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Federation, Reconciliation, and the Future

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The Centre won the inaugural National Reconciliation Award in 2000. Phil is also National President of Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR), a coalition of 260,000 Australians and 120 national organisations in support of indigenous peoples' rights.

He is author of the Australian Citizens' Statement that is the basis for ANTaR's *Sea of Hands* project, which won the Human Rights Award in 1999.

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Phil Glendenning, *Edmund Rice Centre for Justice & Community Education*

Professor Peter Sheehan, Professor Mary Sheehan, Professor Muredach Dynan, Mrs Mary Dynan, Distinguished guests, Friends of McAuley Campus and Australian Catholic University

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land, I honour your ancestors and it is indeed a great pleasure to be on your country. I would especially like to thank Joan Hendriks for her welcome tonight.

It is a great pleasure to be here in Brisbane tonight, especially at McAuley Campus.

I'd like to thank especially Jim Graham, Anne-Marie Philips and Michelle Higman for their work in getting me here.

An evening like tonight in this place brings to mind the great and heroic deeds of Catherine McAuley – a woman who mobilised social action in favour of those excluded in her own society. That mobilisation continues today in the Sisters of Mercy and their continuing mission for justice. The fact that this is the Aquinas lecture recalls the notion put by Thomas Aquinas that we need to take space to seek the truth. So in a very real sense these will be themes in my reflections tonight – the importance of mobilisation of people of good will and heart, and the need to create space where the truth can be heard. These are fundamental to addressing the unfinished business of our nation that lies at the heart of a true reconciliation between the indigenous peoples of this country, and those who have come from other places and their descendants.

What a year this year of the Centenary of Federation has been. What a period in our history we are living through. The notion of Reconciliation, the need for Reconciliation, has never perhaps seen to be more relevant, and as people have remarked to me since September 11, never more difficult.

It is important to try and make some sense of what the world now contemplates because it is connected to the sort of Australia we will have in the future.

Two thoughts from Afghanistan and the United States indicate the truth of this.

From Afghanistan there is an old expression that goes like this:

On every hand there are five fingers and each of them is different.

Thus it is with the world we live in. Not every American is George W. Bush. Not every Afghani is a gun-toting member of the Taliban. There is one hand of humanity and we are all part of it

From New York City one of the fire-fighters coming off shift at the World Trade Centre put it like this:

The terrorist is obsessed by death. They deal in death, their only weapon is death. That is why our response must be life.

Reconciliation processes *are* about understanding the difference that makes up the whole. Reconciliation is about life, about choosing life.

This view may be somewhat at odds with the 'dead or alive' and 'crusade' edicts of the American President. And yet, from our experience in Australia and in places like Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Israel and Palestine and Guatemala, it is precisely true.

Life lies at the heart of Reconciliation. And despite the actions of the Australian Government in demonising asylum seekers fleeing the Taliban, compassion for people should never be seen as weakness. In this year of commemorating Federation, Australia can and should do better than this.

This is indeed difficult work yet it is that very difficulty that underscores its importance.

So as we gather here tonight here in Brisbane the world stands four square faced with the reality that the world's most powerful and wealthy nation in the history of the planet is bombing one of the poorest nations on earth, it is important to recognise a further reality.

A retaliatory response that will kill more civilians, that is based in revenge, will not work. Mutual death is not an agent of positive change. It has never worked. Ultimately people have to talk to each other. Whatever happens we are going to end up talking to these people.

We should remember that there exists in the United States a serious tradition of belief in freedom and of support for the poor and the afflicted. No one who has ever been to Ellis Island could ever forget the power of that.

Mary Robinson, the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner said recently that the only appropriate response is a human rights response. What occurred in the US is a crime against humanity, a war crime, and should be tried accordingly. There are mechanisms in place as we have seen with the extradition of Slobodan Milosevic and others. There is a due process.

As we have seen from Ireland, Rwanda, Guatemala, El Salvador military action does not solve the problem. It actually makes it worse. Putting aside all questions of morality, or even humanity – in base terms, it does not work. Never has. Never can. Kill 50 Bin Ladens and you face another 500.

What a pity we cannot bomb Afghanistan with butter, and bread. Carpet bomb Kandahar and Kabul with medicine for sick children, possibilities for the future. Diminish the gap between the rich and poor. Do to the people of Afghanistan what the aspiration of Ellis Island sought to do.

