

RECONCILIATION – BEYOND POLITICIANS

On Sunday, Western Australians will walk across a bridge – the Causeway – and then beyond. Be there if you can. It should be a great moment in our State's history.

It marks a moment of transition - an end and a beginning. It is the end of the 10 year life of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation through which reconciliation has become a living, often painful and always rich movement. And it is the beginning of the next phase – where we try to make that movement really mean something in the daily lives of Western Australians, Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal alike.

Reconciliation is, at its essence, a process of building trust after wrong-doing. The process is pretty simple. First, you talk and listen. Then, you come to understand what has happened, and sincerely acknowledge the wrongs that have occurred. Finally you work together to repair the damage caused by those wrongs.

It is simple, but not easy. In fact, it is really tough work. Tough for us as individuals, and tough for us as a nation. As we ready ourselves to walk across the Bridge it is a good moment to ask, "how far have we come?"

Political stagnation

At the political level it is hard to see progress. Trust between our State and Federal governments and Aboriginal leaders is probably lower now than it was 10 years ago. There are three reasons for this: Firstly, there is a misunderstanding of what reconciliation actually means. Our political leaders like to speak of "practical reconciliation" – programs aimed at provision of basic services, opportunities and rights. But provision of these, especially to the most dispossessed and disadvantaged group in our society, is not reconciliation. It is, or should be, the core business of any modern democracy. To paint it as something other than the basic work of government is dismissive of the rights of citizenship that Aboriginal people should enjoy.

Secondly, as the rights of Aboriginal people have come to be recognised and asserted (through royal commissions, high court decisions and human rights inquiries) governments have been less than enthusiastic in protecting or promoting those rights, which, again, makes Aboriginal people appear to be, somehow, "outsiders" in their own land.

Thirdly, there is the political inability, or at least unwillingness, to genuinely engage in the transformative process of spiritual and emotional reconciliation – the trust building of the human heart. Now this latter may not be the politicians' fault. Unlike the protection of rights, or the provision of services and opportunities, perhaps reconciliation is not within their capacity. The de-humanising process of centralised politics – the factions, the ten second grabs and the adversarial debate – is unlikely to ignite real leadership of spirit and heart. Perhaps we should stop expecting this of politicians. We can, of course, ask that they resource the process, because it is fundamental to our social well-being. But leadership in a matter of heart and spirit such as reconciliation – perhaps this is not their business. Perhaps it is ours – all of ours.

Let the people lead

So let's take responsibility for it. Let's stop asking politicians to lead the process of reconciliation and simply ask them to listen. Ask them, even, to follow the lead of the people.

On Sunday, if you're there, you could be part of that new sense of people's leadership that is growing in the movement toward reconciliation. In the last 10 years, the seeds of a profound transformation have been planted. We may not see much but dirt yet, but the seeds are there, and they're taking root. In reconciliation groups around the state, in Local Councils making dramatic changes, in schools and workplaces and neighbourhoods, in Aboriginal people coming to believe that the wider communities actually gives a damn, the seeds are ready to grow if we will only nourish them.

In my work in reconciliation I am often overwhelmed by the generosity, the courage and the commitment that people in local communities are displaying through the process of reconciliation. This is where the hope and the future lies.

Objections

Of course there are many people who object to reconciliation and they fall into two broad groups. The first group believe that it is not necessary – that the wrongs did not occur, or that they have nothing to do with us, or that trust and healing are not important elements in our society. To this group we need to say “Think what you like – but please don’t stand in the way of those who do want to do the work of reconciliation. Trust building – and the justice that it depends on – is not dangerous or subversive. It will not cost you your backyard or your income or even your pride. It is a simple human process. It makes our lives richer, our communities safer and our nation greater. Let us get on with it without a barrage of bitterness and criticism.”

The second group object that “reconciliation” can be used to distract us from justice. Genuine reconciliation is simply impossible without justice. But there is no doubt that a term like reconciliation can be used as a facade to whitewash the truth. So this group, unlike the first, is fundamentally important to the genuine reconciliation process. They monitor the commitment to justice that reconciliation must, eventually, be built on. The criticisms of these people toward the reconciliation process are not “anti-reconciliation” as some try to paint them. They are essential to its long term success.

Walking forward together

The walk on Sunday is a moment where we come together to take the next step. Acknowledging all the pain and the fear, the mistrust and the hurt, the ignorance and arrogance, the conflict and injustice we walk to find the courage and hope to carry us forward. It is a moment where we can say, with our bodies: “I want to be part of the healing”. “I want to begin the trust building”. “I want my community and my nation to proudly and courageously right the wrongs”. And, perhaps most importantly, “I want to celebrate what we can become”

See you there.

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