

2012 Victorian Reconciliation Forum

Saturday 10th November 2012, Koorie Heritage Trust

The 2012 Victorian Reconciliation Forum was held following the AGMs of Reconciliation Victoria and ANTaR Victoria. Over 100 people attended including many members of local reconciliation groups, members and supporters of ANTaR Vic and RecVic, Aboriginal community members and other interested people.

The forum structure included an acknowledgement and key-note presentation, followed by three sessions running concurrently in the morning and then another three sessions concurrently in the afternoon, followed by a plenary with short summaries of all six sessions. Sessions ran for 1 ½ hours and included two presentations followed by facilitated discussion.

The forum opened with a moving [Acknowledgement of local Aboriginal liberators](#) (download from RecVic website) and activists by RecVic Co-Chair Vicki Clark. This acknowledgement of the 'keepers of the fire' included tributes to William Barak, William Cooper, Pastor Sir Doug Nicholls, William Onus, Iris Lovett-Gardiner, Molly Dyer and Joan Robinson.

Following this acknowledgement, outgoing ANTaR Victoria Chairperson Clare Land delivered the keynote address "[The Politics of Solidarity](#)" (download from RecVic website), based on her PhD thesis.

Clare's presentation addressed two questions:

How do non-Indigenous people know that our/their work supports Indigenous peoples' agendas?

How do we know that the way we work is appropriate?

Her research, based on in-depth interviews and informed by a critical reference group, put forward two key propositions, aimed at non-Indigenous people working in solidarity with Indigenous people:

- more proactively monitor our/their own practices
- develop accountable relationships with both Indigenous people and other non-Indigenous people.

Below is a list of Sessions and speakers, with links to jump to the summary report of each session:

1. [Reconciliation in Schools](#)
2. [Constitutional Recognition](#)
3. [Engaging the wider community](#)
4. [Local Government and Reconciliation](#)
5. [Campaigning on Aboriginal rights](#)
6. [Relationships with Aboriginal people and groups](#)

1. Reconciliation in Schools

Speakers— Vicki Clark (RecVic Co-Chair, Coordinator Aboriginal Catholic Ministry); John Burke (RecVic Committee, Geelong One Fire Reconciliation Group)

John Burke set the scene by asking: How can reconciliation be promoted in schools?

Attendees went around the table introducing themselves, and saying what involvement they have with schools. It was an amazing mix of people, with a great wealth of experience, doing a lot of work.

Vicki Clark (RecVic Co-Chair and Coordinator Aboriginal Catholic Ministry) gave an [overview of her work in Catholic schools](#) (download from RecVic website).

Vicki spoke about the need to tell a more inclusive version of Australian history, one that pays proper respect to the significant moments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander empowerment. She spoke specifically about the following events:

- * The Referendum for Constitution Alteration, May 27, 1967.
- * Mabo Day, Jun 3, 1992.
- * Paul Keating's Redfern Speech, Dec 10, 1992.
- * Black Deaths in Custody Royal Commission, 1987-1991.
- * Bringing Them Home Report, 1997.
- * National 'Sorry Day,' May 26, 1998.
- * Michael Long's "Long Walk to Canberra", Nov 21, 2004.
- * Apology to the Stolen Generations, Feb 13, 2008.

Vicki mentioned the importance of the new National Curriculum which requires indigenous content to be included across different subject areas. She also mentioned the importance of the reference to Lake Mungo within the National Curriculum, which has particular reference for Vicki (who is Mutti Mutti); she takes various school groups to Lake Mungo in order to reflect on their identity.

The work of the **Fire Carrier** program:

Vicki described the work of the Fire ('Friends Igniting Reconciliation through Education') Carrier program, and the associated OTDF ('Opening The Doors Foundation'). The aim of these is to promote awareness and action among students, and provide a longer-term pathway for young Australians to be involved in the work of reconciliation.

<http://www.openingthedoors.org.au/friends-igniting-reconciliation-through-education/>

The work of the '**Proud Race**' program:

Vicki described the work of the Proud Race (the phrase taken from Kevin Rudd's apology speech) program in schools. This consists of mobilising students to create bollards containing stories of aboriginal people, and place these all around the country on specific days. They have a special 'Proud Race story tree' on their website.

