

Mabo Ten Years On—Small Step or Giant Leap?

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This year was the tenth anniversary of the High Court's Mabo decision. It has created a valuable opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved in Indigenous Affairs over the last decade, and whether or not Indigenous Australians have really reaped the rewards the High Court opened up to us in this landmark case.

It also provides an opportunity to ask some challenging questions about how we can remove the obstacles that stand in the way of a better and more equal relationship between black and white Australians.

As part of this chapter I want to focus on the current political leadership in Canberra, which I think is a serial underachiever when it comes to reducing Indigenous disadvantage. This is because it is driven by the conviction that better economic opportunities and individual initiative alone will deliver real equality between all Australians.

I also want to highlight some of the obstacles to progress that exist within Indigenous communities and why these need to be confronted and addressed if we are to see a new generation of Indigenous leaders coming forward.

The *Mabo* decision and the *Native Title Act*—best outcome or political back-peddle?

The *Mabo* decision must be seen within the broader context of public policy making in Indigenous Affairs over the last 100 years and more particularly the period since the 1967 referendum.

This latter date marks a real turning point in the history of Indigenous Affairs in Australia. It was an era when, for the first time, the emergence of a truly national social conscience in relation to Indigenous peoples in Australia can be recognised. Without this shift in the national psyche, I do not think the States and Territories would have passed land rights legislation and we certainly wouldn't have had the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody or a ten year dialogue about reconciliation.

But has Australia really maximised the opportunities these achievements opened up to us, or have they been squandered by half-hearted political responses?

Just as many people thought the 1967 referendum and the citizenship rights it conferred on Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders would transform our life experience and deliver equality, so too many people placed great hope in the ability of the *Mabo* decision to right the wrongs of the past and belatedly deliver social justice to the original owners of the land.

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After all, the High Court affirmed in law what Indigenous people had always known in their hearts:—

that we have a basic right to our traditional country (where native title has not been extinguished—which occurred without the consent of Indigenous peoples); and
this right exists because of our cultural identity, our laws, traditions and customs.

The Mabo decision achieved legal recognition of our status as the First Nation Peoples of Australia and gave us the ability to move towards a better position in the social, economic and political life of this country. It presented us with both the imperative and the tools to negotiate our relationship with the rest of the Nation. Despite the rhetoric of new forms of political correctness and popularism, it was never about being 'separate and equal' but creating an 'equal and inclusive' agenda.

Many Indigenous people were also heartened by prospect of native title legislation being able to deliver better legal protection of our cultures, especially in relation to significant sites and objects. Taking the High Court's finding that native title has its origins in the culture and traditions of Indigenous people, it was logical to assume that heritage protection and other cultural rights would need to be included in the concept of native title.

In addition to the development of a *Native Title Act*, it was also proposed that there would be:

a social justice compact between the Commonwealth Government and Indigenous Australians that would set out how Indigenous people could exercise and protect their inherent rights, ranging from cultural integrity and heritage protection, to regional self-governance and a treaty, to economic development; and

a National Indigenous Land Fund that would provide a long-term financial base for the acquisition of land by Indigenous communities who had been dispossessed and would be unlikely to be able to claim native title.

But a social compact never eventuated.

The Indigenous leadership only gave their consent and support to the enactment of native title legislation on the basis that this package of measures would follow. In this respect, the original agreement that was brokered was not honoured.

The proposal for a treaty or national framework agreement to overcome the destructive cultural, social and economic consequences of dispossession is yet to be pursued by any national government. Even now, ten years on, the concept of a treaty to settle the 'unfinished business' of the last two hundred years, remains acutely controversial—amongst the broader population and our own mob.

The *Native Title Act* that resulted in 1993 is one of the most ambitious, complex and far-reaching pieces of legislation ever embarked upon. It is comparable only in scope to the Australian Constitution—with implications for all federal and state property laws.

But it has established processes that are alienating and disempowering for most Indigenous people because the *Act* remains centred around a reliance on litigation to achieve a final settlement of claims, or to answer the more intractable questions that the *Native Title Act* did not foresee or failed to address.

Our interests in the land and the associated cultural rights and responsibilities are forced to take a back seat to complex, esoteric legal questions about extinguishment. At the end of the day, the onus of proof always rests with the traditional owners to prove decent and ongoing, unbroken connection to country, guaranteeing that many Indigenous people will never ‘qualify’ as traditional owners in the legal sense of the word.

