?" So it's a difficult one.

Council?

I've heard a lot about it, but I haven't got a clue how they operate. I know nobody on it. It's just one of those bodies you hear about. Comes out of Canberra.

Document

Sounds like a heap of bureaucrats have written it. What does it really mean?

Some of it's damned good, but it's been very very carefully worded. When you have something so carefully worded, it doesn't sound natural. You tend to wonder what the hell we're trying to do.

I agree with the overall tenor. I just think the wording's a bit quaint, cute or there to appease somebody. God knows who. Flowery.

Some people hate the fact that the Aborigines were the first inhabitants. Some hate the idea they have been here longer than 40,000 years. It doesn't bother me. Mankind is still one and the same. We can't help the colour of our bloody skin.

Implied apology?

I'm in two totally different minds about it. Number one, we've done the wrong thing by Aboriginal people. Not me, my ancestors, but I'm not going to apologise for my bloody ancestors.

It's trying to make you feel powerless, humble for something you haven't done. Trying to humiliate you.

A lot of us want to see it fixed up, but we don't want to be humiliated because we love this land as much as the Aboriginal people.

Is there something else we can do, like solve the problems rather than apologise? Wouldn't that be just a wee bit more important?

Yes, we should acknowledge original settlement, acknowledge the wrongs of the past, and I honestly believe our forefathers and many people today are still doing the wrong thing by Aboriginal people.

If you could do something, it's real, it's a step forward. It's not just words. John Howard and his stupid bloody preamble and all that crap. Do something. Don't talk.

There are some really good things happening in this town. The Aboriginal community's got the Aboriginal Society House, run by Aborigines for Aboriginal people who are hooked on the drink.

Then the Catholic Church runs a separate school for Aboriginal kids who didn't want to go to the school with white kids for fear of being belittled or whatever.

There's a lot of things happening among the people themselves.

Strategies

As an overview, the first three I like, but on the reconciliation project they start to use those words again (as in the draft declaration). Pussyfoots a bit.

Options

You're asking me to have the wisdom of Solomon and I'm afraid I haven't got it. We all have our limitations!

I would have no problems with a declaration. But the word "reconciliation" has over the past few years become a cancerous word because of the scare tactics that have been preached by radical whites and blacks.

Think of a better word?

Unity. Give me a thesaurus and I'll have a look. These days, words change. You'd say "crippled children's society" and you couldn't say that. "Blind" is now visually impaired. This one's got the same sort of connotations and I think that's becoming a barrier.

I deal with a lot of rednecks. You can't dismiss the rednecks. They're there; they live, breathe, work. You've got to try to educate them and bring them into the system. To them, the word "reconciliation" is like a vampire coming up against garlic and a heap of crosses! They recoil.

I find the whole thing a little curious because, as I say, we all live in this community and we don't see the colour of each other's skin. We don't have a problem. It's about self-worth.

Respondent 4

Relations

They're getting better. The older groups have seen a lot, mostly negative, but it's progressively becoming positive.

The younger people seem to think that Moree is becoming better. There are jobs for more of them. But they also feel there should be more effort within the community. One only has to see the lack of young Aboriginal people employed in retail jobs in the main street. The more national brands of retailers do a better job – Shell, Woolworths has worked hard at recruiting Aboriginal people.

Many of the more traditional retailers in the town have dragged their feet. The Chamber of Commerce have not been particularly forward in encouraging the employment of Aboriginal people.

Talk much about reconciliation?

No. Very little discussion. It's an "agenda" subject, they would perceive. A label. To a certain extent I think they're right. Reconciliation is about working with people across a community and getting things done.

Any activities that concretise it?

Yes and no. The tourism commission here has no Aboriginal person. I think it's a major weakness. The Chamber of Commerce, service clubs The Rotary Club has no Aboriginal person, and in my time here (18 months) had never invited an Aboriginal person until I invited Warren Barnes.

There's a reconciliation group in Goondiwindi and Bogabilla, but not in Moree.

