Closing the Gap—Reconciliation

Acknowledgement of country and thanks to:

  • Aunty Agnes for the welcome

Welcoming us to country and acknowledging your ancestors and connection to this land is a very important part of our reconciliation journey.

It’s a simple yet powerful way to show respect, and a solid foundation on which to build relationships.

Thanks also to:

  • The Hon Dr Andrew Leigh MP; and
  • Adam Gilchrist AM, and our next door neighbours in Old Parliament House, the National Australia Day Council

Tribute to Dr Yunupingu

Ladies and Gentleman, just over a week ago we lost a great Australian: a song man; an educator; an Australian of the Year.

He was a man of many firsts; the first Aboriginal person from the Northern Territory to gain a university degree; the first Aboriginal school principal; the front man of the first band to mix traditional Arnhem Land song cycles with modern rock and dance music to captivate the world.

But his passing from kidney disease, which he battled in his adult life, was not a first, and sadly, something all too familiar to Aboriginal people.
His death at 56, almost 20 years below the average life expectancy of Australian men, is a stark reminder of the challenges we face to close the gaps between the first Australians and those who now, also call Australia home.

It is a reminder that, even an outstanding Australian of the Year—who has trod the world stage, and contributed in so many ways to make this country a better place—even he cannot fully escape the legacies of history.

**Health inequalities and closing the gap**

While statistical information is limited, it is estimated chronic kidney disease is over seven (7) times more prevalent in Aboriginal communities compared to the broader Australian community.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are found to be more likely to have end-stage kidney disease needing dialysis and hospitalisation.

And it is estimated Indigenous Australians are almost four (4) times as likely to die from chronic kidney disease, than non-Indigenous Australians.

This is in part due to a higher incidence of risk factors such as diabetes, high blood pressure and smoking; and higher levels of inadequate nutrition, alcohol misuse, poor living conditions and streptococcal throat and skin infections.

Of course these risk factors impact across a number of chronic diseases resulting in the unacceptable gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians.

But clinical risk factors are not the only contributor to poor health.

Access to healthcare and treatment, or lack thereof, particularly at early stages of diagnosis, often results in chronic progression of diseases leading to higher mortality rates.
This is particularly true for remote Indigenous communities where hospitals and health services can be several hundreds of kilometres away.

But it is not only the tyranny of distance that limits good health care. The attitudes and perceptions of health professionals can significantly impact on a patient.

This includes the belief of stereotypes that lead to making people wait longer, avoiding giving care, non-treatment or misdiagnosis of Indigenous patients.

Not spending as much time with patients and/or not explaining either the condition or treatment options.

Or general negative comments and looks that make patients feel unwelcome and less likely to seek medical help.

I would like to think in the 21st century that we are past these kinds of blatant discrimination, but report after report tells us a different story.

**National Reconciliation Week and racism**

Whether it’s consciously or unconsciously, our attitudes and perceptions influence our actions and behaviours.

In turn our attitudes are formed through what we have learnt, our experiences and the perceived social norms.

At the end of last month we celebrated the start of National Reconciliation Week with the theme “Let’s talk Recognition.”

The week is bookended by the anniversaries of two significant milestones in our nation’s journey towards reconciliation:

- the 1967 Referendum—our most successful referendum—where over 90% of Australians voted to allow Indigenous Australians to be counted in the census and to give the Australian Government power to make laws on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander peoples; and

- the Mabo High Court decision which recognised native title rights and finally put to rest the idea of *terra nullius* or the land belonging to no one.

It was an amazing week with nearly 700 events officially registered this year, including flash mobs; art exhibitions; forums and debates; bbqs; community days; events for every meal of the day; and lots of conversations.

Throughout the week we celebrated the successes and contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the Australian community.

And none more so than the contribution of Indigenous people to the game of Aussie Rules, with the AFL’s Indigenous Round at the start of National Reconciliation Week.

But the opening match of the round turned from a thrilling game of football to a disappointing end.

A champion of the game, who should have been celebrating a well deserved win, was filled with anger, hurt and frustration after being racial vilified—as we later discovered—by a 13 year-old Collingwood fan.

Reactions to the incident were swift.

Condemnation, universal.

Apologies were personal and unequivocal.

The next day, in his media conference responding to the incident, Adam Goodes showed why he is such a champion and leader.

Although he was distressed, he didn’t blame the young fan.

Rather he blamed the broader environment which condoned the words she used.

He expressed his concern for her welfare and graciously offered an olive branch to speak to her, and explain how and why the words she used hurt.
This was reconciliation in action.

By the end of the weekend it felt as if we had truly come a long way since 1993—when Nicky Winmar lifted his jersey to the Collingwood cheer squad who had yelled racist jibes all day, and proudly pointed to his skin.

<PAUSE>

As we all know, this was not the end of the story.

But if there is a silver-lining to be found through all of this, it is the conversations that took place in lounge rooms, in pubs, in workplaces, and around kitchen tables.

What was being called out was what Collingwood player Harry O’Brien said was “...reflective of common attitudes that we as a society face.” Referring to Australia as “...very casual with racism.”

I’m sure we have all encountered it in some form—the “harmless” joke that picks on difference; the saying we’ve always used that “doesn’t mean anything”; the constant reference to race in a negative way.

When offense is taken, how many times have you heard: “Why do you need to make a fuss?”, or “Aren’t we all the same?”, or “Stop being so sensitive.”

