

Reconcilable differences

The 10th anniversary of the Mabo decision on land rights has again focused attention on reconciliation. How close are we to finding an approach that satisfactorily blends the practical and the symbolic?

By Michael Gordon.

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IF I had plenty of money, I'd try to wake up people to what's happening with the Aboriginal race." So said Reg Saunders, the only Aborigine to be commissioned in wartime as an officer in the Australian armed forces, in 1962.

Saunders was chatting with my father, Harry Gordon, for the final chapter of his book on Saunders' extraordinary life, *The Embarrassing Australian*. The chapter was called *Monologue on Main Street*.

"I reckon the average Australian has some feeling of sympathy for the black man but he doesn't do anything about it," Saunders explained. "He needs to be jolted. If I had enough money, I'd apply myself to the work of jolting people and really doing something."

Saunders had a few ideas about how this could be done. He would show films of the appalling conditions in which indigenous people lived. He would force investigations into the discrimination in country towns where Aborigines had to sit in roped-off areas at the pictures or were barred from swimming in the same pools as whites, or forbidden from living in certain streets, on the grounds that it would bring down property values.

"What else would I do? I'd try to ginger up some pride of race among the Aborigines themselves," he said. "And I'd work to have discrimination based on colour made a punishable offence in Australia."

When Saunders became an officer with authority to give orders to white men in 1944, Aborigines were not entitled to vote and only those with a special permit had the right to buy a beer at a hotel.

When Saunders died of heart failure in March, 1990, at the age of 69, it is fair to say that the average Australian had not, in Reg's words, been jolted into thinking about the question of reconciliation, much less doing something about it.

More than a year later, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was established to undertake the first formal process of reconciliation since British settlement. But it is

safe to suggest the average Australian has been jolted in the decade since Saunders' death.

Jolted by the findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the Mabo decision of 1992 and by the 1997 Bringing Them Home report into the forced removal of children.

Jolted by that great gesture of defiance and pride by Nicky Winmar at Victoria Park in 1993, and by the efforts of Winmar and other footballers such as Michael Long to eliminate racism in sport.

And jolted by the stories captured by indigenous painters, songwriters and film makers, people such as Richard Frankland, Reg's nephew, and by non-indigenous artists and performers too, including Paul Kelly and Midnight Oil.

I doubt whether Saunders could have imagined back in 1990 that a quarter of a million Australians would walk for reconciliation in Melbourne and Sydney in 2000, and that gestures of similar strength would be made in communities, big and small, across the country.

It is unlikely that, even in his most optimistic moments, he could have anticipated the reaction of millions of Australians and the huge international audience to the 12-minute Awakenings segment at the Sydney Olympics, or the tidal wave of emotion that drenched everyone in the stands the night Cathy Freeman won gold and carried two flags.

But I suspect that, if he were still alive, he would have smiled wryly at the Prime Minister's assertion that these events demonstrated that "we are a more reconciled country than many people previously thought", just as he would have two generations earlier when it was suggested that his success as a soldier showed there was no colour bar in Australia.

What the year 2000 did demonstrate, overwhelmingly, was the will to be reconciled. Whether the nation has capitalised on that will is another question.

The 10th anniversary of the Mabo decision on June 3 has again focused debate on the question of just how far Australia has progressed in tackling indigenous disadvantage and achieving a sincere reconciliation.

There is no simple answer. Just as the High Court's recognition that Australia did not belong to "nobody" before white settlement has produced substantial gains in some places and frustration and anger in others, the picture on reconciliation is uneven.

Some communities have taken significant strides toward economic independence but the social fabric of others has continued to deteriorate. Some indicators, like the number of indigenous students in higher education, have shown improvement, but others, like incarceration levels in the Northern Territory, continue to be appalling.

In the absence of a formal apology and a willingness to consider how a framework agreement, or treaty, would advance the nation, debate has tended to be polarised

and unproductive. On one side are advocates of a so-called rights agenda, including a treaty acknowledging that the country was occupied without consent. On the other is an almost singular focus on "practical reconciliation".

When Labor leader Simon Crean recently promised to work on a new social justice package, without specifying what it might include, Indigenous Affairs Minister Philip Ruddock suggested he was revisiting the proposition of separate development for indigenous Australians.

If the package included the possibility of a treaty, indigenous seats in the parliament, constitutional reform and recognition of customary law, Mr Ruddock suggested that the great majority of Australians would not support it.

Yet with the exception of the idea of designated seats, which is not a priority of most indigenous leaders, each of the propositions is capable of being discussing in a rational, non-threatening way, without raising the spectre of separate nations or rousing the ire of those attracted to the policies of Pauline Hanson.

In the same way, the Howard Government's ideas for achieving practical reconciliation by addressing disadvantage in housing, education, employment and health can be discussed without assuming that the policy is driven by the ideology of assimilation.

