

Leadership and Aboriginal Reconciliation

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Abstract

Calls for greater leadership on the issue of Aboriginal reconciliation are often vague about what they actually mean by 'leadership'. I contend that the most appropriate lens through which to regard leadership on the issue of reconciliation is not the usual notion of leadership-as-influence, but instead the theory of 'adaptive leadership', developed by Harvard professor Ronald Heifetz. Applying these ideas to the problems of Aboriginal reconciliation, I propose four principles that might promote progress on this difficult and complex issue.

Leadership and Aboriginal Reconciliation

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The call for Australian politicians to demonstrate “leadership” on the issue of Aboriginal¹ reconciliation has been a standard critique over the past decade – particularly from those on the left of the political spectrum. Yet what might leadership *mean* in this context? Would it mean providing more funding for Aboriginal health, education and housing? Would it be devising an effective strategy for reconciliation? Would it involve providing the vision of a reconciled Australia, a goal towards which the nation can move?

One theory of leadership, initiated by Ronald Heifetz (1994), suggests that leadership entails not persuasion or vision-setting, but mobilizing people to deal with difficult problems on their own terms. Heifetz calls this process “adaptive work”. He emphasizes that leadership is an activity, not an outcome. Instead of imposing answers, leadership involves making people take ownership of a problem, and devise a solution themselves.

This paper argues that adaptive leadership offers valuable insights to help understand Aboriginal reconciliation in Australia. The adaptive work of reconciliation is not the responsibility of elected politicians and senior members of the Aboriginal community – although these people may help. More controversially, it contends that the core work of reconciliation is not improving the standard of living of Aboriginal people, but changing

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¹ Throughout, “Aboriginal” includes Torres Strait Islanders.

the attitudes of white Australia.² Remediating the appalling disparities in health and education may prove an important precondition for reconciliation, and may also be an outcome of the reconciliation process. But it should not be mistaken for the adaptive work of reconciliation, which involves forging stronger interpersonal relations and creating a better sense of understanding between black and white Australians.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 1 outlines the theory of adaptive leadership. Section 2 provides a brief history of reconciliation. Section 3 addresses what adaptive leadership might mean in the context of reconciliation. Section 4 concludes.

1. The theory of adaptive leadership

The past two decades have seen an explosion of books on the topic of leadership, yet surprisingly little discussion about what constitutes leadership. According to Rost (1991), around two-thirds of the books published on leadership in the 1980s had no definition of leadership whatsoever – either on the basis that leadership was so important that it did not need to be stated, or that leadership was impossible to define.

Of those scholars who have sought to define leadership, most have focused on the notions of leadership as influence, leadership as management, and leadership as achieving the goals of an organization. Typical definitions of leadership include the following:

² In this paper, the term “black” refers to indigenous Australians, and the term “white” to non-indigenous Australians (including those, like Asian-Australians, whose skin is not pale). In this sense, I am using “white” and “black” as many Aboriginal people use the terms “whitefella” and “blackfella”.

- “Leadership is the behaviour of an individual when he is directing the activities of a group toward a shared goal.”(Hemphill & Coons 1957, 7)
- “Leadership is the process of influencing the activities of an organized group toward goal achievement”(Rauch & Behling 1984, 46)
- “Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes” (Rost 1991, 102)
- “The leader is one who mobilizes others to a goal shared by leader and followers... [Leadership is] mobilization toward a common good” (Wills 1994)
- “A leader is an individual (or, rarely, a set of individuals) who significantly affects the thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviours of a significant number.”
(Gardner 1995)

Common debates in the leadership literature are whether management and leadership ought to be distinguished, how leaders influence followers, and what traits are required to be a leader. Heifetz, however, offers a completely different paradigm. In his view, leadership-as-influence “implicitly promotes influence as an orienting value, perpetuating a confusion between means and ends” (1994, 18).

In *Leadership without Easy Answers*, Heifetz presents his theory of adaptive leadership. Several new concepts are central to understanding this theory. There must be a “problematic reality” – a state of affairs that can only be solved by changing the opinions

of a particular group of people.³ Given that problematic reality, leadership must take place through “adaptive work”, in which people are forced to confront issues that they have previously avoided dealing with, and hence come to change their attitudes. The task of the person exercising leadership is to create an environment in which individuals’ ideas can evolve. Heifetz likens this environment to a pressure cooker. Too cold, and people will have no incentive to change their attitudes. Too hot, and they will remove themselves from the situation.