The amendments to the *Native Title Act* in 1998, following the *Wik* decision, have rendered it non-beneficial in its effect on Indigenous peoples.

All the High Court determined in *Wik* was that some elements of native title might have survived the grant of a pastoral lease. Where this is the case, and there is some overlap in the exercise of those rights, the court found that the rights of the pastoral lease-holder prevail over those of the native title holders.

However, these amendments effectively licensed governments to racially discriminate against the interests of Indigenous peoples by elevating the property rights of non-Indigenous Australians.

Politicians were able to rationalise this latest compromise of Indigenous rights as being in the interests of economic development and by citing the vague but highly emotive concept of ‘certainty’ while providing no certainty to Indigenous people. It was a reminder to Indigenous people of just how vulnerable our statutory rights are, and how expendable the principle of equality before the law is, if enough money is involved.

Viewed in terms of actual native title outcomes, it is hard to argue the *Act* has been anything other than a spectacular failure:

- 31 successful determinations in ten years,
- 590 claims still unresolved;
- 54 Indigenous Land Use Agreements (NNTT 2002).

There is a clear need for these 590 unresolved claims to be fast-tracked so that people can get on with their lives.

However, I also acknowledge that it is primarily because of the *Mabo* decision that Australians have begun to take a much more honest look at the past and have started to realise we have a black history that sits uncomfortably with the national ethos of ‘a fair go’ for all.

Ordinary Australians—black and white—have had to grapple with native title issues at the local level. People who were historically on opposite sides of the fence have had to open a dialogue and give each other a voice in decisions about land and natural resource management.

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This wasn't happening ten years ago because there simply was no imperative for non-Indigenous people to even contemplate the possibility of a native title right existing in their backyards or that it could deliver outcomes that were good for the entire nation.

Nevertheless, coupled with other revelations from our nation's past, such as arose in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, the *Mabo* and *Wik* decisions have given rise to an unprecedented outpouring of community action in support of native title and reconciliation. This culminated in the bridge walks in 2000 and the release of the *Documents for Reconciliation* by the now disbanded Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation that same year.

Practical reconciliation—or historical denial

Yet for the vast majority of Australians, Indigenous Affairs remains a 'problem', and predominantly, one that can only be addressed if Indigenous people get serious about putting their own house in order.

This is a very convenient situation for any government. If most of the country thinks the problem lies with Indigenous people themselves, a government doesn't have to try too hard—and it certainly doesn't have to set the historical record straight.

This is precisely what the current policy of practical reconciliation enables the present Government to do.

Over the last twenty years, Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders have been studied, analysed and probed about every aspect of our lives in excruciating detail.

Governments have had report after report, consistently advocating the same principle: ie *Indigenous disadvantage can only be improved when Indigenous people are given greater control over the decisions that impact on their daily lives.*

However, the current Government's approach to Indigenous disadvantage is founded in its conviction that better economic opportunities and individual initiative alone will help to integrate Indigenous people into 'mainstream Australia', and deliver real equality.

The Prime Minister made it very clear earlier this year, that in his mind, the measure of success in terms of the reconciliation process, will be when Indigenous Australians blend into the wider community and no longer stand out as an embarrassing statistical anomaly.

Underpinning the Government's vision for a reconciled Australia are a number of simplistic, and in my view unsubstantiated, assertions that do not stand up to intellectual rigour or historical reality.

These assertions divorce the experience of Indigenous people in this country from any historical context and they assume that all Australians have the same life opportunities: that it is all a question of individual motivation and choice.

Among the assertions are the following:

- focusing on Indigenous health, housing, education and employment (basic citizenship rights) alone will overcome Indigenous disadvantage and achieve lasting reconciliation
- symbolic aspects of reconciliation, like an apology to the stolen generations, or a treaty, will do nothing to address Indigenous disadvantage and are socially and politically divisive
- the so-called ‘rights agenda’ that has sought to incorporate international standards of human rights into the Australian legal system, has been tried and failed
- there has been too much focus on Indigenous rights at the expense of Indigenous responsibility, and there is more to be gained by encouraging and supporting *individuals* to become *self-reliant* and
- by ‘turning off the grog’, and tackling ‘welfare dependency’, Indigenous communities will be able to address family violence, alcohol abuse and social dysfunction.