<http://proudrace.yingadi.org.au/news.php>

2. Constitutional Recognition

Lessons from the '67 Referendum for the proposed Recognition referendum

Speakers: Dr Peter Lewis (President ANTaR National, Policy Manager VACCA), Professor Bain Attwood (Monash University)

While speakers strongly agreed on need to strengthen rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples they did not agree on the efficacy of Constitutional change to achieve this, nor on the value of the current referendum proposal.

Peter Lewis argued that there is a [strong case for constitutional recognition](#) (download from RecVic website), despite the limitations of the process and of the proposed changes. He provided a history of the process and campaign so far and provided an update on where the proposal is at right now. There has been downward trend since Mabo, Redfern Speech, Hawke's Treaty proposal, the 'wheels are slipping' on road to reconciliation.

While the most desirable outcome is a Treaty, Peter stated isn't realistic in this political climate.

His view was that despite the proposed changes not going far enough and not addressing the issue of sovereignty, the referendum is an opportunity:

- to rebuild the reconciliation movement;
- to improve the situation of Aboriginal Australians through removal of race powers and enhancing rights;
- for discussion about who we are as a country, identity and what is wrong with Australia;
- Referendum can be mechanism to leverage the conversation into one about a Treaty.
- Significant number of Aboriginal leaders want referendum.

Peter's fear is that politicians will water down Expert Panel's recommendations to achieve bipartisanship and through the fear conservatives have of a Rights framework.

[Professor Attwood's presentation](#) (download from RecVic website) firstly debunked the myths of '67:

- Referendum was presented as one about rights, but it wasn't really about rights.
- The change to the constitution wasn't as significant as commonly believed – most rights existed already: citizenship and right to vote.
- Reforms introduced by Whitlam were not dependent on the constitutional change (although the strong majority vote gave Whitlam and others a "political mandate").

He argued that what was important were the stories told about the '67 Referendum and how it was presented, not what it actually achieved legally. He criticised composition of Expert Panel – too many lawyers, who didn't study history of '67.

Lessons of '67:

The message was simple: referendum was presented to be about 'Rights'. The success and strength of the 10 year-long campaign was highlighted by political bipartisanship and broad-based support from the Australian public. Media support across the spectrum. Professor Attwood detailed what would be required for this Referendum to be successful; there would need to be an emotional "call to the nation", to win hearts and minds and the promise that this campaign will change something significant in the Australian narrative and psyche.

Difficulties today:

Professor Attwood detailed why he believed this campaign was difficult. He believes that the message is not simple and is unclear; what does "Recognise" mean? Some of changes are not about Recognition. As one of the key requirements for success; but difficult to attain in the current political climate, bipartisanship support had to been achieved. Labor governments rarely successful at producing successful Yes vote (only once in history) and the media is not universally supportive, in

'67 even The Australian ran the 'Yes' campaign. Professor Attwood argued that changing the Constitution is not the main game, and that the current recommendations were poorly thought out and doomed to failure.

Issues discussed or raised:

- Should we change the message so that it is simple and clear?
- Since we have built such momentum around the campaign wouldn't it be a tragedy not to maintain this?
- Should we take a step backwards and ask ourselves: What is the endgame? Recognition? Rights?

3. Engaging the wider community

Speakers: Bernadette McPherson (Catholic Education Office, Bendigo), Prof. Andrew Gunstone (Monash University)

Bernadette McPherson showed a video clip that she uses as an educational tool with teachers and students along with a questionnaire for a discussion exercise. The video is a [speech by Professor Michael McDaniel](#) (click to watch video) delivered at the Allens Arthur Robertson Law Firm Reconciliation Action Plan launch in 2009. In the clip Professor McDaniel challenges non-Indigenous people to think about what reconciliation is, for example what it means to partake in Acknowledgement and Welcome to Country. He believes that these protocols are becoming Australian customs, and they legitimise our place in society and give us a sense of belonging. Principle of interconnectedness, people, country, wind water constellations, people past and present. Professor McDaniel spoke of his belief that Reconciliation imbues a sense of interconnectedness, a process of sharing.