Last year on a river bank in Murawari country in northern NSW, Cathy an elder from Goodooga was having a conversation two young people from Northern Ireland. One Catholic and one Protestant. After hearing of John Howard's reaction to the Stolen Generations, and his refusal to apologise, one

says “Why don’t you just shoot the little bastard?” Cathy replied, “Ah well all that violence hasn’t done you mob much good, eh?” It was not because of the violence that the parties agreed to the Belfast Agreement. It was the violence that prevented the Belfast Agreement for 30 years.

Overcoming division and embracing difference is basic to these processes of reconciliation. To do that though, requires the telling of the truth. And the need for a space to be created wherein that truth can be heard.

Often, reconciliation processes have been dominated primarily by the role of politicians, lawyers and even extremists. In Australia, far too often, Aboriginal people themselves are excluded – particularly at various levels of government.

But reconciliation is not someone else’s job. It involves us all. There is a central and essential role in reconciliation for education for the community, the building of awareness and the development of key skills for the community. Educational institutions and non-government organisations have played and continue to play a vital role in reconciliation.

After all, more than most, they have access to the people at the levels of where their lives are lived.

It’s about leaders – not only those in the political domain – but in everyday life – leaders like yourselves and others, making institutions more responsive to the directions of reconciliation and making them accountable for the achievements.

How is it then for Catholic education, teachers and universities? There is a challenge it seems to me, a challenge to ask the students and staff the questions or encouraging them towards greater understanding and tolerance about the cultural interface, and about the issues that arise as a consequence of it.

Achieving a real reconciliation will also require “getting on the front foot”. Of moving beyond the most public discourse, or the most explicit discourse in the media, to ascertain what people really feel and think. And providing a space whereby people can develop the skills necessary for reconciliation. Reconciliation is about more than knowledge or increased awareness of issues. It is also about skills and it is about relationships. Knowing people and knowing what to do. In particular, skills of social analysis are essential for young people especially to be equipped to understand the world in which they live and will one day be expected to lead.

Thus in our experience we need 4 c's

- *Critical space*
- *Creative and mobilising dialogue*
- *Collaboration between different groups, sectors and agencies.*
- *Connections globally*

The challenge is to avoid compartmentalisation, of staying with the areas with which we are familiar. There's a need to enable people to step outside of the comfortable and even our own areas of expertise and seek to make connections, draw out commonalities. Identify space for movement.

For an institution like ACU there is a call in the “4 C's” to engaged citizenship in its teaching, research, and community service for staff and students.

For our work in Australia, especially significant in this is the role of youth – for it is to youth that the responsibility of making reconciliation sustainable over the long-term will fall. And it is young people who can often see connections and possibilities for change.

Youth are more than the future. In many places they are at the centre of conflict. Most IRA bombers are in their late teens. We have worked with young men who have killed 16 people by their early twenties. The killings in Rwanda were in the main carried out by young people aged between 14 and 19 years of age.

Excluding young people from full participation in society is done at a heavy price. In Australia one of the things of which we are least proud is the fact that after 100 years of our federation our young people kill themselves at a higher rate than any other country on earth. And not in the poorest parts of the country, or in the Aboriginal community, but in southern affluent Sydney and the eastern seaside central coast. Where the young experience alienation and exclusion, the price that is paid is terrible.

It is therefore important that we do not compartmentalise people. The notion of cross-sectoral dialogue and joint action is essential, because reconciliation is not just for the social and community welfare sector. This involves the creation of critical and indeed sacred space wherein people can move. Critical and sacred space for advocacy, understanding and mediation, where the significance of local-global connections can be seen and understood. This includes engaging with those with whom we would normally disagree. And finding space for the engagement.

In our work in reconciliation in Australia it became clear over time that one significant sector missing from the peoples' movement were business organisations. We have begun a small project, in collaboration with the ACU, to provide a space, a forum, for discussions with business on ethics and values in the workplace and in society. And to do qualitative research. This is unusual for social justice work, which too often works at the margins of society.

There is perhaps no greater issue to consider for the future of the planet than how we are going to share it rich in diversity and difference rather than allowing those differences and gaps that currently exist lead us to the abyss.

NGO's and educational organisations have a central role to play in this. They will be basic to the maintenance and building peoples' of movements for social change, especially as it relates to reconciliation. This is especially relevant when we consider the ongoing peoples' movement for reconciliation in Australia.