Heifetz distinguishes adaptive work from what he calls “technical work” – mechanical decisions that do not require systemic change. Technical work might include coordinating disaster relief after a flood, providing medical care to an injured person, or deciding whether a particular tax policy will stimulate the economy. Such work is not by any means unimportant, but it needs to be separated from the work of allowing a group to think more deeply about their beliefs.

One example of adaptive work that Heifetz gives is the actions taken by the head of the US Environmental Protection Agency, William Ruckelshaus when confronted in 1983 with a high-polluting copper plant in Tacoma, Washington (1994, 88-95).

Environmentalists were urging the EPA to impose tougher standards on the plant, since its emissions were potentially carcinogenic. But many local residents objected, arguing that higher standards would force the plant to close, increasing unemployment in a region already hard-hit by the recession.

³ One difficulty with Heifetz’s theory, however, is that it presumes that it will be self-evident when a problematic reality exists. Postmodernists might counter that there can be no absolute notion of what constitutes a problematic reality.

Rather than imposing his decision on the community of Tacoma, Ruckelshaus determined that local residents would shape the outcome. Through a series of workshops and public meetings, the community eventually came to the decision that the plant should be shut down. Yet the most important aspect of the process was that residents came to realize that the town's economic base needed to be diversified. In adaptive leadership terms, it was this "problematic reality" that underlay the environment versus jobs conflict.

Another example of adaptive work that Heifetz presents involves the actions of President Lyndon Johnson in relation to the desegregation marchers in Alabama (1994, 132-38). In 1964, Governor George Wallace, an arch-segregationist, had ordered police to attack unarmed marchers calling for equal voting rights for African Americans. Several months later, Reverend Martin Luther King organized another march. Johnson was faced with impassioned calls from civil rights activists to send in federal troops, and equally fierce demands from southern politicians to stay out. Instead of acting, he held steady. Over the following few days, Wallace came to realize that his troops would be unable to maintain law and order. By forcing Wallace to deal with the problem himself, Johnson forced him to adapt his anti-federal rhetoric: in the end, Wallace himself requested that Johnson call in the National Guard.

Heifetz distinguishes between leadership, the process of bringing a group to do adaptive work, and authority, the exercise of formal power. Hence a politician, a bureaucrat, or an army sergeant may exercise formal authority, but he or she will not necessarily exert

leadership. Likewise, individuals without authority may nonetheless exercise leadership – Heifetz gives examples of everyday people who have forced groups to confront problematic realities, and hence do adaptive work.

2. History

Aboriginal settlement in Australia dates back between 40,000 and 60,000 years, in contrast to British settlement, which has endured for a comparatively brief 213 years. Until the 1970s, the conventional view of black-white relations in the early years of the colony was that the Aboriginal people had mounted little resistance (Hancock 1930; Ward 1975, 25-26; Blainey 1966, 132). Some historians went further, arguing that this was one of the reasons why no treaty was negotiated with the indigenous people, as was the case with New Zealand's Treaty of Waitangi (Tatz 1972).

It has only been in the past thirty years that this view of history has been repudiated, with historians such as C.D Rowley (1972), Raymond Evans (1975), Kenneth Maddock (1975) and Henry Reynolds (1981) uncovering the ongoing violence between blacks and whites that characterized early Australia.⁴

The killing began early. In 1790, after Aboriginals had speared one of his servants, Governor Arthur Phillip called for a punitive raid on the offending tribe (Knightley 2001, 108). Over the following 150 years, Australia's Aboriginal population declined from around 300,000 to an estimated 75,000. Some died as a result of introduced diseases,

⁴ On this substantial shift in Australian historiography, see Evans (1975) and Espák (2000).

such as smallpox and tuberculosis, but many were murdered by settlers (Markus 1994, 34-54). Attacks by Aboriginal people on white settlements were often responded to by hunting parties. This continued until the early-twentieth century. Reynolds (1999, 107-08) quotes from an account of one such attack, published pseudonymously in 1907 in a major metropolitan newspaper, the *Townsville Herald*:

“It was estimated that over 150 myalls [Aboriginal people] bit the dust that morning, and unfortunately many women and children shared the same fate. In that wild, yelling, rushing mob, it was hard to avoid shooting the women and babies and there were men in that mob of whites who would ruthlessly destroy anything possessing a black hide.... It may appear cold-blooded murder to some to wipe out a whole camp for killing, perhaps a couple of bullocks, but then each member of the tribe must be held equally guilty, and therefore, it would be impossible to discriminate.... The writer never held a man guilty of murder who wiped out a nigger. They should be classed with the black snake and death adder, and treated accordingly.”