Aborigines have to accept responsibility, get too many handouts, why can't we all be equal?

People do raise that here but they tend to be the old and bold. The people are mostly moving on from that.

Cultural activities

The ibis come here to breed in the wetlands and there are dances and other Aboriginal cultural activities emanating from that.

Boobarra Lagoon has got enormous heritage (significance). We're fighting a battle and Senator Herron has finally decreed that there will be no waterskiing there after the 30th of June next year. We've still got people who don't respect the spirit of that decision and organised a gigantic waterski carnival there last weekend.

The point is, the culture of the plains is far more fragile than in other places. We've celebrated the culture of the high country, the coast, the slopes, the desert, but not the plains. There's virtually no written account of how the Aborigines lived here prior to settlement, but after settlement and the massacres, Myall Creek, and we'll have a commemoration camp on June 10 next year I have a map of 30 or 40 massacre sites.

It's about history. It's acknowledgment and those things should be done as part of reconciliation and we're doing that. It adds substance to the relationship between the white and indigenous communities.

Document

The language needs to be more robust. I'm not happy with the word "gift". It should be more forthright. I think it's being a little prim.

The last two pars, but saying again "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander" it seems to divide. It should be "our" heritage.

Reconciliation is about everyone in the community being able to participate and realise their aspirations.

We all want to go forward to advance this country of ours.

See Reconciliation as drawing a line under all this and moving on?

Yes. I don't believe anything ends.

Options

I've always visualised it in organisations and institutions as a badge of honour or something, that expresses the spirit of the place.

Need legal standing to be effective?

No, not as it's expressed here. I don't think it does need legal standing. I think that would be wrong, quite frankly. It's an aspiration, and it's a continuing process that never stops.

It's about getting out there and acting with goodwill.

Respondent 5

Race relations – 1st impression (been here 18mths)

People in the South East of the state have the impression that this is a pretty rough and ready place. The Deep North. Lot of rednecks. There is racism on both sides, but I've also seen a lot of good things. There are a lot of people working very hard to try to solve the problems, and there are a lot of problems.

Their sense of being, their sense of place, has been turned on its ear. I'm coming around to the view that a lot of the problem stems from lack of work. Alcohol problems among a small minority. A lot of people in the white community, that's all they see.

Employment in the private sector?

That's a good question, now you mention it. You see them in labouring roles. I haven't encountered any in any of the areas I'd be asked to go and address.

The major institutions of the town?

Yeah.

Happy Valley out near the airport has been set up as a place for "Parkies" – people who live in the parks. All they wanted was a shelter over their heads. A woman called Amy Kirwan is quite active on the welfare side. She went in there and tried to help. She contacted the paper. She was quite upset at what she'd seen. A very violent community, a group of people who had no hope. It was very sad. We put it out there hoping some good might come. It upset a few people, particularly in the indigenous community, because they thought it was just whites bashing blacks again.

Palm Island has had a major problem, but a lot of people are trying to address that. Professor Paul Turner has UN links and works for an organisation that links in with a number of multinationals and they're trying to break the cycle, educate the kids, give them a sense of worth, get them doing things for the community.

He and Rio Tinto and the ADF and others who have moved into Palm Island are trying to get an eco-tourism thing going where the people can show off their true culture, show people their island. Who knows what may flow from that?

What happens in the laneway out behind the paper really opened my eyes when I came here. People shouting, "You white bastard." Nothing to do with the paper, I think.

Another thing that upset me one day was this seeing this waif sitting on the side of the road, it was hosing down and everyone else was under cover and here was this kid just sitting there. Who cares for him? He's was just a kid of 7 or 8.

Talk about reconciliation?

No. It gets trotted out occasionally when the pollies might unveil some new program, throw a bit more money at the problem.

I don't think people really think about it.

Your policy?

The only way we can address the problem is to publish stories. I'm sending a reporter out with this Professor Turner to Palm Island on Monday.

Heard of Council?

Yes.

Heard of document?