A few prominent Indigenous commentators have developed and advocated aspects of these assertions as part of a broader analysis of the way forward in Indigenous Affairs policy.

But by using the language of neo-liberalism, and consequently being seen to be of a similar mindset to the Howard Government, they have been cast in the media as legitimising the practical reconciliation agenda.

Now, rather than being acknowledged as a critical turning point in Indigenous Affairs in Australia, the 1967 referendum and the attainment of equal citizenship rights that it once symbolised, is being recast as the beginning of the era of Indigenous welfare dependence and social dysfunction.

Many in the Indigenous leadership now find themselves in the invidious position of being labelled ‘part of the problem’ and disciples of the ‘rhetoric of victimhood’ that underpins Indigenous dysfunction (Ruddock 2002).

The reality is however, that you cannot treat the symptoms of dysfunction in isolation from the historical causes.

Good public policy can only emerge where there has been an honest and accurate analysis of past errors and omissions, and a genuine commitment to meeting the needs and aspirations of the people affected by any new policy.

The Howard Government may be determined to address Indigenous disadvantage through practical reconciliation measures, but their record to date is not even measuring up to the rhetoric.

Just in the area of health alone only about 74c of *direct* Commonwealth health funding is spent on each Indigenous person for every \$1 spent on a non-Indigenous Australian.

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This remains the case even after the 2001 Commonwealth Grants Commission Report recommended that the poorer health status of Indigenous people and their greater reliance on the public health system, would justify at least a doubling of the average per capita government expenditure on non-Indigenous people, just to achieve parity in expenditure on health care for all Australians.

However, there was no recognition of this in this year's Federal Budget. Instead we saw the Government proposing a winding back of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, which will have adverse financial and health outcomes for Indigenous people, as well as many other disadvantaged Australians.

This budget also offered no extra funds for violence against women and sexual abuse of children, yet the Government has made much political mileage out of these issues. Verging on the indecent, is the same Government's under-spending of last year's allocation by some \$4.5m.

We have to have a mechanism that will make governments accountable. And we have to hold the current government to account to ensure it delivers—even if it is only on its limited promises of practical reconciliation.

That is why I acted on the recommendation by Dr Bill Jonas, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, to establish a Senate Inquiry into the Government's progress on reconciliation. This Inquiry is due to report in March 2003.

Setting the historical record straight—the Australian Constitution

Many Australians do not realise that the current high levels of Indigenous social and economic disadvantage have their roots in the exclusion and blatant racism that was enshrined in the Australian Constitution.

Up until the 1967 referendum, s. 127 of the Constitution prevented the Commonwealth from counting Indigenous Australians in the national census. Consequently, no Commonwealth Government could even purport to know the scale of Indigenous disadvantage in comparison to the rest of the population, let alone do anything to address the dire need that existed.

Instead, Indigenous Australians became a statistical non-entity in our own country, and the reluctant responsibility of so-called 'welfare' boards, punitively administered by the States.

The recent exposure of the Queensland Government's policy of withholding and underpaying the wages of about 16,500 Aboriginal workers over an 80-year period, is just one example of how exploitative and overtly racist the Indigenous Affairs policies of the States were for much of the last century (Kidd 1997).

The reality at the federal level was not significantly different. The Constitution and the men who drafted it, guaranteed the exclusion of Indigenous people from the legislative program of Commonwealth Governments for most of the last century. What other Australians have taken for granted, we were excluded from, including:

- Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902 & Electoral Act 1918
- Invalid and Old Age Pension Act 1908
 - Maternity Allowance Act 1912
 - Child Endowment Act 1941
 - Widows' Pension Act 1942
 - Unemployment & Sickness Benefit Act 1944.

Full access for Indigenous Australians to social security benefits did not occur until the late 1970s and in some remote communities, not until the early 1980s. (Jonas 2001)

Prior to the 1967 referendum, Commonwealth expenditure on Indigenous Australians was zero. It is only as a result of the referendum that the Commonwealth was given legal power to intervene in Indigenous affairs.

And it was only after the Whitlam Government took office in 1972 that over \$100 million was spent on Indigenous Affairs in one year. To give some idea of just how incremental the Commonwealth's involvement was in these early years of responsibility—the *total* Commonwealth expenditure on Indigenous Affairs to 1987—the first 20 years of Commonwealth responsibility—was just on \$3 billion.

