

## **Many paths to reconciliation**

By Noel Pearson

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JOHN Howard's election-eve pledge to solve the "unfinished business" of indigenous reconciliation is no less than a bid to make history – for himself and the nation.

A road is proposed to be travelled to secure what has become a holy grail for Australians of goodwill. History soon forgets budget surpluses and property booms, tax cuts and sky-rocketing share markets. History will not forget reconciliation.

Conservative leaders can surprise with moves notionally more likely to occur on the Left but actually easier for them. I find striking parallels between Howard and Richard Nixon: both leaders were seen as highly conservative and controversial cultural warriors from the Right; both were tagged with the appellation "tricky"; both were the subject of visceral hatred from the progressive Left; both men carried the faith of the conservative and parochial heartland of their nations.

And the political logic is precisely the same this time: there are some issues that can only be carried by political leadership from the side most hostile to the issue. Only Nixon could go to China, and Australia will not amend its Constitution unless its most conservative leaders adopt the cause.

Howard has sworn to make reconciliation a central plank in his bid for a fifth term, and Kevin Rudd has pledged the support of the Labor Party whether it wins or loses the election.

Plainly, it is harder to win a referendum than an election. Amendment of the Australian Constitution requires a majority of voters in a majority of states, and this has been done only eight times since Federation.

The 1967 referendum was carried by 91 per cent of Australian voters. Referendum proposals that do not have bipartisan support are doomed.

You need consensus between the voters of Left-side parties and Right-side parties. Referendum proposals therefore require 90 per cent strategies, whereas federal elections require only 51 per cent strategies.

Rudd and his indigenous affairs and reconciliation spokeswoman Jenny Macklin correctly identified the most important aspect of Howard's initiative, namely that bipartisan leadership is needed regardless of who wins the federal election.

Of the flood of reactions to Howard's bombshell, I found the reaction of the West Australian Aboriginal leader Dennis Eggington most insightful. Eggington is a member of a recently formed group of indigenous leaders who condemn the Howard Government's Northern Territory intervention and its policies during the past 11 years.

Eggington showed strong leadership when he said that Howard's pledge "is a good sign in the sense that those Australians who support and follow John Howard can see that shift and shift their own thinking towards first nation's peoples in this country", and that he "hopes that Howard's plan succeeds" because it "will refocus the reconciliation process".

A consensus that includes conservative Australians about "a special place in society but within society, not separate" is, as Eggington realises, the great promise of the Howard initiative.

There are several ways in which one could answer the question "what is reconciliation and when will we know we have achieved it?"

There is an ultimate destination to which reconciliation aspires: for indigenous peoples to rise out of their chronic disadvantage and state of un-wellbeing to a state of social, cultural, economic and spiritual wellbeing comparable to other Australians, while retaining the distinctness of their indigenous identities.

But this is a multigenerational challenge: the disparities are so large that it will take generations of concerted effort pursuing correct policies to close the gaps. Life expectancy is the obvious aggregate marker and at present the deficit (between white and black people) is measured by the Productivity Commission's benchmarking framework to be 17 years.

Actually achieving the end destination cannot therefore be, at least by itself, the meaning of reconciliation.

The other way in which reconciliation is often conceptualised is that it is a suitably symbolic moment in time when necessarily momentous acknowledgements are made and commitments are given.

Of course, the great weakness of the "moment in time" view of reconciliation is that, without more, such a moment is sure to rapidly turn out to be a false dawn. Nevertheless, there is a place for a symbolic moment in time.

The idea that reconciliation is a continuing process (as indeed it is) is now a widespread assumption, but the problem with this idea is that it can be a cop-out. It can be akin to asking "how long is a piece of string?"

Yes, there is an iterative process of economic, social and cultural policy reform and practical rendition, and relationship-building and celebration, but to leave the notion of reconciliation as a process is to just say "we're working on it and one day it will come".