The violence was not one-sided. Aboriginal people, forced off their land, employed guerrilla tactics – taking advantage of their superior knowledge of local conditions to mount surprise attacks on unwary settlers. Many whites lived in a state of perpetual suspense, and in particular, “terror of the night” (Reynolds 1999, 143). Thus several contemporary historians have argued convincingly that black-white relations in frontier Australia are properly described as a state of “war” (Reynolds 1999, 142-51; Knightley

2001, 111). But this depiction of events remains controversial. Politicians, bureaucrats and educators continue to deny that white settlers “invaded” Australia (Reynolds 1999, 153-67).

During the first half of the twentieth century, government policies towards Aboriginal people prevented them from voting, and restricted where they could work and live. Discrimination was entrenched not only in legislation, but also in the Constitution, which provided until 1967 that Aboriginal people should not be counted in the census. Most government officials expected the Aboriginal people to die out, and hence embarked upon a policy of assimilation – through which Aboriginal children were taken from their parents and placed in foster homes. Over the period 1910-70, between 20,000 and 25,000 Aboriginal children – perhaps 1 in 10 – were separated from their parents (Manne 2001, 27). They came to be known as the “stolen generations”.

Changes in Australia’s racial policies came slowly. In 1965, Charles Perkins led the “Freedom Ride” - a busload of 30 students from the University of Sydney who travelled to rural New South Wales, exposing racial segregation in swimming pools, restaurants and theatres – and focusing international media attention on racism in Australia (Shoemaker 1989; Read 1990). The following year, a group of Aboriginal stockmen at Wave Hill cattle station went on strike, and were supported by Aboriginal communities and unions nationwide (Markus 1994).

With the election of the Whitlam Labor Government in 1972, a federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs was established, and organizations to deal with Aboriginal housing, welfare and legal services were created. In 1975, at a ceremony for the handing back of land to the Gurindji people, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam symbolically poured sand into the hands of Aboriginal elder Vincent Lingiari. The following year, in a process set in train by the Whitlam Government and concluded by the Fraser Government, land rights legislation was enacted for the Northern Territory, allowing large swathes of land to be returned to their Aboriginal owners.

Over the past two decades, the public debate over black-white relations in Australia has centred around five issues – land ownership, the stolen generations, living standards, a treaty, and interpersonal reconciliation.

Land ownership In the early and mid 1990s, land ownership was the most prominent of these. With only a few exceptions, state governments in the 1980s were reluctant to grant land rights to Aboriginal peoples. This situation was transformed with the High Court's 1992 *Mabo* decision⁵, which granted native title to Aboriginal groups who could show a continuing link to the land. In the 1996 *Wik* case⁶, the High Court further held that native title could survive the grant of pastoral leases, greatly extending its potential scope.⁷ Almost as important as these court decisions, however, was the federal government's decision in 1994 to establish a National Native Title Tribunal, with the explicit goal of

⁵ *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* (1992) 175 CLR 1

⁶ *Wik Peoples v Queensland* (1996) 187 CLR 1

⁷ In 2001, the High Court held that a limited form of native title rights could exist over the sea: *Commonwealth v Yarmirr* [2001] HCA 56.

providing a forum in which groups could explore ways to reach agreements about native title. Following a series of controversial amendments to the legislation governing the Tribunal in 1998, the issue of Aboriginal land ownership has become substantially less prominent in the minds of most white Australians.⁸

Stolen generations In its place has emerged the issue of the “stolen generations”. *Bringing Them Home*, the report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, was handed down in 1997. It presented damning statistics on the numbers of children separated from their families, the rates of child abuse, and their ongoing trauma; as well as the stories of some of those who had been taken from their families. The accuracy of the report was questioned by the federal government, which also rejected the suggestion that the government should formally apologize to the stolen generations. The Prime Minister, John Howard, expressed his “personal regret”, but argued that no-one should be held responsible for the actions of the past (see for eg Howard 2000b). In May 2000, large protests were organized across the nation (including 200,000 Sydneysiders who crossed the Sydney Harbour Bridge) calling on the government to say “Sorry”. Hundreds of thousands of Australians signed “Sorry Books” (Nossal 2000, 299). But although all state governments have apologized to the stolen generations, the federal government has not done so.⁹ Around half of all Australians support an apology.¹⁰

⁸ In April 1998, a national poll found that 7% of Australians rated Wik or land issue as one of the top three priorities for government. In February 1999, this fell to 1%, and in November 1999, to below 1% (Morgan 2000).