In comparison, the federal government now dedicates \$2.5 billion annually to the Indigenous Affairs budget.

This historic overview of the Commonwealth's role in Indigenous Affairs provides some indication of just how recent its relationship with Indigenous people really is. We remain in a phase of relationship building—taking one step back for every two steps gained.

Building up strong, accountable and sustainable Indigenous governance structures

Astoundingly, a majority of Australians continue to believe the popular myth that Indigenous Affairs is the land of milk and honey, where organisations have endless resources.

Take ATSIC for example. It has long been the whipping boy of Indigenous Affairs, even by its master, the federal government. But few Australians are aware that ATSIC is not an independent body—even though it has an elected board—with complete authority over the expenditure of the Indigenous Affairs budget.

Less than half of this year's trumpeted 'record' \$2.5b Indigenous Affairs budget is allocated to ATSIC (\$1,132 billion) and of that, the Government requires that two-thirds is spent in just three areas:

- employment programs (similar to work for the dole schemes),
- housing and infrastructure, and
- settlement of native title claims.

That leaves less than \$400 million for some of the key planks of the Government's practical reconciliation agenda, including measures to combat family violence and

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drug alcohol and other substance abuse in communities. Also, ATSIC is still managing the fallout from the \$470m cut in the Coalition's first budget.

It is important to emphasise that identifiable Commonwealth expenditure on Indigenous specific programs is not simply 'on top of' the general government expenditure that benefits all Australians.

For example: Close to *one-third* of Commonwealth expenditure on Indigenous people directly *substitutes* for expenditure on mainstream assistance programs.⁶ The Indigenous-specific programs deliver virtually the same outcomes, but the way in which services are structured or accessed is different on account of the cultural and other needs of the Indigenous people who use them.

To name a few:

- Abstudy is a substitute for Youth Allowance
- Community Employment programs substitute for Newstart Allowance
- Aboriginal Medical Services substitute for Medicare supported services, and so on.

At the same time, a lot of Commonwealth assistance flows to other groups within Australian society, such as veterans and farmers, which have a disproportionately low number of Indigenous members (DPL 2001).

But what the Commonwealth Grants Commission found in its national Report on Indigenous Funding is that despite the entrenched levels of disadvantage experienced by Indigenous people across all of the key economic and social indicators, we access mainstream services at very much lower rates than non-Indigenous people—regardless of whether we are in urban or remote areas.

Some of the prime examples of where Indigenous people under-utilise the mainstream services include the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and Aged Care services.

As a consequence, the Indigenous-specific services that were only designed to supplement mainstream services, are struggling with levels of demand that they are simply not equipped to meet. And more often than not, it is the most disadvantaged Indigenous people who miss out.

The more recent Commonwealth Grants Commission Report also clearly recognises that the Indigenous Affairs budget has to be more wisely spent and directed to areas of greatest need. It made some very valuable recommendations about the need for greater Indigenous "control of, or stronger influence over, service delivery expenditure", particularly at the regional and local levels (CGC 2001).

However, one issue which has been absent from these discussions is the question of the number of Indigenous organisations that are already in existence, and whether by their sheer numbers, they are a drain on the already overstretched funds available.

Indigenous communities need to ask this question at the local and regional level. Many need to make some cold, hard decisions about which Indigenous organisations are delivering beneficial outcomes and operating cost-effectively, and which ones are not.

We have to start rewarding the successful and accountable organisations, rather than treating all of the good, the bad and the ugly organisations, in exactly the same way.

When you look at just how many Indigenous corporations have been established over the last 30 years of fragmented program delivery, the need for rationalisation and consolidation is obvious.

According to the Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations, who administers the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act*, there are about 2,188 registered Indigenous corporations nationally. This translates into a national average of one corporation for every 187 Indigenous people, using the 2001 census population figure of 410,000.

I regard this figure as a conservative estimate for the following reasons:

- not all Indigenous-owned and controlled corporations are registered under the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act* or (ACA Act).
- In fact, about half of all Indigenous organisations in Australia are incorporated under other laws, usually to avoid the strict requirements on the structure of corporations and their decision-making processes that exist under the ACA Act. Many are incorporated under general State legislation, which does not separately identify Indigenous organisations.
- Just looking at NSW, there is not a significant variance between the number of corporations funded under ATSIC's Regional Council Program Expenditure in NSW (425) and the number of corporations listed for NSW with the Office of the Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations (391)—a variance of only 33.

