

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

**REPORT NO 2
INDIGENOUS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

PREPARED FOR THE

**COUNCIL FOR ABORIGINAL
RECONCILIATION**

BY

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**IN COLLABORATION WITH
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A recurrent anguish in the study of cross-cultural communications is to watch questions being asked from one side which can make no sense at all to the other.

Across the gulfs of time we hear the silence of perfect incomprehension.

-- INGA CLENDINNEN, *'TIGER'S EYE'*

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INTRODUCTION

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

This report is based on a series of discussions and in-depth interviews with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including elders and other leaders, as well as 'ordinary' people, in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia, the Northern Territory, and Queensland conducted by Irving Saulwick and Denis Muller during March and April, 2000. 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 Outline used in the discussions.

This is our final report on this subject. Our first report was published in February, 2000, and was based on qualitative research among non-Indigenous Australians.

It was designed to provide information about the attitudes of the non-Indigenous 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.'

This report is based on a parallel study among Indigenous Australians.

Both studies were undertaken jointly by Irving Saulwick and Denis Muller, who also wrote this report.

The views we have reported on are rich and complex. They cover a wide range of subjects and experiences. Sometimes they were offered in Aboriginal languages, sometimes in English. On many occasions they were offered with deep feeling.

A CAVEAT

Although we spoke with a lot of people throughout Australia during this study we cannot assert that other -- perhaps conflicting -- views would not have been offered by other people. Not infrequently, however, we heard similar views expressed by very different people in very different locations. Such strong patterns emerged

among the responses that we are satisfied the major threads in our report do represent widely held views among the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Where we draw hypotheses from this data they are just that – hypotheses. It is our view, based on a careful analysis of all the data, that the hypotheses are soundly based. However, no quantitative validation or quantification has been undertaken, and without that it cannot be conclusively asserted that these views are indeed representative of the Indigenous population as a whole.

AN APPRECIATION

We would like to offer a brief personal note. We have felt especially privileged to conduct this work. As a couple of ‘whitefellas’ previously unknown to our respondents, we have been accepted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with warmth and dignity. We have listened to people tell their own heartfelt stories with great feeling. We believe we have been spoken to with an honesty and an openness which is as gratifying as it is remarkable. For all this and more we are greatly indebted to those individuals and communities who assisted in this study. We hope that their voices are clearly heard throughout these pages.

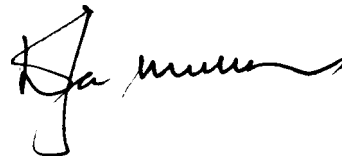
We have described the environment to our discussions on Elcho Island in somewhat more detail than we have for other places because it was so different. But, in a very real sense, each place we visited was unique and the information offered by each person we spoke with was both unique and important.

AN EXPLANATION

We have begun this report with a quotation from Inga Clendinnen’s memoir, *Tiger’s Eye*. The context from which it was drawn is a description of the exchanges between Aboriginal people and Mr G. A. Robinson, Chief Protector of Aborigines for Port Phillip District, in 1841. Having listened to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians speaking about Reconciliation, particularly on the subject of an apology, we thought it still apposite in the year 2000.



IRVING SAULWICK



DENIS MULLER

May 2000

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live day after day after day with the awareness that they are a dispossessed people. It is shown to them in the racist way in which they perceive they are treated by many non-Indigenous people in a wide variety of circumstances, in the material poverty of their lives and the lives of their extended families and their general communities, and in the way they are discriminated against in employment, in the way they are housed and in their lack of access to health and education services as good as those available to non-Indigenous people.

For many, the sense of dispossession is reinforced by their own experience of being forcibly taken from their families, or by the stories they hear from their families of killings and other sufferings inflicted on them by those they call the invaders or the colonists.

Individuals within the Indigenous community, as might be expected, have reacted in many ways to this sense of dispossession. Some have brushed it aside and got on with their lives. Some have been deeply wounded, and have fought a difficult fight to overcome its effects on them. Some have been permanently damaged. None has escaped untouched, except perhaps individuals who have buried their Aboriginality: yet the fact of denial of part of their heritage itself may be seen as a price they have paid.

A paradox is apparent: Indigenous people have, over the past few years, expressed increasing pride in their Aboriginality, while at the same time they have felt misunderstood and discriminated against by significant sections of the non-Indigenous community because of it. In many cases, it seems that the more an individual feels discriminated against, the more he or she takes pride in Aboriginal culture and traditions.

Of course, knowledge of traditional beliefs and customs varies widely throughout the Indigenous community. Some communities, particularly those who live in relatively isolated areas, have retained and use their own language or languages. These communities, which are often guided and controlled by clan elders, tend to be strong in the practice of traditional ways, even where the influence of the Christian church is also strongly present. Other communities have only vestiges of traditional knowledge. Yet even here, where language might have been lost and tribal lands alienated, the influence of traditional ways -- particularly the sense of obligation to one's extended family, a sense of affinity with the land and some of the sacred sites remembered -- and a sense of communality persist strongly.