⁹ The Howard Government has argued that a formal apology could subject the government to legal claims (Donnan 2000), a suggestion that has been firmly rejected by the Labor Opposition (Melham 2000).

¹⁰ A 1997 poll found that 57% agreed generally with the federal government’s decision and reason to not formally apologize to the Aboriginal community, while 37% disagreed, with 6% undecided (Roy Morgan

Living standards The third issue is that of living standards. Since the election of the Howard Government in 1996, this has been the aspect of indigenous affairs upon which it has focused most attention. Aboriginal children are less than half as likely to finish school or attend university than whites, indigenous incarceration rates are significantly higher, Aboriginal unemployment is four times the white average, and health problems, including diabetes, eye infections, and heart disease, are all substantially worse in Aboriginal communities (O'Donoghue 2000, 293-94). This has led Prime Minister John Howard to argue that “practical measures to address the profound economic and social disadvantage of many indigenous Australians are at the heart of a successful reconciliation process” (2000a, 91). Howard has termed this process “practical reconciliation”. The main criticisms of his approach have come from senior figures in the Aboriginal community, who contend that his rhetoric has not been matched by sufficient funding, and that such programs should be administered by specialist, rather than mainstream, agencies (P Dodson 2000; Clark 2000).

Treaty A fourth issue is whether indigenous and non-indigenous Australians should negotiate a treaty. In the late-1970s and early-1980s, several prominent Australians – HC (“Nugget”) Coombs, Charles Rowley, and Judith Wright – publicly advocated a treaty, or “Makaratta” between black and white Australia (Rowse 2000, 174-89). Coombs argued in 1979 that until a treaty was negotiated “our very right to be here is tainted by the

1997). A differently worded poll in June 2000 found that 43% of Australians agreed with an apology, while 49% did not agree, with 8% undecided (Newspoll 2000a). When the same question was asked in October 2000, 51% of Australians agreed with an apology, while 42% did not agree, with 7% undecided (Newspoll 2000b).

aggression against the Aborigines by which it was established” (1994, 143). In 1987, the treaty movement reached its peak when Prime Minister Bob Hawke committed the government to negotiating a “compact of understanding” with the Aboriginal people. But the issue foundered within a few years over issues of who would negotiate for each side, and what compensation might be paid – creating resentment within the Aboriginal community. In 1992, the *Mabo* decision provided an alternative solution to the issue of land ownership, removing what had been one of the principal reasons for negotiating a treaty. A poll taken in 2000 found that 45% of Australians supported the negotiation of a treaty between Aboriginal Australia and the federal government, 37% opposed it, and a substantial 18% were uncommitted – reflecting widespread uncertainty about what such a treaty would entail (Newspoll 2000a).

Interpersonal reconciliation Finally, while other issues ebbed and flowed, one of the successes of the late-1990s has been in the area of interpersonal reconciliation. In 1997, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation held the Australian Reconciliation Convention – at which it announced the formulation of a draft declaration of reconciliation. The original text of the draft declaration was produced in June 1999, and over the following year, the Council worked to consult as many Australians as possible on the text of the declaration. During 1999-2000, around 300 meetings were held in urban and regional Australia (CAR 2000, Ch 4), with the final version being presented to the Australian people in May 2000.¹¹ As part of the process, the Council encouraged the formation of local groups to discuss reconciliation, and funded small teams to travel around Australia, visiting towns and

¹¹ The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation ended its work in December 2000. The peak body working on reconciliation in Australia today is the non-profit organization, Reconciliation Australia (www.reconciliationaustralia.org).

arranging discussions on the topic of reconciliation. These meetings served not only to improve the text of the declaration, but also to provide a forum in which difficult issues relating to race could be raised by communities.¹²

3. Applying adaptive leadership to the issue of reconciliation?

Given the five issues that have constituted “reconciliation” in Australia, what would it mean to exert adaptive leadership? In my view, it would require the following.

a) Separate the technical work from the adaptive work

Although improving the living standards of Aboriginal people is a critically important goal, it does not constitute the adaptive work of reconciliation. The core challenge goes deeper than providing more resources to Aboriginal communities. Reconciliation cannot be solved by the Australian Treasury, because it entails developing a new dialogue between white and black Australia. This is why Howard’s notion of practical reconciliation is fundamentally flawed: because it suggests to the Australian people that the work of reconciliation is that of government departments, not ordinary individuals. In the terminology of Heifetz, practical reconciliation is a “work avoidance mechanism” (1994, 37-39).