In any case, it provides some indication of the level of duplication and the administrative over-servicing that is occurring in many Indigenous communities.

I am also mindful of the extent to which the *Native Title Act* and the Indigenous Land Corporation have contributed to this plethora of Indigenous corporations and prescribed bodies corporate.

Both *Acts* provide that only prescribed bodies corporate can hold title to land or act as agents for native title holders. In addition, the NTA has given rise to the establishment of numerous Representative Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Bodies in most States, which have a pivotal role in the operation of the Act, particularly in terms of the services and advice they provide to their Indigenous clients.

These corporations are the latest contestants to enter the increasingly competitive arena that is frequently, and disparagingly referred to in the national media as 'the Indigenous industry'.

These organisations follow in the footsteps of the many community-based organisations that began to spring up in the 1970s as Indigenous communities around Australia were mobilised in the struggle for land rights, self-determination and basic citizenship rights.

I think it is important to recognise that this so-called 'industry' has come about as a result of legislation by our nation's parliaments, and social agitation by Indigenous

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people themselves. Its emergence was motivated by the recognition that Indigenous Australians have a right to good health, legal representation, a decent education, adequate housing, equitable employment opportunities, and land—and that they will not achieve these outcomes if they are not given the extra assistance required to put them on the starting blocks with the rest of Australia.

I am in no way suggesting that we should try to wind the clock back to the 1960s when few Indigenous owned and controlled organisations existed. On the contrary, I regard the prevalence of a network of Indigenous controlled organisations as a highly desirable development that is just as necessary today as it was back then.

So, whilst we should respect and pay tribute to those Indigenous leaders who have battled to achieve this institutional and economic platform for their communities, we also need to look at how well this vast and expanding body of Indigenous corporations is serving the community in 2002 and what reforms can be undertaken to make them work more efficiently for indigenous people.

Some Indigenous leaders have publicly acknowledged that the plethora of organisations has become a significant drain on many of the communities they were set up to serve, both in terms of human and financial capital.

These organisations are subject to a number of accountability checks and balances as is any similar organisation.

However, I believe we must honestly examine the existence and operations of these organisations against service delivery expectations, community expectations and performance. A series of national benchmarks should be set up as performance measures for all Indigenous community organisations to meet.

Although some communities have developed innovative ways of incorporating traditional authority structures and governance procedures into the operation of their boards of management, others have an uphill battle in managing the general administrative and reporting requirements. Often these day-to-day responsibilities have been added to the load borne by our Elders, or worse still, the day-to-day decision-making is contracted to outside consultants at great financial cost, and often at the expense of the community retaining real control over important business decisions.

Recent moves in the Northern Territory have seen that Government biting the bullet and creating regional health partnerships between Government and Indigenous organisations and communities.

All Indigenous health money—that is Territory and Federal money—for a particular region, will be pooled and administered by a community-controlled health board.

This will not only put Indigenous people in charge, it will also cut down on duplication, bureaucracy, and the general complexity and over-administration, with which most people working in the delivery of Indigenous services, are only too familiar.

While the Territory Government's action is not about rationalising the operations of Indigenous community organisations, it does attack part of the problem at its source.

That is; streamlining funding so it is directed, effective and most importantly, Indigenous-controlled.

The demographics of Indigenous Australia

We need to remind ourselves that there are only 410,000 Indigenous Australians—the largest total since Indigenous people were included for the first time in the national census in 1971.

Even though this is a quite manageable number to deal with, many Australians are still prepared to accept the stereotype of Indigenous affairs as being a terminal case of public policy failure.

How is it possible that 410,000 people should overwhelm our imagination or our ability to formulate responses to familiar challenges within community development?

Indeed, there are some additional aspects to this demographic that are quite important to remember:

- Of the 410,000, about two-thirds are under the age of 25. This is a marked contrast to the broader Australian population where the profile is very much the reverse.
- This means that 240,000 are under the age of 25 and most of them under the age of 18.
- 40% of the nation's juvenile detention population is Indigenous, as is 20% of the nation's prison population.
- Less than half of young Indigenous people aged 15 to 19 are attending secondary school, and consequently, only about 10% are completing their HSC.
- These figures contrast with those for non-Indigenous Australians, of whom 70% are attending secondary school and about 30% are completing their HSC (ABS 2001).

