

Reconciliation, Recognition and the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*: 10 years after the apology

Associate Professor Dominic O'Sullivan

It is 10 years since the Australian [parliamentary apology](#) to the stolen generations. Apology is an essential condition for reconciliation, though reconciliation is a much deeper concept still. It came into Australian political discourse in a significant way [during the 1990s](#), a decade of both shock and hope, as a [Royal Commission](#) into indigenous deaths in custody and a [National Inquiry](#) into the stolen generations brought Australian colonialism's full impact into public focus. At the same time, they recommended paths forward; ways to 'put things right'. The [Mabo](#) and [Wik](#) decisions of the High Court provided hope for fair and meaningful land rights.

The idea that parliaments should say 'sorry' to the stolen generations - children systematically removed from their families from the early 1900s until the 1970s - in order to '[breed out](#)' their aboriginality polarised policy debate. [The state and territory parliaments accepted the National Inquiry's recommendation of an apology, while the Federal parliament resisted](#). The Prime Minister John Howard argued that [the current parliament couldn't be 'sorry' for the decisions of the past](#). However, there are deeper meanings of sorrow and Howard's insistence that there should be no apology kept the issue on the public agenda.

[Reconciliation was especially encouraged](#) by the Christian churches anxious to correct the consequences of their own contributions to the stolen generations practice and anxious to bring a Christian message of hope into public discourse. The sacramental notion of reconciliation as correcting a broken relationship between God and the individual through sorrow, forgiveness and resolve to avoid further wrongdoing became a religious metaphor for just social and political relationships. If parliaments, communities and individuals could say 'sorry', they could be forgiven because sorrow was a solemn commitment to correct the consequences of injustice.

The test for reconciliation is high. Forgiveness is a significant expectation. It is not clear that one can ever say reconciliation has been achieved; that it is complete and need never again trouble the public

conscience. Yet just and non-colonial political relationships depend on reconciliation remaining a political aspiration, and Reconciliation Week's value is to keep that aspiration in sight.

Politics is routinely seen as the business of the state. However, reconciliation implies that the state and indigenous peoples work out the terms of their [engagement as equals](#). Perhaps as the [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#) proposes through a 'Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history'. Makarrata is significant: 'The coming together after a struggle. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination'.

Self-determination is a universal right. It belongs to indigenous peoples as much as it belongs to anyone. Under the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), it includes

the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions (Article 18).

Yet, it is the minimisation of indigenous voice at all levels of the political system that most compromises reconciliation; that perpetuates the colonial order. How that voice is admitted into the liberal democratic system is Reconciliation Week's most pressing question. It is also a question of citizenship, of who belongs to the political community and who does not. For the citizen is as Aristotle simply put it [one who deliberates](#).

There are arguments for guaranteed indigenous representation in parliaments, or as the *Uluru Statement* proposes for a constitutionally guaranteed voice to parliament. The argument that the liberal political order as it is currently constructed is just does not carry much weight among indigenous people. While the Uluru proposal has become one of partisan political party contest, public opinion polls indicate a wider belief that democracy can work better for indigenous people.

Making democracy work better is essential to reconciliation. It is important that all people have the political capacities to shape and influence the society in which they live; the capacity to lead public policy development and to test the reasonableness of the policy proposals that governments make.

The *Uluru Statement* is a simple though far reaching proposal. It is representative of a significant body of indigenous thought. If it is to be rejected, it ought to be because reasoned deliberation has produced a better, fairer more inclusive and respectful democratic model. In the absence of meaningful political voice, one cannot say that the transgressions of the past will not be repeated.