The correct way to think about reconciliation is as combining the three elements: an ultimate goal, a symbolic moment, and an ongoing process. In my discussions with Patrick Dodson and other indigenous leaders in the past three years we articulated the following goal for our people:

For Aboriginal children to have the same expectations of life as their fellow Australians, to develop their unique cultural, social and economic capital, secured by a new framework of Aboriginal rights and responsibilities, embraced in a national settlement.

In order to get to that destination there needs to be a commitment made at a symbolic moment in time – a national settlement – that establishes the means necessary for progress to be made towards the destination.

The significance of the PM's announcement this week is twofold. First, he is leading the conservatives closer towards common ground with indigenous Australians in relation to our people's goal: a secured place for a distinct indigenous identity.

Second, the symbolic moment in time, when the overwhelming majority of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians reach a settlement about the framework for achieving the goal, is closer with the proposed referendum.

The symbolic moment in time will come when the people of Australia have agreed on the right words for expressing acknowledgement of the past and the present, and recognition of indigenous peoplehood within a united, indivisible nation.

In fact, the PM made his first significant contributions to the formulation of these words more than two years ago at a national gathering of indigenous leaders in Old Parliament House. He recognised and acknowledged past injustices, recognised that communal interest in and spiritual attachment to land is fundamental to indigenous culture, made it clear that the Government does not seek to wind back or undermine native title or land rights, and pledged to meet the indigenous people of this country more than halfway if necessary.

It has been overlooked that there is a continuity between that speech and Howard's speech this week. This week Howard accepted a large part of the blame for the lack of progress in relations between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians during his time as a leader.

The starting point for reconciliation must be a reflection on history and the present situation of indigenous Australians. It is this history and the parlous present condition of indigenous Australians that requires reconciliation. Howard has committed to this starting point through an appropriately momentous symbolic moment in time: amending the Australian Constitution to recognise indigenous people.

However, it is not possible to talk seriously about achieving reconciliation by identifying and committing to an end destination or goal without setting out the means to getting there. Having identified the end destination and adopted a framework for getting to that destination, the final component of reconciliation is to make the intergenerational commitment to travel the journey.

Former Liberal prime minister Malcolm Fraser said “a referendum would not do anything unless it was accompanied by a 20-year commitment on health, education and housing”. However churlish Fraser’s frame of mind might be about Howard, his point is correct.

This week, Dodson repeated his severe criticisms of the Howard Government’s policies and attitudes. Yesterday he was asked whether we could have meaningful reconciliation without the sorry word.

Dodson said: “We have got to have meaningful dialogue and meaningful discourse. Howard’s reasons for not saying sorry are interesting ones and they need to be explored. No one has asked Howard to give up anything of what he believes.

“To the degree that the PM has made his own admissions about his shortfalls and failings, no one has asked him give up his positions on these 1950s mentalities or those positive aspects about Australian history. People have asked him to be a bit broader than that.

“The question of the apology has never been about guilt. It has been about owning up to the fact that this happened to people in their lives and that they were taken without their consent or from their mothers and their peoples. It is the substance of serious discussion, and I don’t think we should simply write off the sentiment of the Prime Minister on the basis that he hasn’t himself personally come to a position where he is capable of saying sorry.”

There is of course a flipside to the right-wing leader who must make the leftward journey to the Centre, and that is when the leaders of the Left make the rightward journey to the Centre. There could be no peace in Northern Ireland without the leadership of Gerry Adams and the Rev Ian Paisley – a truculent right-wing leader – would never have made the journey to peace without Adams.

If I have learned anything from the wise counsel of Yolngu leader Galarrwuy Yunupingu, reconciliation will require this country’s national leadership to come to terms with Dodson and Lowitja O’Donoghue as much as it is able to come to terms with Sue Gordon and Noel Pearson.

This is only the start and there is a lot of road to travel yet, but the self-described most conservative leader in Australian politics has turned the vehicle of his bid for the fifth term of his prime ministership down the road to this very destination.

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