Although Mr Ruddock accused Mr Crean of trying to walk "both sides of the street", my experience looking at communities has convinced me that this is precisely what is required - that lasting reconciliation has to involve both the practical and the symbolic: the tangible and the spiritual.

To this end, I think there are 10 propositions that should underpin a comprehensive effort to achieve reconciliation.

1. The ultimate leadership role and responsibility resides with the Commonwealth Government, and that means with the prime minister of the day. This is what Australians decided so emphatically in the 1967 referendum. It is also what flows from Australia's international obligations.

2. Indigenous leaders must be able to negotiate from a position of knowledge and strength, with authority devolved and regional agreements encouraged.

But without the necessary skills, particularly in the middle management areas, there will not be lasting change. Without informed consent, there will not be a lasting settlement. A main focus should be on capacity building.

3. Any agreement must be between the government of the day and the indigenous leadership, and any settlement should involve all stakeholders, including the miners, pastoralists and fishing industries.

This is one of the lessons of Australia's experience since Mabo. If only government and representatives of indigenous Australia are involved, the support of the wider community for the process is unlikely to be sustained.

4. Progress toward a compact between politicians, stakeholders and indigenous Australians must continue to be underpinned by momentum for reconciliation in the wider community.

Here the work of Reconciliation Australia, the foundation to carry on the work of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, community groups and the education system, will be crucial.

5. The key to achieving better outcomes is incentive. As former Labor senator Bob Collins says: "The days of discipline and coercion are finished. What's left is incentive." But how do you provide it?

Maybe there could be a system of rewards for communities prepared to become self-sufficient in fruit and vegetables (as many were in the days of the missions), with additional assistance in employment and training programs in areas like eco-tourism and ultimately the prospect of preferential tenders and joint ventures.

6. The capacity to become self-sufficient and economically more independent varies greatly across the country, not least for reasons of climate and natural resources, but overwhelmingly because of the failures in health and education.

The great danger in simply providing opportunities and incentives to set up enterprises is that the capacity isn't there to take advantage of them. Once again, indigenous people will have been set up to fail.

7. "Upstream" approaches must be given a higher priority than "downstream" approaches. Upstream is about dealing with causes. Downstream is dealing with consequences. This means more resources and effort should be devoted to preventative strategies.

The dominance of the downstream can be seen in places such as Mornington Island, where the most impressive infrastructure in the community when I visited was the tavern, the police station and the hospital. The tavern is the source of many of the problems, and the hospital and the police station deal with the consequences. Yet there was no recreation centre and not enough support for those trying to generate programs for those who need counselling, and for the promotion of sensible drinking.

As Richard Trudgen argues in his book, *Why Warriors Lie Down And Die*, the aim of upstream strategies is to rebuild the capacity of people to take control of their own lives.

8. Reconciliation is not just about addressing a problem or righting a wrong; it's also about giving white Australia more opportunity to share in the richness of indigenous culture and history that are such a central part of the nation's story and identity.

It took the Olympics to make possible the Festival of Dreaming in 1997, the biggest celebration and exhibition of indigenous art and culture ever staged. Sandy Hollway, the chief executive of the games' organising committee, believed it would be a fitting

legacy for such a festival to be held every three or four years, and move around the country. This is a great idea.

9. Duplication is dumb. A concerted effort is required to avoid the waste and overlap that asserts itself in both the delivery of services and in the explosion in the number and variety of organisations, programs and structures.

As Noel Pearson writes in *Our Right To Take Responsibility*: "We need to recognise the incoherence and irrationality of many of these structures - the overlapping functions, the conflicting roles, the inefficient scale, the inappropriate representation, the lack of coordination and the waste of limited resources." He was talking only about Aboriginal structures, but the same can be said about government (federal, state and local) and non-government structures.

10. The final and most important point is that the objective of any settlement has to be two-fold: to settle the historical, political, economic and social grievances while simultaneously charting a new course for the future. The problem with the Howard Government's approach is that it assumes the latter can be achieved without addressing the former. This is a formula for failure. As Marcia Langton, chair of Australian indigenous studies at Melbourne University, said in her 2000 inaugural professorial lecture, *A Treaty Between Our Nations*, these grievances represent a loose thread in the web of our civil society. "The lack of consent and the absence of agreements or treaties, remains a stain on Australian history and the chief obstacle to constructing an honourable place for indigenous Australians in the modern state."

It does not necessarily follow, however, that everything has to be dealt with in one hit. While an agreement that charts a course for the future must go to the question of economic and political rights, some issues could be attended to later on, once the value of agreement making is clear.

The essential ingredients are leadership and commitment, and if Reg Saunders were around today, he might observe that we are not seeing enough of either quality from either side of politics. That is not a reason to be pessimistic. It is cause for those who are committed to redouble their efforts.

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