



RECONCILIATION
AUSTRALIA

2019 National RAP Conference Fred Chaney's Keynote Speech – Looking Back 24 October 2019

My interest in reconciliation long predates the use of that term to describe our attempts to deal with the relationship between First Nations people and the rest of us as well as the dealing with the disastrous social economic and cultural impact of settlement on Indigenous Australians. One of the themes of this year is truth telling. It still may be that there are many truths yet to be told but most Australians now know the bare bones of the Indigenous history of dispossession dispersal and disadvantage. I want to touch on some of that history because so much of the present is the product of the past. Most of the unfinished business of reconciliation flows from history. The need for RAPs is a product of that history.

As a child in the nineteen forties and fifties I was educated about the courage and endurance of the explorers and the settlers who followed them. As a child born in the second World War I was aware of the stories of the bravery of our troops. Having lost a grandfather in WW 1 and having a father decorated for brave conduct in WW 2 I was early conscious of the bravery of Australians at war, of our Empire connections and of my status then as a British subject. These parts of our past still matter to me. My commitment to Australia, its democracy, to equal citizenship, to fairness, to individual liberty and much else flow from what has gone before. They also flow from what I knew about my grandparents and saw in my parents.

I mention these things just to emphasise that the past matters and that what we know about it colours what we believe and what we do. It is impossible to understand the need for RAPs now without an understanding of where we have come from and how we got to 2019. We need more than a snapshot in time. We need to see the moving picture of what is happening, how we are getting from where we have been to where we are now and to where we need to be.

I first became conscious of the fact that my version of Australia and its history was partial and incomplete in 1956 when I was in year 11 and stayed on a farm where I first an Aboriginal person. She was a domestic servant, well treated but in a subtle way I did not fully comprehend or understand, differently treated. It was a tiny opening of a door that swung open wider over the next few years.

Here is how I have described what I came to see and began to understand after that first meeting.

“My teenage memories of the position of the Aboriginal people in my state of Western Australia in the 1950s and 60s remain sharp. It is of them being:

excluded from the normal benefits of being Australian.
denied the vote and other civil liberties afforded generally to others
confined to reserves living in humpies tin sheds and car bodies



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casually prostituted and abused
denied education and employment
treated with overt contempt beyond the racism still see today.”

The recent films about the treatment of the great AFL footballer and Australian of the Year, Adam Goodes, are painful reminders of the persistence of racism, much as we seem to hate having it drawn to our attention.

We were supposed to be decent and to believe in the equality of our fellow Australians. But for some strange reason our egalitarianism and mateship did not apply to Indigenous people

What I saw as a school student in the 1950s then as university student was the frequent denial of decent treatment and equality of citizenship for Indigenous people. I particularly mention the idea we are all equal, the equality of citizenship, because that important idea is part of why constitutional recognition is contentious to some of our fellow Australians yet it was also the principle that drove many of the positive changes in the legal position of Aboriginals.

This audience is likely to be very aware of the continuing disadvantage of Indigenous Australians. But as a reminder that change is possible Australia today is a much better place for Indigenous Australians than the Australia of my youth. Even a partial list of the changes is a reminder change is possible.

- Voting rights were legislated in 1962
- The overwhelming vote for the 1967 referendum which whatever its technical achievements was really about the nation agreeing to equal citizenship.
- The Commonwealth acceptance of the need to support Indigenous culture and connection to land and the need for special services in the 1972 (pre Whitlam) budget,
- The exposure of the unique Aboriginal connection to land in the Gove Land case in 1972 leading to the Woodward Enquiries and all Party support for Land Rights legislation in 1976,
- All party support for the Racial Discrimination Act in 1975,
- Implementation of Land Rights legislation in South Australia and New South Wales, more modestly in Queensland and Victoria during the 1980s.”

All of these changes pre date the formal Reconciliation movement which began in 1990 as one of the responses to the Deaths in Custody Royal Commission. That Royal Commission was another wake up call.

The 1990s were an important time of change.

- In 1991 the decade of Reconciliation commenced under the leadership of the CAR.