In my mind, the education statistics for young Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are both of concern. But in the case of young Indigenous people, they highlight just how much ground has to be made up if all Australians are to have equal life opportunities.

It would seem apparent to me that these statistics have significant implications for how policy initiatives should be structured and delivered over the short, medium and longer term.

It is clear that in the longer-term, inroads have to be made in relation to Indigenous educational opportunities to ensure that a new generation of leaders is able to emerge and be nurtured. The cost of failure in this regard is the possibility that current problems of high unemployment, community violence, family breakdown, and general lack of life opportunities will be compounded in generations to come.

Similarly, a group of 410,000 people should no longer tolerate the "*poor bugger me*" attitude and focus more of our energies in growing our organisations and sponsoring our young.

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Despite the gloom of the present, we have every reason to be optimistic in recognising the presence of an emerging class of young Indigenous leaders to open a new phase in defining black/white relations.

In this vein, I can only hope that this round of ATSIC elections gives us new outcomes, fresh blood and new ideas. Not because the others haven't done their job—because I think they have—but because those who fall into the 30% club need to make room for the majority, indeed, it is time that, that 70% are reflected in our leadership make-up and not confined to juvenile detention centres or our nation's gaols.

We must also refute the notion that all Indigenous people live in the remote outback. Only 30% of the Indigenous population live in remote locations.

The other 70% live in the towns, regions and cities of Australia. There are Torres Strait Islanders living in Canberra and Sydney. There are plenty of the mob living in Adelaide, Darwin, Townsville, Katherine and Kalgoorlie.

These are people who for the most part have a telephone, watch TV and listen to radios in their own homes. The postman goes past everyday. The whole infrastructure of government remains within their day-to-day reach.

But for the Indigenous people of rural, regional and urban Australia, isolation is not a factor of distance, but a matter of prejudice. Overt and institutional racism are the underlying causes of our contemporary isolation, more so than any geographic realities.

If we are to tackle the scourge of racism, we first have to overcome the ignorance and misinformation that is recycled—sometimes by our political leaders, but also by friends and family.

Conclusion

It is clear that our current circumstance is derived from the dominant position of government in Indigenous affairs and the failure to see Indigenous rights as a crucial plank in changing the status quo.

No Australian Government has ever wholeheartedly embraced the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to self-determination, and the associated inherent rights that flow from it.

Recognition has only ever been partial—the Mabo decision is a testament to that—and then, given begrudgingly and in a compromised form. Leadership has been more forthcoming in the law than it has in Parliament because at least the law has remained 'colour-blind' in recognising Indigenous rights.

Far too much energy has been expended trying to contain and restrict the application of any rights that are recognised, and invariably more energy is consumed in manoeuvres to limit the application of those rights once they are recognised, native title, being the prime example.

Reconciliation is about the next generation. It is about giving our young people the opportunity to take up the challenges and develop the skills to avoid that pathway to gaols and unemployment queues.

Issues such as education, capacity building, leadership, and sustainable models of community development must be addressed as our top priorities. And as a community, we should be more willing to celebrate and learn from our successes.

I believe, that despite the gloom of the present, we have every reason to be optimistic in recognising the presence of an emerging class of young Indigenous leaders to open a new phase in defining black/white relations.

410,000 is not a lot of people. We can turn our future around.

We have the guidebook in the form of our cultures—the stories and wisdom that our Elders have passed on to us. These survival skills are as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago. We just need to learn new ways of applying that knowledge to our own lives so that there is a better match between institutions and people, and between resources and needs.

Governments may come and go, but we will always be here, so long as we continue to nurture our young so they can take forward our stories, our memories and our future.

Senator Aden Ridgeway is from the Gumbayngirr people of northern New South Wales, the Australian Democrats Senator for New South Wales and the only Indigenous member of the Federal Parliament. Aden has extensive experience in policy and administration, a long-time involvement in national Indigenous politics, a passionate commitment to human rights and an ongoing interest in philanthropic and arts organisations. His portfolio areas are Arts and Sport; Consumer Affairs; Forestry; Indigenous Affairs; Industry, Small Business and Tourism and Trade and Overseas Development.