

8 July 2016

Mr Brian Wilson
Community Services Directorate
Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
oatsia@act.gov.au

Dear Mr Wilson,

Re: Comments on the ACT Government's proposal for a permanent Reconciliation Day to commence in 2017

Thank you for the invitation from Minister Chris Bourke seeking Reconciliation Australia's views on the ACT Government's proposal to replace the Family and Community Day or the Queen's Birthday public holiday with a permanent Reconciliation Day to commence in 2017.

As the national organisation promoting reconciliation between the broader community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Reconciliation Australia seeks to help build an Australia that is reconciled, just and equitable for all. A key step in achieving this vision is to foster a shared national identity that unites all Australians. Measures such as this proposal, that value and recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage as a proud part of a shared national identity, are unifying, and work to advance reconciliation in our nation. As such, Reconciliation Australia welcomes Minister Bourke's proposal and offers the following views and comments:

1. Reconciliation Australia supports the concept of a Reconciliation Day public holiday.
2. Reconciliation Australia also supports further proposed measures to engage local communities and emphasises the importance of an extensive and unifying community consultation process.
3. In identifying a suitable date to implement a Reconciliation Day, Reconciliation Australia asks the ACT Government to consider several key components surrounding the practicality of this public holiday.

Reconciliation Australia supports the concept of a Reconciliation Day

Reconciliation Australia supports a Reconciliation Day public holiday as an important way to foster a shared identity and unity within the ACT community. This shared identity should be one that values and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage. The day would be an opportunity to embody values that are important to the wider Australian community and that are significant to the journey of reconciliation; particularly the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians, respect for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and unity. Furthermore, Reconciliation Australia is in full support of a public holiday that celebrates the diverse cultures and contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the ACT.

Reconciliation Australia's inaugural *State of Reconciliation in Australia* Report demonstrates that there is much goodwill for reconciliation and the wider Australian community is eager to do more. Key findings of the Report show that:

- Almost all Australians (86 per cent) believe the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians is important.
- Most Australians (72 per cent) believe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are important to Australia's national identity.
- Only a small portion of Australians (39 per cent) believe they have a high knowledge of the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia; but,
- Most Australians (83 per cent) believe it is important to know more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

However, the Report also finds that:

- The level of contact and interaction between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians is low.
- Whilst many Australians (44 per cent) want to support reconciliation, most don't know how (76 per cent).
- Australians are divided on the nature and extent of the effect of past wrongs on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

This evidence highlights the schism that exists between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians in understanding how historical injustices have shaped the current circumstances many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face. It also highlights the goodwill towards reconciliation that exists across the Australian community and Australians' desire to learn more and contribute to reconciliation. Based on this evidence there is clearly a case for providing the wider Australian community with more opportunities to grow their knowledge, understanding and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through a Reconciliation Day public holiday.

Evidence from Reconciliation Australia's *Australian Reconciliation Barometer* also shows that 53 per cent of the general population and 74 per cent of First Australians are in favour of making Mabo Day (June 3) a day of national significance.¹ These statistics indicate that the community would most likely be accepting of a public holiday valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and history. Given that most Australians want to do more to support reconciliation but don't know how, a public education campaign supporting Reconciliation Day would be an ideal tool to promote substantial activities of reconciliation that the public may engage with on the public holiday. A Reconciliation Day public holiday in the ACT would be a powerful and practical way of providing the ACT community with the opportunity to do more towards reconciliation.

Furthermore, more than 60 workplaces throughout the ACT currently have a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) in place. This is combined with 40 early learning services and schools that have engaged with Reconciliation Australia's Narragunnawali program; a program developed

¹ *The State of Reconciliation in Australia*, Reconciliation Australia.

for early learning services and schools to promote reconciliation from an early age. These numbers highlight the increasing support within the ACT community for reconciliation. A Reconciliation Day public holiday would be an opportunity to build on these positive trends in workplaces and schools across the ACT community and extend the opportunity to contribute to reconciliation to new sectors of the community.

The importance of an extensive community consultation process

Reconciliation Australia supports further proposed measures to engage local communities and emphasises the importance of an extensive and unifying community consultation process to establish the public holiday.

According to the *2014 Australian Reconciliation Barometer*, 61 per cent of the general community believe that they have no to fairly low levels of knowledge about the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia (compared with 27 per cent of Indigenous respondents). Furthermore, 70 per cent of the general community claim to have no to fairly low levels of knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures (compared to 34 per cent of Indigenous respondents). Given the current disparity in community understanding, there is risk of further division occurring if the process to establish the public holiday does not unify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people on a common understanding of the meaning behind the day. Consensus can only be achieved through a vigorous consultation process that builds relationships between ACT Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous communities.

Reconciliation Australia firmly believes that it is essential to gain the support of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community before implementing a Reconciliation Day public holiday. Extensive consultation with the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body and the United Ngunnawal Elders Council as well as other diverse community groups is recommended. We also recommend that the Government liaise extensively with the Canberra business community to establish their support for the proposal. There must be strong levels of engagement with the general public to ensure that a Reconciliation Day public holiday is not only accepted but embraced by the whole community.

Reconciliation Australia acknowledges the significance of establishing Reconciliation Day in 2017, being the 50th Anniversary of the 1967 referendum. It is felt, however, that the need for thorough consultation with the community should be prioritised ahead of meeting any specific deadline. The process to establish Reconciliation Day has the potential to create division if the views of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous community members are not meaningfully engaged with and considered. Done well, there is the potential to generate greater unity as a process of reconciliation itself.

The practicality of a Reconciliation Day

Community engagement about creating a Reconciliation Day public holiday and building community support and consensus are the critical concerns for Reconciliation Australia. Our view is that the practicalities of creating a Reconciliation Day public holiday must be based on community support and consensus. In considering an appropriate date for a Reconciliation

Day public holiday, however, Reconciliation Australia offers the following initial comments on the proposed scenarios for consideration.

Replacing the Queen's Birthday

Reconciliation Australia views replacing the Queen's Birthday public holiday as the most contentious option out of the two proposed public holidays to change. Replacing the Queen's Birthday public holiday would put Canberra at odds with a majority of other Australian states who would most likely maintain the public holiday. While it is arguable that Australians no longer engage with what the Queen's Birthday public holiday typically represents, removing the Queen's Birthday public holiday also has the potential to polarise the community, particularly with those in support of the monarchy. This result would be at odds with the purpose of Reconciliation Day; to achieve greater unity.

Replacing Family and Community Day

Reconciliation Australia views Family and Community Day as the optimal public holiday to replace. Given that the Family and Community Day public holiday is a day for people to spend with their family and friends, there is little reason why these values cannot still be embraced under a Reconciliation Day, with the addition of enhancing unity and reconciliation within the community. Reconciliation Australia considers the optimal date for Reconciliation Day to be either during National Reconciliation Week or another culturally significant date to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and that may be unique to the ACT.

Reconciliation is a journey between both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians that is far from complete. Establishing a public holiday that promotes positive steps towards reconciliation and provides the opportunity for people to connect would be a significant milestone on our nation's reconciliation journey. The importance of strong community consultation is paramount if a Reconciliation Day public holiday is to be valued and celebrated with its intended meaning.

The creation of a Reconciliation Day public holiday would be an important act for the ACT and a significant, nation-leading step towards creating a reconciled, just and equitable Australia. Reconciliation Australia commends the ACT Government for putting this proposal forward and we would be happy to provide any further assistance.

Yours sincerely



Karen Mundine
Acting CEO
Reconciliation Australia