

25 years of reconciliation and what do we have to show for it?

By [Paul Daley](#)

National Reconciliation Week is testimony to the hope and aspiration of many Australians that Indigenous lives and cultures should be celebrated – but the reality tells a less hopeful story



Part of National Reconciliation Week 2016, the 'Sea of Hands' installation is for Australians to reflect on Australia's national identity and the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in the nation's story. Photograph: William West/AFP/Getty Images

Friday 3 June 2016

The 25th National Reconciliation Week – an event seeded with admirable optimism that relations between Australia's first peoples and non-Indigenous Australia can one day be bridged – ends on Friday.

This year reconciliation week is freighted with heavy symbolism, coinciding as it does with the silver anniversary of the foundation of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1991.

Next year, reconciliation week will align with two more milestones for Indigenous Australia. It will be the 25th anniversary of the high court Mabo judgment that

acknowledged the unique relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the continent. And it will be half a century on 27 May 2017 since Australia voted at referendum to give the commonwealth power to legislate for the Indigenous and to count them formally among the citizenry on the census.

Critical events to be sure – moments of national hope that offered potential opportunity to build conciliation between Indigenous and other Australia.

Twenty-five years. 50 years. How many wars have begun and ended in that time? How many cities have been built or destroyed? How many generations of Australian leaders, black and non-Indigenous, have arrived and passed?

And, after 25, after 50 – after 100 – years, how far, really, have we travelled when it comes to improving the lot of Indigenous people, on moving forward with the business that is central to reconciliation, honestly reckoning with the shameful inequity – rooted in colonial history – that mars Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia today?

Not much, if at all.

In some areas we are going backwards.

Here's another anniversary, albeit one that non-Indigenous Australia does not refer to all that often. Last 15 April it was 26 years since the handing down of the royal commission report into Aboriginal deaths in custody. The report made 339 recommendations aimed at keeping Indigenous Australians out of jail and, therefore, away from the possibility of dying behind bars.

In 1991, when the report was handed down, Indigenous people comprised 14% of prisoners (a shameful figure given Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders constitute about 3% of the population). Quarter of a century after the royal commission, Indigenous people comprised 27% of the prison population.

There have been more than 150 Indigenous deaths in custody since the royal commission reported. The most recent was 25-year-old Steven Freeman, found dead a week ago at Canberra's prison, the Alexander Maconochie Centre. The prison is just a few kilometres, as the sulphur crested cockatoo flies, from this nation's Parliament House.

Of course it is inside that building, embedded into what was an Aboriginal sacred site on Kurrajong Hill, that, every year our legislators participate in a highly performative event. “Closing the Gap” has, in my view, become something of a bipartisan charade aimed at appeasing the international community that Australian legislators are still watching what anthropologist Jon Altman calls the “Indigenous socio-economic disaster space”. Closing The Gap measures the appalling disparities between the quality and duration of Indigenous lives and those of other Australians.

But most of the gaps are widening. It has led to pitifully few outcomes for Indigenous people. Meanwhile, genuine involvement in the conception, formulation, negotiation and implementation of Indigenous policy largely by-passes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is passed down from the whitefella government, after “consultation” with a handpicked few Indigenous sages.

Twenty-five years after Mabo, Indigenous sovereignty remains unacknowledged by the commonwealth. There have been no treaties. Indigenous land rights remain heavily qualified in favour of the commonwealth. Mining companies, many of them foreign and which pay no – or little – Australian tax, continue to dispossess and marginalise Indigenous people, destroy their lands and disconnect them from culture.

And who’d’ve thought that just 40 years after that landmark referendum, a federal government – with bipartisan support – would effectively suspend the Racial Discrimination Act and send troops (replete with all that resonance of 1788 invasion) into remote communities as part of the so-called “intervention”?

All the while mainstream Australian media shows little interest in tracing the line between Indigenous inequity and European invasion and colonial history. With a few notable exceptions, it largely pays lip service to Indigenous issues, treating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues as politically, socially, economically and culturally marginal.

They, like so many whitefella politicians, view Indigenous culture as something that is best exists in museum, rather than lived in urban or rural communities.

National Reconciliation Week and its theme – Our History, Our Story, Our Future – is testimony to the hope and aspiration (in the face of some glaring, ugly realities) of many good Australians that Indigenous lives and cultures should be raised and celebrated in our national consciousness.

The symbiosis between past and present, the continuum of time, is never more pronounced than in Indigenous Australia.

But after the 25th reconciliation week, I'm left with an empty sense that too much time is passing with far too few positive outcomes for Indigenous Australia.