Peoples' Movements

I would like to turn to the importance of peoples movements in Reconciliation.

Citizens – not consumers - are at the centre of the global drama unfolding today.

The goal of peoples' movements has been to energise a critical mass of independent, decentralised initiative in support of a mobilising social vision. A number of times in recent years over the past decade the UNDP has noted that peoples' participation is becoming the central issue of our time. Across the world there has been the emergence of peoples' organisations demanding on behalf of every citizen more and more say in shaping their own lives and the values of their own society.

Within the past three decades peoples' movements have reshaped thought and action on the environment, human rights, the rights of women, peace, population, and increasingly, the rights of indigenous people. And on reconciliation. Though these remain battles yet to be won, the progress – from an historical perspective – has been rapid and pervasive.

Peoples' movements have a special quality. They are driven not by budgets or organisational structures but rather by ideas, by a vision of a better world. They move on social energy more than on money. The vision mobilises independent action by countless individuals and organisations across state and national boundaries, all supporting a shared ideal. Participants in successful movements collaborate in continuously shifting networks and coalitions. This vision, first articulated by David Korten, provides a theoretical framework for the ANTaR coalition.

In Australia the challenge for the peoples movement for reconciliation is to work for a just solution to our unfinished business. This is underpinned by five key principles put forward at a Lets Talk reconciliation conference in Belfast by a group of Aboriginal leaders. We have found these principles to be of use in other contexts internationally.

- First, **recognition**: that indigenous peoples should be recognised as first peoples.
- Second, that distinct and inalienable **rights** flow from that uniqueness.

- Third, that there must be a ***commitment to social justice*** that is both formal and substantive.
- Fourth, that ***negotiations in good faith*** are essential in any reconciliation process.
- Finally, that there must be a ***change in power relationships***.

In Australia, ultimately the strength of the movement for reconciliation lies in the simplicity of its aims to provide support in accordance with the expressed wishes and aims of indigenous people and to educate the broad Australian and international community with the facts. An important part of the strategy is that all action for social justice should be to be participative, As Paulo Friere once noted, social movement and social action serve to 'conscientise' the community.

Conscientisation is not just about the critical reflection of reality, but the process by which human beings participate in a transforming act.

Hence in Australia over the past ten years we have had a formal reconciliation process that re-fired the peoples' movement and over the past five years we have seen the development of other initiatives including *ANTaR* and the *Sea of Hands* and the *Sorry Books* – as part of the formal ten year reconciliation process in Australia and in response to the report into the Stolen Generations, *Bringing Them Home*.

In 1997, the Chair of the Reconciliation Council Patrick Dodson called on all Australians to join the peoples' movement for reconciliation which had been alive in Australia in different forms for many years – in 1938 and before and after the '67 referendum. At the same time the Howard Government's refusal to apologise for the policy of taking Aboriginal children away from their parents and attempts to diminish indigenous peoples native title rights, led to an upsurge in the community for support for Aboriginal people.

Today ANTaR has 260,000 signatures to the Sea of Hands, and has 120 national groups as members. It is the largest mobilisation of Australians since the Vietnam War. One million Australians have signed the Sorry Books apologising to the Stolen Generations. Similarly, the 10 year formal process of reconciliation concluded with a series of bridge walks in major cities. Half a million people walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

The question remains in the Australian context as to whether we are good at the symbolics and not necessarily at the substance. The Sea of Hands, the bridge walks, the Sorry Books are not ends in themselves. They are signposts of a destination yet to be reached, and of the work that remains to be done.

We know this because in Australia today, all social indicators demonstrate that by any standard measure of well-being, whether it be employment, education, income, housing or health – all of which are of course inter-linked – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are left far behind the general Australian population. A seminal Government report last year indicated that reconciliation in Australia will need to be more than a nicely worded document. The report revealed that:

- 50% of Aboriginal men do not live past 50 years of age
- Aboriginal people are 14 times more likely to go to prison than other Australians
- Aboriginal babies die at twice the rate of other Australians
- The mortality rates for Aboriginal peoples are above the rates for the poorest of Third

World countries

In response the Government has sought to put an emphasis on improving Aboriginal health, education and welfare, under the banner of *practical reconciliation*. However, these are the domain of all Australians irrespective of race, creed or colour. Reconciliation requires more than this. While health, housing and education are indisputably important, they are not the whole story. They are the needs the Government has decided on behalf of Aboriginal Australians. Indigenous Australia itself sees other needs: justice, equity, and the recognition of their rights to land.