You hear about these things, but Clearly it would be interesting for this place.

(Paper has 80% penetration locally.)

Showed document draft

You get a redneck element. You get people who refuse to take the blame for anything that occurred in the past.

They're the ones that tend to write letters.

But you've got to start somewhere.

Elements of draft that would be a particular problem or particularly good?

*"Colonise without consent" would get the old brigade rolling again.
"Recognise customary laws" would get the debate going again too. You'll get the land rights thing.*

A lot of people misread what the paper was trying to say. What brought it to a head was Yanner boasting how he could take some sort of weapon out into the bush and shoot whatever he likes. He's been the maverick face of the Aboriginal community. Very outspoken. There'd been some protected species shot, and there was a court case and they won.

He upset us a bit because we thought it was a very arrogant thing to say. So we gave him a bit of a going over in an editorial, mainly because I think even people in his own community are often embarrassed by him. We didn't disagree with the court ruling, but he didn't have to rub everyone's nose in it.

Having taken a swipe at Yanner, I copped quite a few letters, mostly from the Aboriginal community.

Leaders further on?

They probably would be, but it's not something I've sat down and discussed with the mayor.

Not so much is done on reconciliation but on different programs, welfare, doing something about the 'parkies' problem. People like to feel good about putting the money up. Then we don't hear any more about it. Could be our fault, too. We should make regular checks. But some days I've only got two or three reporters. What can you do? You can only react.

Respondent 6

Talk about Reconciliation?

In the university there some talk about it, but I tend to mix with people who do talk about it. My guess is that generally people don't.

There's some scepticism about reconciliation. Some people see it as window-dressing by the Government to keep race relations off the Olympic agenda. So people are a bit sceptical about it being an imposed thing.

But the Stolen Generations report did generate both horror and goodwill by non-indigenous Australians towards indigenous Australians.

And the signing of the Sorry Books – whether you call that reconciliation – perhaps it is. It's fair to describe that as a people's movement, having a national Sorry Day.

When people live with Aboriginal people as neighbours, there's not the focus on talking about it. My neighbour's an Aboriginal guy, and we share

mangoes off our tree and we're just neighbours. We don't talk about reconciliation. So I think there's a "let's get on with it" sort of attitude.

I work among Aboriginal people and they have a sort of feeling that reconciliation is for white people. That's quite openly stated.

Document

It's a white voice speaking.

If it were a Government document passed by Parliament . . . "and so we take this step – as one part of the nation expresses it's sorrow . . ." this raises a question of legitimacy in my mind: on what authority do the framers of this document make that statement?

Aboriginal people would think this was a document for white people. They would say, this would make white people happier, but we've heard it before.

Sticking points among non-indigenous people?

Which groups? Pastoralists? I've got a cousin near Emerald who's clearing his land as fast as he can before "those Aborigines get it through land rights". So this fear has been spread. "Customary laws and traditions"; use of the word "custodians" might raise that.

What would your mate at Emerald think about it?

Bullshit, bullshit.

Options

I can't get my head around the possibility that this would be passed by Parliament, much less accepted by people at a referendum. But if it were just put in halls, you'd wonder about the value of the process, the status of the document. There are considerable questions about its legitimacy anyway.

I don't think that's necessarily the result of the top-down approach because that's the way things happen in Australia. But the impression that's been given in this process, particularly in recent years, is that this is a problem that we want to resolve quickly, and so we'll try to resolve it quickly and move on. This has meant that the depth of feeling about it, particularly among indigenous people has not been quite ignored but not fully investigated.

So that leads to the problem I was suggesting.

Education is the key to enshrining things in the Australian consciousness. Once you put things into curriculum and kids learn to recite things, then they

become part of the national consciousness. Until you can get that sort of status with documents like this, then so what?

Part of civics, social education, it needs contextualising. In my experience with indigenous people, the best occasions occur after it becomes clear to the indigenous person that I too have an understanding of Australia's past and have some idea of how horrendous life is for some indigenous people. Once you have that understanding – which has come through education – you have a much better relationship with the person because there's some recognition, and they'd be more likely to listen to something I'd say.