Many Indigenous people live in or near poverty. This seems to put them under considerable pressure. It is hard to escape the continual struggle to survive economically under these conditions. This struggle is often exacerbated by social obligations to family and kinsfolk, which can lead to further pressure on scarce economic resources and on limited accommodation. It seems that these are the conditions which sometimes lead to family breakdown, violence, child abuse and withdrawal of children from education, or of adults from the limited employment opportunities which do exist, especially for those with little or no formal training. It also makes it very difficult for people who live in this sub-culture of poverty to see mainstream society as other than racist and discriminatory. Often their experiences, particularly with potential employers and with bureaucrats in the state system, are interpreted in this way, even if they were not seen in this light by the non-Indigenous people involved.

There are those who live partly, but certainly not wholly, outside mainstream society. These are people who have retained their own language and many of the cultural traditions and practices of their forebears, even if they have been influenced by Christian and other practices. From our limited observation, we suggest that these people are less alienated but more demanding of autonomy. They strongly espouse the ideal of equality and unity within a nation of diverse peoples.

Indigenous people know and acknowledge that the Indigenous community itself is divided. This troubles many Indigenous people, who say they need to become reconciled among themselves, and would be better equipped to deal with reconciliation on a wider canvas were they able to be more unified themselves.

It is not uncommon to hear remarks among Aboriginal people about differences between “full bloods” and “half castes” – their words, not ours. Some of the people living a traditional life in the Northern Territory said that the Government should listen to them on the matter of reconciliation because they were “full bloods”.

People not living a traditional life in New South Wales, yet who attached great importance to their Aboriginal identity and culture, spoke with some resentment about the way they said they were referred to as “half castes” by “full bloods”. They said that their views were equally valid. Moreover, some said that the Government gave money and other resources to people living the traditional life, and implied that they missed out as a result.

At the same time, it was common among all Aboriginal people to celebrate the distinctive identities, histories, traditions and sense of place which their clan nationhoods, language and other cultural heritage confer on them. They are puzzled and upset by what they see as an inability or unwillingness on the part of non-Indigenous people to recognise and respect these differences. They point to the many differences in cultural and ethnic background among the non-Indigenous

population and imply that it is a form of racism not to recognise the possibility of differences among their people.

They are profoundly cynical about government and about most people in high places. Many are also cynical about the reconciliation process. They say that they have heard it all before, and yet their lives or their prospects have not significantly been improved.

Some are also cynical about their own leaders whom, they imply, sit in high places and have lost touch with their 'grass roots' people.

THE QUESTION OF AN APOLOGY

Despite their sense of loss and dispossession, many people in the Indigenous community have a generosity of spirit which is palpable. While some say that they would find it hard to forgive the non-Indigenous community for what they and their people have suffered over the past 200 years, many, perhaps the vast majority (although we cannot categorically assert this) can forgive. They say that they cannot forget, but that they can forgive.

Initially, our research suggested that there were four main strands to the thinking of Indigenous people on this question:

First, it means acknowledging that what happened in the past *did* happen and that the denial of it must stop.

Second, it means acknowledging that the wrongs of the past were truly wrong.

Third, that this past -- wrongs and all -- must be taught as part of a full and true Australian history.

Fourth, the matter of the word 'sorry':

- ◆ It is not about monetary compensation or damages, which are seen as white people's constructs.
- ◆ It is not about today's Australians taking personal responsibility but about acknowledging that wrong was done and expressing sorrow about it. Indigenous people say they know that the forebears of many recent arrivals had nothing to do with what happened, and that today's descendants of early colonists cannot assume personal responsibility for what their forebears did.

- ◆ It is not worth saying if it is not truly meant.
- ◆ If the government said sorry, ordinary people would follow.
- ◆ Uttering the word ‘sorry’ is now seen as less important – not because it is inherently unimportant but because the debate about it has undermined its sincerity.
- ◆ Saying sorry will not on its own make life better for Indigenous people. Only when it is associated with actions such as the provision of decent education, housing and health services and equal employment opportunities will it become meaningful.

These strands were constant across all the Aboriginal communities and individuals we spoke to, with varying emphases but with the same broad thrust.

Then in April 2000, a controversy arose over a submission by the Federal Government to a Senate committee concerning the “stolen generations”.

We conducted research at only one site -- Moree, NSW – after that intervention. At Moree, the issue of the “stolen generations” was dominant. At other places, it had been mentioned as one issue among many for which Aborigines were owed an apology. At Moree it was singled out as a particular issue deserving of an apology, and as a particular issue on which monetary compensation should be paid to the individuals taken from their parents.

It should be noted that most of the Aboriginal people we spoke to in Moree argued for the payment of compensation to the particular individuals hurt by the policy of removal, and did not make a broader claim for monetary compensation in general. However, a minority did. In Moree, as elsewhere, a minority referred to the large amounts of money made from the land and asked why the Aboriginal people from whom that land had been taken, should not receive some compensation.