¹² At one meeting that I attended, in the rural Western Australian town of Carnarvon, Aboriginal residents spoke of the problems of racism and joblessness, while whites expressed their fears of crime, and high levels of welfare. The discussion was direct and hard-hitting, but skillfully brokered by the Council’s representatives. Blacks asked questions like “why don’t you look me in the eye when you walk past me in the street?”, and whites asked questions like “why do so many Aboriginal people steal from my shop?”. As someone who was not part of the local community, I had the impression that these were conversations that should have been had years beforehand.

Mick Dodson, Chairperson of the Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre, has described practical reconciliation as a “furphy”. In a speech at Corroboree 2000, he argued:

“Although issues of the health, housing and education of Indigenous Australians are of key concern to a nation, they are not issues that are at the very heart or the very soul of reconciliation.

But they are – quite simply – the entitlements every Australian should enjoy. The tragedy is that they are entitlements successive governments have denied. Why should they be given some higher order of things in the reconciliation process?

Reconciliation is about far deeper things – to do with nation, soul and spirit.

Reconciliation is about the blood and flesh of the lives we must lead together not the nuts and bolts of the entitlements as citizens we should all enjoy.” (2000)

This is not to suggest that closing the gap between Aboriginal and white living standards is an easy task. In recent years, Noel Pearson, a former director of the Cape York Land Council, has argued that the current system of welfare needs to be revamped before it can effectively serve Aboriginal communities (see Pearson 2001). There is also an ongoing debate as to whether the Aboriginal health, education and housing should be provided through specialist or mainstream agencies. Solving these problems is a vital, difficult goal

to achieve. But at the same time, as Dodson points out, we need to recognize that this is not the “blood and flesh” of reconciliation.

b) Move white Australians into a zone of discomfort

For adaptive work to be done, Heifetz argues, a group needs to enter a state of disequilibrium. Without some degree of social stress, the impetus to do adaptive work will be absent. Yet the level of discomfort cannot be too great, or the group will shun the work entirely.

One important attempt to induce a sense of discomfort was then Prime Minister Paul Keating’s 1992 speech at the launch of the international year for the world’s indigenous people. Keating told a large audience of Aboriginal and white people the problem began with “us non-Aboriginal Australians”. He continued:

“It begins, I think, with the act of recognition. Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disasters. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion.

It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us. With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic

human response and enter into their hearts and minds. We failed to ask - how would I feel if this were done to me?

As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us.”

(Keating 1992)

The public outcry that followed demonstrated the disequilibrium into which Keating had plunged many Australians. Yet while Keating’s status as Prime Minister gave his speech prominence, it also made it difficult for him to maintain the national sense of discomfort over reconciliation. Any authority figure will be tempted to strive to be liked by the electorate, and in the short-term, the best way to achieve this end is by creating a sense of comfort and equilibrium. Indeed, in the wake of Keating’s 1996 election loss, some commentators suggested that his focus on indigenous issues had contributed to his defeat (Johns 1997; Williams 1997; Thompson 1999).¹³ Keating had, in Heifetz’s terms, been “assassinated” (Heifetz 1994, 235-49) because he had created too great a sense of discomfort for the Australian electorate. Indeed, his opponent, John Howard, explicitly offered the Australian electorate an administration in which they would feel more “relaxed and comfortable” about themselves, a promise which many commentators interpreted as adhering to a traditional view of Australia’s history (Brawley 1999).¹⁴

¹³ Shaun Wilson (2001) goes further, arguing that in the 1996, 1998 and 2001 elections, the Howard Government has effectively practised “wedge politics”, using race issues as a means of separating the Labor Party from working class voters.

¹⁴ More recently, a similar connection has been made by senior Howard Government minister Tony Abbott (O’Loughlin 2002).