In one sense it reads like an apology from the State; in another sense it reads like a contract or an agreement.

It's not just going to fix things. This needs to go on for generations, centuries. It needs a lot of give-and-take, and it's not just something that can be solved by a document.

You do need a statement, you need something to work from. I'm not against a document. Documents are very important things. But this one is a bit strange. It would have a lot more value if it were something that were passed by Parliament, which expressed regret or sorrow, that would have significance, but not a document like this. Perhaps elements of this document might be suitable for such a process.

You need something that would help people to engage in dialogue. That's what's needed. It's not something that been "cured". This is a process that will take decades, if not centuries.

We need something from our national leaders saying, "We're all in this together" and not this separation of indigenous and non-indigenous. We all need to go forward together.

Race relations?

Hard to generalise. There are some excellent points of contact and there are pockets of total alienation. The current local government leadership, who set the dogs on the local 'parkies' – I don't think he'll ever be forgiven for that.

I know they're setting up a cultural heritage centre and that may be a way of continuing this difficult dialogue.

Example of excellent contact?

The school here.

Police?

There are some excellent police, with very good contacts; others not so good.

Local media?

I think they're terrible. Their spin on many stories is totally baseless. For example, a young indigenous fellow was exercising in the local gym when his girlfriend walked in and tried to cut off his genitals, and it then published all his details about his medical history on the front page. They would not have done that if it were a white person.

The better stories often come in the free papers. They often cover success stories.

APPENDIX 1

Group Discussion Schedule

Date	Location	Specification
7/12/99 Evening	1. Melbourne	White Collar -35 M & F
8/12/99 Evening	2. Ballarat	Blue Collar 35+ M & F
13/12/99 Evening	3. Western Sydney	Blue Collar 35+ M & F
13/12/99 Evening	4. Northern Sydney	White Collar 35+ M & F
14/12/99 Evening	5. Moree NSW	Blue Collar 35+ M & F
15/12/99 Evening	6. Brisbane	Blue Collar -35 M & F
16/12/99 Evening	7. Townsville	White Collar 35+ M & F
16/12/99 Evening	8. Mt. Isa	White Collar -35 M & F
10/1/00 Evening	9. Darwin	Blue Collar -35 M & F
11/1/00 Evening	10. Katherine	White Collar 35+ M & F
12/1/00 Evening	11. Perth	White Collar -35 M & F
12/1/00 Evening	12. Adelaide	Blue Collar 35+ M & F
13/1/00 Evening	13. Kalgoorlie	Blue Collar -35 M & F
13/1/00 Evening	14. Mt. Gambia	White Collar -35 M & F

Individual In-depth Interview Schedule

14/12/99 Moree

John Atkins
Superintendent John Gillette

President, Chamber of Commerce
Commander, Barwon Local Area
Command, NSW Police Service
Manager, Moree Place Management
Gwydir Valley Cotton Growers
Association

Jim Boyce
Dick Estens

16 - 17/12/99 Townsville

John Affleck
Asst Comm. David Jefferies

Editor, Townsville Bulletin
Commander, Northern Region,
Queensland Police Service
Immediate Past President, Chamber
of Commerce
School of Indigenous Studies, James
Cook University

Fay Barker

Dr John Chesterman

17/12/99 Mt Isa

Ron Mc Cullock
Darcy Redman

Mayor, Mt Isa
Chairman, Mt Isa Townsville
Economic Zone (MITEZ)
Manager, Mt Isa Mines
General Manager, Carpentaria
Newspapers

John Gooding
Jim Nichols

10/1/2000 Darwin

George Brown
Commissioner Brian Bates
Peter Carew

Lord Mayor
NT Police Service
President, NT Chamber of
Commerce and Industry

11/1/2000 Katherine

Jim Forscutt
Ann Shepherd
Commander Maurice Burke
Wing Cmdr Mark Simpson

Mayor
President, NT Chamber of
Commerce and Industry
Regional Commander, NT Police
Service
Officer Commanding, RAAF Tindal