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- In 1992 the High Court decision in Mabo (2) cemented in recognition of Indigenous collective rights. Attempts to abolish native title were rebuffed by the High Court.
- In 1993 the Native Title Act was passed and the often slow and arduous process of getting recognition commenced. It is worth noting that at first the mining industry, lead by Hugh Morgan of WMC violently campaigned against native title no doubt encouraged by the successful campaign against Land Rights in the 1980s. However the power of the Mabo decision that changed the native title holders from applicants to stakeholders worked its magic.
- In 1995 Leon Davis, CEO of Rio Tinto, made a landmark speech promising to work with native title. That was the beginning of a revolution that started with the great mining companies and spread through Australia's biggest commercial enterprises. Corporate Australia became a key recruiting ground for and an instrument of change.

I must declare an interest here. Our work with Indigenous students in State schools in the Graham (Polly) Farmer Foundation has been supported for ¼ century by RTIO and BHP.

So the 90' were a productive period and the word reconciliation became the banner under which Australia tackled the relationships between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians and Indigenous disadvantage. Many corporations and institutions published statements of reconciliation and many individuals became involved in the movement and remain involved today.

But while many Indigenous people applauded the sentiments they asked the critical question, "but when will things be different?" Even on the joyous and celebratory days of the bridge walks in 2000 I heard that question asked in the midst of the celebrating.

That is one of the critical questions that underly the idea of RAPs. How do you go from good words into good actions? Another critical point is that we can't expect reconciliation to come from top down government interventions important as governments are to closing the gaps and moulding community views.

Let me say something about the second point, what governments can do and what they can't do.

Governments are vital to reconciliation. What they and only they can do is the ensure that Indigenous Australians have the full menu of civil and political rights and liberties. Only they and their parliaments can legislate about racial discrimination, voting rights and so on. They control and resource schools, hospitals, public amenities, courts, prisons, transfer payments to the old the sick the unemployed and the disabled. All of these functions impinge on the circumstances of Indigenous as well as non Indigenous Australians. We will never close the gaps if governments don't service Indigenous as well as non Indigenous people.



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But governments of necessity do most of these things impersonally, blind to individual circumstances and without love. Health education and employment require more than an allocation of resources. They require a supportive environment, they all require nurture and I would say love. Governments don't do nurture and love. They at best treat citizens equally which precludes responding to individual difference.

It is the non government sector and the community that can bring a non bureaucratic care driven approach. It is remarkable what some RAP bodies have shown can be done. Companies like BHP, Rio, Wesfarmers including Coles, have achieved remarkable employment growth in relatively short order. They achieve employment and procurement growth by making it happen by whatever it takes. Some of this has happened without the support of a RAP, usually driven by committed CEOs or other senior personnel. But RAPs are a means of keeping efforts on track and improving.

Corporations are used to setting end targets and then marshalling the whole range of resources needed to meet their targets. They are used to managing complexity and cutting across internal silos. Public servants are not authorised to respond to subjectivity. Their accountabilities to parliaments, to auditors and to anti corruption bodies are necessarily rules based. You cannot wholly remove the bureaucratic silos that inhibit whole of government approaches

So we need whole of community responses to achieve reconciliation. Governments have their essential roles as do all of us in the non government sectors and all of us as individuals.

RAPs are as essential to non Government organisations as policies on human resources, safety, quality, and environmental management. If, you really want to play your part consistently and well you write down what you are trying to do and how you are going to go about it.

This audience does not need educating on the ascending levels of RAPs, on the explosive growth in their adoption, on the increasing public role RAP organisations are playing in supporting Indigenous aspirations including the triple demands of the Uluru Statement from the Heart. A constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament, a Makarrata Commission and truth telling. It does not need education on importance of the growth of procurement from Indigenous business, on the need to settle the relationships. It does not need educating on the relevance of respectful relationships to achieving change. What I hope this audience can do is to cement in the commitments so many elements of the Australian community have made, continue to grow those commitments, and maintain a commitment to continuous improvement explicit in the ladder of RAP categories.

When I was young it seemed almost every hand was turned against Indigenous wellbeing, the enemies were everywhere. Now RAPs tell us the allies are everywhere. Part of our role as non-Indigenous is to get the message out to our Indigenous fellow Australians that they have a lot of allies who have ears as well as voices and that they can count on us to walk with them.