Reconciliation can never be enhanced by white fellas talking on behalf of black fellas. Besides the fact it is unjust, morally indefensible, it doesn't work. We've tried it and it has failed. Reconciliation will not be fully achieved in Australia until the rights of indigenous people – which include adequate health, education and housing but are not limited to them – are recognised.

Therefore the energy now is on the development of a framework agreement, or series of agreements between the government of the day and Aboriginal people. Recent polls have indicated that 53% of Australians favour a treaty, or treaties, with Aboriginal Australians. Treaties after all are about agreement and not division. Last Sunday ANTaR and ACROSS together with 55 community groups launched a campaign calling for negotiations to develop a framework agreement that would lead us eventually to enshrine in the law of the land a formal agreement or treaty that would state the things that have been achieved and that which remains to be done.

At the same time there is a need to work with our young people to enable them to contribute to an emerging society that is based on constructive agreements to resolve the unfinished business of our history.

The Let's Talk project is a good example of this work. ERC is the Australian partner in this project which has its origins in the Irish peace process. It is a simple yet powerful process to enable young people to develop the skills necessary to make reconciliation a reality. To create a space to meet, talk and dance and sing. And to argue and agree to disagree.

In each of the Let's Talk initiatives there was a commitment on the part of all participants to take the initiative and enter into critical space. This critical space included meeting people from the more remote and more urban parts of one's own country, crossing borders and meeting people from different countries, including Ireland, Britain, Israel and Palestine, Brazil, Rwanda and Australia, who were committed to advancing the reconciliation agenda in their own countries.

This commitment to critical space challenges the value placed on tourism by people today with the values of today's pilgrim. The purpose of today's pilgrimage, as distinct from the tour, to new

countries and places is not to see but understand, not to follow directories but to hear the stories, not to contain the memory but to create new worlds and opportunities together.

There is an ease and comfort in staying in one's own personal space as an individual, community, and nation or to be a tourist to new scenes.

Staying in one's own world and space limits, if not prevents, any opportunity for reconciliation because of the reluctance to see the world and issues from other peoples' perspectives.

This is particularly evident in the current debate in Australia over asylum seekers. As it was in the lead-up to the last election the Australian Government has determined that it is in its electoral interests to exacerbate fear in the community on racial grounds. It is ugly politics that diminishes the nation.

To advance the reconciliation agenda one needs to be able to take the step beyond one's own history and experiences and look at questions from the perspective of others, particularly those whose lives are characterized by oppression and social exclusion. To see the richness that is theirs to offer and ours to understand.

But it must be based in relationships. Real relationships between real people. Otherwise it can easily become an exercise in voyeurism – whereby the poverty and oppressions of the poor liberates the rich from the inadequacies of their experiences.

This movement into new critical space is an ever-present challenge. One's previous reconciliation experiences are a source of new and deeper understanding and appreciation for meeting new people and their worlds. Moving into new interpersonal space is a commitment to integrity, in which each person's responsibility is to listen with openness and respect to the other person(s) story and walk with them into their history - not to usurp or exploit - but to be enriched by their culture and values, and accept the invitation to dream new possibilities. We open ourselves to

the continual need for social engagement with those who are different to us and to be personally challenged by the new contexts.

The Australian reconciliation experience has been different to other parts of the world. Australia has never had a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the manner of such commissions that have taken place in South Africa, El Salvador, Guatemala, Argentina and Chile. Our country has never sought to construct a Commission to deal with past crimes committed against its citizens. No nation state, however committed to the principles of democracy ever has a perfect history or provided justice to its citizens through its institutions. Australia is no exception to this when it comes to the treatment of the indigenous peoples of the country – Aboriginal Australians.

Many Australians have been and are embarrassed and ashamed by the recent uncovering of racism and intolerance and are extremely dissatisfied with where they have been left by our government. In not responding constructively to the truths brought before the nation there has been no closure on these matters. The unfinished business has remained unfinished.

We cannot go forward without a sense of pride in our capacity to have settled the dark deeds of our past without knowing we have built a secure foundation for a new relationship for the future. We have to solve our problems at home but the interest of the international community in how this is resolved from the indigenous peoples' view is needed and will happen. The hard work done by many Australians will not be in vain.

