

History of Reconciliation

Excerpt from Reconciliation Australia's website: <http://www.reconciliation.org.au/home/reconciliation-resources/significant-events---anniversaries/history-of-reconciliation>

“Introduction

Britain established a colony at Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788 without consent and without negotiating with the original inhabitants. In the following decades, other colonies were established around the continent to which British convicts were exported and free settlers and emancipists were granted title to lands in the colonies and surrounding areas.

In the process of colonization, Aboriginal people were dispossessed and displaced from their lands, forced into reservations and killed in battles for their land, by hunting parties and the poisoning of waterholes. Furthermore, many died from introduced diseases such as small pox. In the second half of the 19th Century, Torres Strait Islanders also lost their independence when the Queensland Government annexed the Torres Strait Islanders. Many were killed by diseases introduced by the British colonisers.

As numbers declined and traditional lifestyles and cultures were disrupted, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples become increasingly marginalised. Many were moved, often forcibly, to missions or government reserves. Some became fringe dwellers on the outskirts of cities and towns, while others managed to earn a meagre living in the casual workforce of rural and outback Australia. They were no longer allowed to live as they had done for tens of thousands of years, but neither were they able to become equal partners and citizens in the wider society that had taken their land.

Today, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are among the most disadvantaged people in Australian society and many of their problems stem directly from colonisation, dispossession from their lands, and forced marginalisation, depriving them of the opportunities that are taken for granted by other Australian citizens.

Nevertheless, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have fought for their rights and to maintain their cultures. More than 200 years after the first British settlement in Sydney, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people celebrate their survival spiritually, physically and culturally.

Ever since the early days of colonisation and settlement, many non-Indigenous people have argued against the harsh treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and called for recognition of their rights.

Over the last 30 years, the need to address the disadvantages experienced by Indigenous peoples has become a mainstream concern for Australians, many of whom are now working in their communities and workplaces to help bring about reconciliation.

Early Years of the Reconciliation Movement

In the decade of public debate leading up to Federation in 1901, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were largely ignored and were not involved in any of the conventions and

consultations. As the 'Founding Fathers' hammered out a draft Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia, they discussed Aboriginal people only to:

- *Specifically deny the new Commonwealth Parliament the power to make laws for Aboriginal people; and*
- *Exclude the necessity to count them in the census.*

These omissions reflected that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples did not enjoy the same rights, responsibilities and benefits of other Australian citizens and highlighted their exclusion from Australian society more generally.

From the time of Federation it took two thirds of a century for Australians to recognise that the 1901 Constitution had to be changed to give the Commonwealth parliament the power to make laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and to ensure that they would be counted in the census.

It took a 10-year long campaign by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their supporters before both sides of the Parliament agreed that a referendum should be held to ask the Australian public whether the Constitution should be changed in these ways. In the historic referendum of 27 May 1967, more than 90 percent of eligible voters supported the proposed changes, by far the most overwhelming 'Yes' vote at an Australian referendum.

The Freedom Ride through north-western NSW in 1965 had exposed to the public the racial discrimination experienced by Aboriginal people and the poverty and degradation of their living conditions. In 1966, Vincent Lingiari led the Gurindji people in a walk-off and strike from the Wave Hill cattle station in the Northern Territory, owned by Britain's Lord Vestey. The Gurindji's initial protest was over wages and living conditions but soon became a claim for the return of their traditional lands. The effects of these and other similar events rippled across the nation, raising the nation's awareness and stimulating movements for the recognition of rights of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The years following the Freedom Ride and the 1967 Referendum saw the growth and development of these movements and of the autonomous organisations of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. For example, in 1972, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was established on the lawns in front of Parliament House in Canberra.

The return of some of the Gurindji people's traditional lands in 1975, nine years after the Wave Hill strike, by then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, marked a sign of hope for other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that their land rights too would be recognised. In 1976, the Government led by Malcolm Fraser put legislation through the Federal Parliament which became the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976, the first land rights legislation in Australia.

The Formalisation of the Reconciliation Process

The 1991 Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody explained that the Indigenous disadvantage was a product of the history of dispossession. This had begun the cycle of poverty, poor health and limited education that had trapped Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in an existence very different from most other Australians.

For these reasons, the Royal Commission recommended that all political leaders and their parties recognise that reconciliation between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in Australia must be achieved if community division, discord and injustice to Indigenous people were to be avoided.

Soon after, the Commonwealth Parliament voted unanimously to establish the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation with the object of promoting a process of reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider Australian community. The Parliament noted that there had been no formal process of reconciliation to date, and that it was “most desirable that there be such a reconciliation” by the year 2001, the centenary of Federation. This was the beginning of a formal process of reconciliation.

Following ten years of guiding the formal reconciliation process, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation established Reconciliation Australia as the non-government, not-for-profit foundation to continue the national focus for reconciliation.

Reconciliation Australia works with business, government and individual Australians to bring about change. We identify and promote examples of reconciliation in action so that others can share their good ideas and add their support. Furthermore, we independently monitor Australia’s progress towards reconciliation so that government, business and the community can take on the responsibility to back up words with real commitment.

On 13 February 2008, the new Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, issued a formal apology to members of the Stolen Generations. The national apology was a transformative experience for the nation and provided a foundation for Australians to build the kind of respectful relationship that underpins reconciliation.”