During his period as Governor-General, Sir William Deane sought to confront white Australians with the same reality. In a range of speeches delivered between 1996 and 2000, Deane devoted substantial attention to the problems of Aboriginal health (Deane 1997a; Deane 1997c), the need for reconciliation (Deane 1997b; Deane 2000), and the need for white Australians to acknowledge the wrongdoing of their ancestors (Deane 2001a, cf Deane 2001b). Yet Deane's ability to shift white Australians into a zone in which they would be able to do adaptive work was stymied by the constraints placed upon him by Prime Minister Howard (see for eg Morag Fraser 1999).

The example of Keating presents the very real question of whether it will ever be possible for a Prime Minister to exercise leadership on reconciliation without being voted out of office. Yet the example of Deane illustrates another problem – if those who are attempting to do work on leadership are undermined by the government, their progress will be limited.

Despite the limited support that the Howard Government has given to those who have attempted to begin the adaptive work, a variety of individuals have shown over recent years how adaptive leadership can be exercised from outside a position of formal authority. Within the indigenous community, Aden Ridgeway, Evelyn Scott, Lowitja O'Donohue, Mick Dodson and Charles Perkins have been among many Aboriginal people who have taken the harsh message to white Australia about what has been done. Historians have also begun to change school textbooks and curricula so that they accurately reflect the violence that occurred (Reynolds 1999, 154-60).

Others who have helped begin the adaptive work include public intellectuals (Robert Manne, Donald Horne), former judges (Ronald Wilson, William Deane), and some in the media and entertainment industry (Ray Martin, Peter Garrett). Indeed, it is this last group that perhaps have the most potential to begin changing attitudes – as was demonstrated by the strongly positive reaction among some Australians when actor John Howard delivered a powerful “apology by the Prime Minister” on ABC television in July 2000 (Clarke 2000).

For true reconciliation to occur, white Australia will need to confront some truths that will inevitably create discomfort: that white settlers forcibly took the land from its original owners, that massacres of Aboriginal people took place throughout the nineteenth century, that Aboriginal children were taken from their parents for much of the twentieth century, and that racism is a potent force in Australia today. Invariably, anyone who seeks to confront mainstream Australia with these facts will become the subject of vicious and personal attacks. If they are not to be “assassinated”, they will require some support from those in positions of formal authority (such as state or federal politicians) or informal authority (such as media commentators or respected figures in the white community).

Most importantly, those seeking to exert leadership on reconciliation must recognize that discomfort is not simply an unfortunate by-product, but the very core of the adaptive work. If Australians feel “relaxed and comfortable”, it could simply be because they are

avoiding the work of dealing with the past. While most Americans are aware of the battles that were fought between white settlers and Native Americans, Australians do not know enough about the massacres of Aboriginal people that have taken place in our history. Likewise, more effort should be put into ensuring that ordinary Australians – and not just the political elite – hear some of the stories from those Aboriginal people who were separated from their families. The anger and hostility that this generates will be an indication that work is being done. This environment of disequilibrium provides the opportunity for white Australians to begin to adapt their attitudes towards indigenous people.

c) Do work at an individual level

At its heart, reconciliation is about the personal relationships between black and white Australians. Yet many in the reconciliation movement place too high a priority on statements by the Prime Minister or the federal parliament – rather than upon the grassroots work that might be done. The challenge of reconciliation is to recognize that the real work will be done in thousands of communities across Australia. In urban areas, misunderstandings have arisen simply because Aboriginal people make up only 2 percent of the population, and hence many non-indigenous Australians have never had an ordinary conversation with an Aboriginal person. In more mixed communities, the problem is often that effective dialogue has broken down, and no-one has been able to bring both sides to a place where adaptive work can occur.

Lillian Holt, Director of the Centre for Indigenous Education at the University of Melbourne, argues that most of her white friends learned about racism in Australia through mixing with Aborigines. Holt issues a challenge to white Australians:

“go and mix with Aboriginal people.... Hang out with them, walk with them in the streets and accompany them into shops, pubs, and public places. Then wait for the reactions of other whitefellas to yourself and to the Aborigines you are with.”
(2000, 150)

Powerful examples of interpersonal reconciliation already exist. The work carried out by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, which encouraged hundreds of communities to deal with the problematic reality of reconciliation, should be continued. It should also be recognized that because this is adaptive work, it will cause some pain. Indeed, if communities do not have the opportunity to express their real feelings of anger and mistrust, it is likely that the real work is being avoided.