Racism isn’t always an angry face or a white hood, but it is ugly in whatever form it takes.

The health impacts of racism

We know that racism makes you sick—and not just in an ethical or moral sense.

I’ve already mentioned how the attitudes of healthcare professionals can impact on the delivery of medical care, but there is a significant and increasing body of evidence that links a direct pathway between the effects of racism and poorer mental and physical health.
We know that racism is a significant cause of stress for those it targets, and the relationship between stress and mental health is well documented.

According to the Co-operative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, recent studies now show that the stress caused by loss of autonomy and marginalisation, is directly related to higher levels of type 2 diabetes, immune suppression and infection, high blood pressure, stiffening of blood vessels—all indicative of metabolic syndrome—cardiovascular disease and shorter life expectancy.

Further more, U.S. studies have repeatedly found that those who believed they experienced racism on a regular basis had higher levels of cardiovascular and metabolic syndrome when other factors associated with racism such as lower socio-economic status were controlled.

This kind of ongoing stress is so often an intrinsic part of life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with little or no relief or even awareness of its existence.

Often it is just shrugged off as—“That's the way life is.”

**Historical legacies: changing the story**

At the start of my speech I paid tribute to an outstanding Australian of the Year who despite his many successes was unable to escape the legacies of history.

Of course I refer to the events of 1788 and the effects of the British colonisers.

Many of the gaps that exist today between Indigenous people and other Australians, have causal links that stretch back to this moment and its consequences.

The tone of the relationship was set and it was not an equal one.

The disregard for the people who were already on the land, and their subsequent dispossession and alienation is the original trauma—the long-term impact of which can be seen in current levels of lower
educational outcomes; lack of employment opportunity; poor health and general lower socio-economic status.

This history is what makes Australia Day controversial and difficult for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

But the history of this country is not a single story.

Despite the uneven relationship of early encounters; despite the conflict; and despite the cultural clashes; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have survived.

We are the oldest continuing living culture in the world. And while the 26th of January is seen by some as invasion day, there are many who see it as a marker of survival and to be celebrated as such.

But this is not just a black or white story.

The last 225 years are also peppered with stories of reconciliation: stories of people who came together to find ways to get along, despite their differences.

Our history tells stories of people who shared knowledge with each other and who learnt from each other.

There are examples of people who worked together and built mutual respect for each other; who embraced each other’s difference; and who stood up for each other.

It is these combined stories—the good and the bad—that tell our whole story. And it is only by sharing these stories and acknowledging their pain and their triumph that we will ever get to a place of true reconciliation.

At Reconciliation Australia our core business is to create the right environment for stronger relationships, national pride and shared prosperity for all Australians.
Stronger relationships that are built on shared knowledge and respect, are key to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples closing those gaps that still exist. They are key to creating a fairer and more equitable future.

Recognising our past history is part of strengthening our relationships and enables us to imagine a better future.

**Constitutional Recognition and the power of people**

In 2008 the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, offered an apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stolen generations.

We confronted our painful past, and allowed the healing process to begin.

As a nation, we imagined a better future together.

We now have another opportunity to right an historical wrong. To change our Constitution to acknowledge a simple but important fact about our early history: that our people have long been here.

A successful referendum with the majority of Australians saying yes would signal a new intent amongst everyday Australians.

A new intent to live together in this land with mutual respect.

A new intent to put behind us the divisions and exclusions of history.

A new intent to find the best in each other, and ourselves.

That moment is within our power as a people.

Without it, that lingering sense of separation between our cultures erodes our potential and our confidence.

It makes us less than we can be.

But we have a chance to make things equal, and fair and just.

Formal recognition in our Constitution will unlock pride across all of the generations and give our young people the opportunity to grow up being recognised by all Australians.
Pride in their people and their culture.

Pride that extends far and wide.

So that all Australians—black and white—can share in this rich heritage of ours.

Recognising the unique place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has enormous practical implications.

It is the basis on which people can take control of their own lives.

It provides the only real basis for lasting reconciliation.

In modernising our Constitution we also need to remove racial discrimination from our highest document, so that future generations don’t have to re-live the exclusions of history.

That means removing elements like Section 25, which still—yes, in 2013—says the States can ban a whole race of people from voting.

Removing those discriminatory elements will help us to turn the page to a new chapter based on the values Australia proclaims today.

Right now in our nation’s history, we have a chance to take that important next step in the reconciliation journey.

To be part of the change.

As Lowitja O'Donoghue has put it: “Constitutional recognition of the first Australians would be good not only for our own heads and hearts, but also for the nation's soul.”

Constitutional recognition of the first Australians would unite our nation as never before. That new sense of unity would be an inspired gift to future generations.

**Conclusion**

As we travel along this road towards a better future there are many challenges that will continue to confront us: as individuals; as communities; and as a nation.
But I believe we have built strong foundations from which to repair our relationship and in doing so we have created a more robust one.

Every story shared, every conversation is contributing to reconciliation.

Every examination of our attitudes and perceptions is contributing to our understanding of each other.

It is up to each of us to do our part.

Only by working together, will we create a nation where everyone is afforded equal opportunities—and is proud of its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage.

I believe this is the sign of a modern and mature nation.

In closing, I ask you to imagine a day when all Australians are treated equally, a day when we can proudly, and confidently say we live in the land of the ‘fair go’.

To me, this is what Australia Day is all about.

Thank you.