Aside from matters of compensation, it is our observation that appropriate acknowledgment of what Aboriginal people have suffered for over 200 years from the actions of non-Indigenous people and institutions would contribute to the self-esteem of some Indigenous people. Self-esteem, it seems to us, is a fragile emotion. If any people, no matter who they are, continue to be treated as victims, some assume the mantle of victim, with consequent further loss of self-esteem. We do not suggest that this has happened across the board to Indigenous people, but we do suggest that some have been afflicted in this way, just as people in other minority groups may have been similarly afflicted.

POINTS OF SIMILARITY BETWEEN THE VIEWS OF INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

Having conducted two parallel studies on reconciliation, one among Indigenous and one among non-Indigenous Australians, we offer the following synthesis of responses from both studies.

We preface it by saying that in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, there are groups who feel particularly marginalised from society and who feel resentful as a result. Many of these people are either living in poverty or struggling to keep out of poverty. They do not have a sense of possessing a stake in the Australian polity or a place in Australia's future.

These people, in our view, are the most resistant to the ideal of reconciliation. Among these groups – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – the most visible common attitude is to yield nothing to anyone. If policy on reconciliation is to be driven from this perspective, then progress is likely to be difficult, if not impossible.

However, among the broader spectrum of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, there would appear to us to be an area of common ground upon which foundations for reconciliation might be built. We summarise this as follows:

1. The position of Indigenous people in Australia today is a tragedy and the Indigenous culture has been seriously damaged.
2. The past should be confronted and acknowledged, and then we should look forward.
3. An acknowledgment of past wrongs and expression of genuine regret, but without today's Australians taking personal blame, is appropriate.
4. No monetary damages or compensation should be attached to any such acknowledgment.
5. Australia is a nation of diverse peoples where diversity should be celebrated within a unified whole.
6. Australia would be a better place if Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians were to become reconciled.
7. The full history of Australia since 1788 should be written and taught in our schools.

POINTS OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE VIEWS OF INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

At the same time, we do not wish to understate the points of difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians on these matters. The differences are not trivial. We summarise them as follows:

1. The issue of equality. All agree that people should be treated equally but perceptions of equality differ sharply. Non-Indigenous people tend to see Indigenous people as receiving special treatment. Indigenous people see special treatment as essential if they are to attain equality.
2. Deciding the rights and wrongs of the past. On some matters, such as acts of extreme violence, there is little or no disagreement, even if there is a lot of ignorance. On other matters, such as the taking of the children, there is disagreement over whether it was right or wrong, and over whether it was well meant or not. There is also the lack of a shared understanding of the consequences for those hurt by the policy.
3. Three elements in the Draft Declaration (aside from the apology) are important to Indigenous people but not liked by non-Indigenous people:
 - ◆ recognition of Indigenous people as the original owners and custodians of the land;
 - ◆ recognition of customary laws, beliefs and traditions, and
 - ◆ acknowledgment that Australia was colonised without the consent of the original inhabitants.

THE DRAFT DECLARATION

On the matter of the of the Draft Declaration as a whole, Indigenous people were sceptical about whether it would make any real difference to their lives. Some thought it would be an important symbolic gesture. Elders of Elcho Island attached great symbolic significance to it, and wished to see it given full constitutional status.

The most cynical reaction – not common but heard in a number of places -- was that it had been put together by white people to make themselves feel better.

This contrasts with the view of many non-Indigenous people that it had been put together by Aboriginal people to advance their own interests.

IMPRESSIONS OF THE GROUPS

GROUP NO 1: MORWELL, VICTORIA

This group of up to 15 people consisted of a wide range of members of the Morwell Koori community. In age they ranged from an elderly couple, who were referred to as Uncle and Aunty by the middle-aged members of the group, to teenage high school boys. In between were two university students in their early twenties, and a number of people in the thirties and forties, including an academic from the Churchill campus of Monash University.

There were slightly more men than women.

They began by talking about the factions and divisions within the Koori community, with one person saying, “We need to reconcile among ourselves”. The basis of much of this factionalism was resentment by local Kooris about the arrival of others from out of the area who had taken up jobs and other opportunities, leaving the local people feeling “left behind”, as one man put it.

The two most pressing local issues were seen as education and police relations. There was widespread agreement that education was the highest priority for young Kooris in the area. The existence of a university course in Indigenous studies at Monash Churchill was seen as very positive. However, the academic who was associated with the course lamented the ignorance of many of the European undergraduates, only a handful of whom had had any instruction in Australian history during their school days.

Others in the group spoke about the priority they attached to educating their own children, and the son of one participant was doing the VCE at the local high school. One of the reasons this mother and her son had come to the area (from South Australia) was to improve his education.

However, there was concern, mixed with cynicism, about whether education would lead to employment, because of racial prejudice among employers. One person recounted an experience at a business lunch when he had asked an employer which of two people he would employ – a Koori or a European, both of whom had just graduated with equal marks in the VCE. The businessman had said he would employ the European. Asked why, he had disclaimed any racial prejudice on his own part, instead saying that his clients would be less comfortable dealing with an Aboriginal person.

He had then asked the same question of four other employers at the same lunch, and received the same reply.