Across Australia, the Native Title Tribunal continues to perform a brokering role between Aborigines, pastoralists, and miners. Although not always successful, the Tribunal does aim to provide a forum in which all sides can hear and understand one another. In this sense, the Tribunal’s value goes beyond reaching agreement on land use – it also has the potential to assist the long-term process of reconciliation.

Among mining companies, Rio Tinto has placed most energy into forging strong relationships with Aboriginal people (see Rio Tinto 2001). As Paul Wand, chair of Rio Tinto's Aboriginal Foundation, argues:

“it is a mistake to believe that legal agreements will guarantee a harmonious future for resource development. ... to guarantee good relations with the neighbouring communities (and in the Australian context that can include groups living a hundred kilometres away) you have to build and sustain a relationship of trust. Building such a relationship takes time, resources, determination and specialized skills.” (2000, 103)

Yet while companies such as Rio Tinto can make inroads towards reconciliation, their primary incentive must always be to produce an adequate return for their shareholders. It is therefore not surprising that the company's policy towards Aboriginal people has its share of critics (ICEM 1997, 21-25; ICEM 1998, 15; Matthew 2001).

The work of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, the Native Title Tribunal, and perhaps also businesses like Rio Tinto, is the true adaptive work of reconciliation. As such groups move through problematic realities that have built up over decades, they will lay the groundwork for some form of high-level agreement between Aboriginal and white Australia. But without this adaptive work, it will be impossible to forge any enduring agreements.

d) Leadership should be white and black

In the United States, the civil rights movement of the 1960s would not have come to fruition without the passionate advocacy of black figures such as Martin Luther King Jr, Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X – nor without the leadership of white politicians such as Bobby Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. Likewise, the movement towards Aboriginal reconciliation in Australia has depended upon both blacks and whites exercising leadership.

Within the Aboriginal community, the main authority figures have emerged from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and from the more than five thousand indigenous organizations formed under the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act* and other legislation. Those with power in these organizations have to mediate between the demands of their communities and the limited resources available from government – and within a context in which their very legitimacy is often challenged by outsiders (Rowse 2000, 221). The recently-formed Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre is another means through which Aborigines can gain the skills to provide leadership at the community, state or national level (AILC 2001).

For Aboriginal people, much of the work of reconciliation lies in affecting white attitudes. Yet adaptive work also needs to be done within Aboriginal communities. As Aboriginal singer Helen Moran points out:

“Aboriginal people are still learning about the stolen generation and learning about their history. There are a lot of mixed blood, half-caste [Aborigines] who still find it difficult to come to terms with rejection from their own people. Who’s a real Aborigine and who’s not? Urban Aborigines, rural and traditional – they all have their own cultures. ... Aborigines have to come to terms with their loss and embrace the children that were taken and learn how to be Aborigine in the contemporary world. It’s difficult for everybody.” (quoted in Contractor 2000, 145)

Within the white community, few have been willing to engage in the difficult work required to move other “whitefellas” into a zone of discomfort. Each of the last three Labor Prime Ministers – Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke, and Paul Keating – have made major symbolic acts to the Aboriginal people. When Whitlam symbolically poured sand into the hands of Aboriginal elder Vincent Lingiari in 1975, when Hawke announced in 1987 that he supported a “compact of understanding”, and when Keating told an audience in 1992 that “we committed the murders”, white Australia entered a zone of discomfort. A few historians, such as Henry Reynolds, have worked to make Australians understand the violence that was a feature of black-white relations for most of the country’s history. But with some notable exceptions, other whites have held back from playing a leadership role in reconciliation as Coombs did twenty years ago.

The challenge for whites in the reconciliation movement is to be willing to move other whites out of their comfort zone. Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation

(ANTaR) has played a valuable role in organizing large-scale public events, such as the “Sea of Hands”. By using its grassroots network to create a sense of disequilibrium, ANTaR can help move Australians towards doing adaptive work.

4. Conclusion: Aboriginal reconciliation without easy answers

In this paper, I have argued that there are five issues around which the Australian “reconciliation debate” has been constituted – land ownership, the stolen generations, living standards, a treaty, and interpersonal reconciliation. Yet if the true adaptive work of reconciliation is to occur, it is critical to recognize that interpersonal reconciliation is the most difficult and the most important. The challenge for those who would seek to exercise adaptive leadership is threefold – separate the technical work from the adaptive work, move white Australians into a zone of discomfort, and do work at an individual level. By its very nature, reconciliation will not be “relaxed and comfortable”. But this is where true leadership can begin.

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