In this year of the Centenary of Federation we face an election where the mantra of the two major parties is about security. Beyond the hyperbole and spin there is a very real question of what sort of nation, what sort of security, we want. Is it to be a false security based in fear of difference and a sort of invulnerability, or a genuine security based on truth about ourselves, our history and the world.

We need to look to our prophets. Listening to or engaging in dialogue with people like Patrick Dodson and Mary Robinson offers a clear and hopeful alternative to the media grabs of George Bush or John Howard.

Australia has much to offer other countries about reconciliation as a process but it cannot make that contribution fully until it has found its own courage to resolve and reconcile with the Aboriginal people. Australia has the opportunity to do this without the use of guns and trade sanctions as we have seen in other countries. Our failure to respond to the world's oldest living culture held by its Aboriginal peoples will not only be a loss to Australia but to all the people of the planet. Patrick Dodson believes we have perhaps 10 years to ensure the survival of Aboriginal culture in Australia. It is that serious.

The model of education advocated by the peoples' movement for reconciliation and ANTaR in Australia and the Lets Talk project in a number of countries is not locked up in educational institutions but seeks to engage people where they are. It seeks to imbue the public consciousness with an alternative vision adequate to mobilise voluntary action on a national and global scale.

The focus is on the communication of ideas and information throughout the mass media, newsletters, recorded media, the internet, school curricula, major media events, study groups, and social networks of all types to energise voluntary action by people both within and outside their formal organisations in support of social transformation. It is supported by practical strategies to enhance the development of skills especially from young people who are parties to conflict.

The Sea of Hands has travelled the length and breadth of the Australian continent. It has been to Europe and featured recently at the World Conference Against Racism in Durban. Tonight it is in Soweto. It has won a number of international awards. But it should never become domesticating. Its message is liberative and needs to be redefined to meet the changing reality.

If ever there was a time to recommit ourselves to the path of reconciliation it is in this year of the Centenary of Federation when we reflect and see that the unfinished business between indigenous and other Australians diminishes us as a nation and all of us who live here.

At best, the Sea of Hands and the Bridge Walks are examples of the measurable public face of a move in Australia for a better society and a global community that has a place for first peoples and their distinctive rights. Governments come and go, assisting and diminishing the process of reconciliation. Their role is important but it is not most important. That responsibility falls to the people, and increasingly to young people.

I was recently reminded of this reality during a visit to Rwanda where we are involved in assisting with the development of a curriculum for reconciliation in the Rwandan schools.

We visited the massacre site at Gikongoro, a school where 50,000 people were killed over a three-month period. A place where couples, infants and children lay piled to the roof of room after room after room. Most of the killing was done by young people between the age of 15-19. We later visited them at a 're-training camp'. When asked what they knew of Australia one of the young boys said, "You stole the children". Their concern was not limited to what was immediately in front of them. Despite the horrors of what they had been through, had to live with and faced, their concern was for Aboriginal people a world away. And a day away. There is much wisdom to be gained from listening to the young.

The indigenous peoples of Australia have lived on the continent for more than 50,000 years. The Yawru people of the north-west region known as the Kimberley, have just passed through the season of the south east wind. The time when the desert sends its spirits to cool the waters of the Indian ocean and to welcome the salmon from the cold southern waters to their winter spawning in the tidal creeks. It is a time of great bounty and fish are salted and dried for later in the year when the tides are less generous.

The Yawru area coastal people and their culture is tied to the sea and the land that embraces it. The land and the sea are in harmony but each has its own unique function in the life of Yawru culture and law. If one is in crisis then the heart of the other becomes ill until the crisis has departed. So it is with the Aboriginal peoples and their non-indigenous brothers and sisters. So it should be for us here in Brisbane and our brothers and sisters in Afghanistan and in the boats of asylum seekers seeking refuge.

So it is with all the peoples of the planet that make up the five fingers that make up the hand of our common humanity.

There are five fingers and each of them is different.

We are forever intertwined as a result of history and humanity. Our journeys are at times parallel and not necessarily convergent. We each have our rights and responsibilities on the journey and the bounty is there for all but until there is a recognition by each of us to follow our own path while sharing the bounty of the journey Australia will forever be diminished as a nation. The world will be a less human place.

Equipped with the vision, skills and space our unfinished business will be dealt with satisfactorily. In the same way perhaps, the situation the world now faces will have to be addressed.

Until then, the movement, and the struggle continues.

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