What is required from non-indigenous peoples as part of the Reconciliation Movement:

- Recognition of our parallel histories and experiences of life (very different)
- Has left different legacies
- Belief not that solutions are possible but that this is a shared journey and benefits are mutual. Reconciliation is a nation building exercise. Not a charity movement.

Anecdote of Aboriginal people talking to Native Title lawyer...“we need to tell you about the process that has lead us to being here and having this conversation..” (being dispossessed). As non-Indigenous people, we are the embodiment of Captain Cook/Arthur Philip – be mindful of who we are in these situations.

Professor McDaniel stated that he would love non-indigenous people to feel that connection to land like he does – but there is still work to be done. He believes that silence is a form of abuse and this is true for the injustices experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The two key principles he highlighted were; Listen and Action.

Give the space to come together, tell the stories of what brought us here (parallel experiences) give space for relationships to grow. This will help build a collective sense of responsibility and respectful partnerships.

Professor Andrew Gunstone from Monash University presented the findings of his research into community attitudes towards Reconciliation particularly in the Gippsland region. Andrew is also involved in research into Stolen Wages in Victoria.

Andrew's research involved telephone survey's with mostly non-Aboriginal people asking about their awareness, understanding and attitudes towards reconciliation. It also looked at perceptions of Indigenous socio economic disadvantage.

The research found little awareness about the need for indigenous rights, and no awareness of the link between rights and institutional racism.

On the concept of reconciliation, very few (<5%) mentioned land rights. Responses about the meaning of reconciliation commonly referred to unity / equality, with little mention of indigenous rights. Simplistic notions of equality - treating unequal people equally - problematic . Need to treat people differently depending on different circumstances. Reconciliation was seen as 'quite important' despite some very racist comments. Notion of assimilation still very visible in peoples responses.

The research indicates that the wider community is very ignorant of the appalling levels of indigenous disadvantage, and has become more polarised about indigenous disadvantage.

Irrespective of the amount of support that respondents initially gave for the notion of reconciliation perhaps they saw this process as a means for Aboriginal people to 'get over it'.

The responses which saw the highest total disagrees were in relation to sovereignty and non-indigenous responsibility for past injustice.

The surveys were repeated several years apart, and interestingly there was far more support for an apology after it happened. This shows the importance and influence of government leadership.

4. Local Government and Reconciliation

Speakers: Erin McKinnon (Reconciliation Victoria), Jenni Mitchell, Anne and Cindy (GetUp OutWest)

Erin gave brief overview/update of Reconciliation Victoria's work and State Government initiative – Local Government Aboriginal Partnership Project. Reconciliation Victoria Local Government Project – Vic Local Government Aboriginal Engagement and Reconciliation Survey 2012 closed July 2012, 95% of councils responded. There has been a significant increase in activity in past decade, since 2002 Toomnungi Survey and Report. State Government initiative established in 2011 the Local Government Aboriginal Partnership Project which sought to develop good practice principles and ideas for action for Vic LG sector. See info and survey results at:

<http://www.reconciliationvic.org.au/pages/local-government.php>

Jenni, Anne and Cindy from GetUp Out West gave presentation on their groups experiences working with Hobson's Bay Council.

Jenni spoke of the history of GetUp Out West. It was first established 1997 as Hobson's Bay Reconciliation Group and their first action was to put a sorry statement in the local newspaper.

The group was encouraged to become a reference group for Hobson's Bay City. Aboriginal employment was a key desirable. Protocols were established as well as the publication of the history of the First People of Hobson's Bay. In 2006 an Indigenous policy established and then in 2008 after the Apology, the group re-formed as GetUp Out West and held an 'We're sorry – now what?' event.

Anne then spoke of the real politik of working with Council. The groups experience has been that developments were totally dependent on committed officers in local government for support, and that it was the groups' responsibility to know the policy position of the council. Upon reflection she believed that it was more achievable to have policies and protocols developed than to encourage training/employment opportunities within the local government

Cindy then spoke to the group about what she has learned from working with Aboriginal communities. Having worked in Cape Work for past 6 years, she felt the need to contribute back home as a way to continue the conversation. To build awareness and socio-economic change grass roots level work and support is required for any legitimate change. Cindy believes that education and employment are the two main issues and partnerships are essential – eg. with indigenous job networks. She advised that working with Aboriginal organisations informs understanding of the needs of the community and builds a trusting relationship between the parties.