13/1/2000 Kalgoorlie

Karen McGay
John Shipp

Tim Cole

Commander Daryl Balchin

Deputy Mayor, Kalgoorlie-Boulder
Manager, Kalgoorlie Consolidated
Gold Mines

Vice President, Chamber of
Commerce

Commander, Central Region, WA
Police Service

APPENDIX 2

GROUP DISCUSSION OUTLINE

1. How would you describe Australian society to some one who knew nothing about it?
 - What have been its major achievements?
 - What have been its failings?
2. (If not raised:) How would you describe the position of Aborigines in Australia today?
3. What do you think of the idea of 'reconciliation' between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal Australians?
4. What can you tell me about it? (Probe on knowledge of Council)
5. (If not raised:) Have you heard about a document of reconciliation?
 - What, if anything, do you know about it?
 - Where did you hear about it?
6. Whose idea is it? What is it supposed to do?
7. How do you feel about the idea of a document like that?
8. If it is to be produced, what sort of things should it cover? What, if anything, should it not cover?
9. Here is a draft of a Declaration for Reconciliation. We would like to read it with you, and then discuss it.
10. What are your first impressions. What, if anything, do you especially like about it? What, if anything, do you especially not like about it?
11. Are there any parts of it where you think the meaning is not clear?
12. Are there any parts of it which you find difficult to accept?
13. Are there things which should be added to it?

14. The strategies associated with the statement refer to:
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage
 - economic independence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people,
 - recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights and responsibilities.
- How do you feel about these?
15. Now that we have discussed this draft document: what do you think should be done with it:
- It could be a document which would be available for individuals, or community groups and organisation to endorse perhaps by voluntarily signing a register.
 - It could be a document which parliaments and governments at all levels endorsed, but which would have no legal standing.
 - It could be made an Act of the federal parliament, which would give it legal standing.
 - It could also be included in the Constitution, although this would need to be done by referendum.
 - What else, if anything, might be done with it?
16. What else, if anything should be done to advance reconciliation.
17. Whose responsibility is it to do these things?
18. Is there anything which you would like to do?
19. After all this is done, what difference, if any, will it make?
20. Finally, where do you mainly get your news about what is going on?
21. If you wanted more information about issues such as this where do you think you would find it?
22. What is the most convenient way for you to get information like this?

DEPTH INTERVIEW OUTLINE

(Most questions are directed to the person in his or her work or official capacity, but his or her personal views are also sought.)

1. Could you tell us about relations between indigenous and non indigenous people around here?
2. Has there been much talk about the reconciliation process?
3. What do you think of the idea of 'reconciliation'?
4. What can you tell me about it?
5. (If not raised:) Have you heard about a document of reconciliation?
 - What, if anything, do you know about it?
 - Where did you hear about it?
6. Has your organisation talked about the idea of reconciliation or the process? Does it have a position?
7. Have there been any formal or informal discussions with indigenous people on this or other matters recently?
8. Here is a draft of a Declaration for Reconciliation. We would like you to read it and then discuss it with us.
9. What are your first impressions. What, if anything, do you especially like about it? What, if anything, do you especially not like about it?
10. How do you think your organisation would react to the following options:
 - It could be a document which would be available for individuals, or community groups and organisation to endorse perhaps by voluntarily signing a register.
 - It could be a document which parliaments and governments at all levels endorsed, but which would have no legal standing.
 - It could be made an Act of the federal parliament, which would give it legal standing.
 - It could also be included in the Constitution, although this would need to be done by referendum.
 - What else, if anything, might be done with it?

11. What else, if anything should be done to advance reconciliation.
12. Whose responsibility is it to do these things?
13. After all this is done, what difference, if any, will it make?
14. How would your organisation like to be communicated with on this?

Name	Organisation
Position	Location
Date	