Discussion and comments from the group:

- Very difficult situation trying to work with a conservative council where there is no reconciliation group and a lack of political will within Council to change
- Local government employment should reflect population – proportionate representation of Aboriginal people (generally between 1–3%)
- Councils should be encouraged to do more now before they lock in council plan by June 2013
- City of Port Philip's RAP launched in June 2012, with direct lobbying from the Port Philip Citizens for Reconciliation as well as critical factors lined up (the holy trinity!) and Council seized opportunity; there was Aboriginal community support, passionate councillors, and the wider community was ready for council to commit to more work to be done.
- Most beneficial when you can take the community along with you in this journey of reconciliation no matter what the make-up of the Aboriginal population is. It's worth encouraging and fighting for a RAP, Indigenous rights, education and employment funding etc through council.

5. Campaigning on Aboriginal rights

Speakers: Michelle Harris, Joe Annettes and Joan Hamilton from 'Concerned Australians'

Michelle, Joan and Joe discussed how their group works in regard advocating for rights for NT Aboriginal communities in the context of the Intervention and Stronger futures legislation.

'Concerned Australians' use media releases and engages with high profile Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people as part of their strategy. They recognise that this is a life commitment and consider it will be a long journey for results. Their focus is on human rights and their single goal is to get the voices and words of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory out to wider Australia. They do so using YouTube, Facebook, press releases, their website and publications to publicise and

promote the opinions and issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Northern Territory. Relationships are key, 'know the people', personalise correspondence so there is greater accountability to respond and engage with the issues, and follow up with people to ensure they have received key documents.

They showed a [video](#) (click to watch video) as an example of how they promote voices of Aboriginal communities - the Senate Hearing at Maningrida on 22 February 2012, which can also be viewed on Concerned Australians website <http://www.concernedaustralians.com.au/>

6. Relationships with Aboriginal people and groups

Presenters: John Baxter (RecVic, Reconciliation Manningham) and Stephanie Armstrong (RecVic)

John Baxter gave a [presentation](#) (download from RecVic website) about the need to build mutually supportive relationships with the Aboriginal community, and that he doesn't want acknowledgement to be just word on paper or a screen. According to John we are all on a journey together. He spoke of the 4 key factors and understandings required to building respectful relationships with Aboriginal people and groups:

1. Understanding:

– Aboriginal customs and law; Country; Protocol; Tradition

We need to be aware that there are diverse understandings and perceptions on how we see things; we live in two worlds. He raised the question: How do I translate Aboriginal knowledge and desires to another group that comes from a different perspective?

2. Respect

– Be a good listener; Know your place; You may be the smartest person in the room, however...; It's your way, it's our way; It's not me moving forward, it's 'us' – me, my family, my community, the broader community, the young, old people; When is it appropriate to speak, when not to speak

3. Be involved

– How do you begin to engage- get to know people, attend events and functions, find out what's on; Become a familiar face; Assist and support; Know what the issues are, understand and respect

4. Input

– If you get involved, see it through. Actions speak louder than words.

Stephanie Armstrong (Gamilaraay) spoke of her belief that relationships and family are key values for many First Australians. She also spoke of the need to be able to share your knowledge and to accept that there are many ways to learn. A deeper understanding comes when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people work openly and honestly together. One thought to consider; when values and concepts of what's right and what's wrong clash we need to challenge what is best for our children.

Stephanie used this quote to help highlight the point that understanding ourselves is central to leadership. "The most important of all voyages is the discovery of self, and without it, all the rest are not only useless, but disastrous..." (Thomas Merton, American author 1915 – 1968)

Steph also spoke about the 'Cultural Interface', which takes a few stages to reach, including a commitment of spirit, transparency, honesty, trust and respect. Entering the 'Cultural Interface' requires time, patience, waiting, reflecting, deep listening and no assumptions

Steph also talked about shared hopes and aspirations, turning monologue into dialogue. We all have a story and a past. The strength of Aboriginal people is to tell our stories.