Building trust

Professor Mick Dodson presented the 2009 ANU Reconciliation Lecture: “How well do we know each other?” Professor Dodson drew lessons and hope from the findings of Reconciliation Australia’s Reconciliation Barometer. This edited version has been specially prepared for Partyline.

I have identified the education of our children as the central, thematic issue of my term as Australian of the Year. Education is fundamental to improving every aspect of the circumstances of every family and community in this country. It underpins our concept of ourselves, our health, our participation in the workplace, our productivity: it shapes our place in the world.

Education is also fundamental to achieving reconciliation between Indigenous and other Australians.

And there is close relationship between material reconciliation and interpersonal reconciliation. At present there remain great material inequalities of life experience and a gross differential in life expectancy.

The COAG National Indigenous Reform Agreement is integral to the Australian Government’s strategy of Closing the Gap on Indigenous disadvantage. It identifies targets for closing the life expectancy gap, halving the infant mortality rate, equalising access to early childhood education, halving the year 12 attainment rate and halving the gap in employment outcomes.

The shortest time-line to achieve any one of these targets is a decade. The longest is the more baggy concept of a ‘generation’. And several of the targets are not about achieving equality but merely a 50 per cent reduction of the present levels of inequality.

Equality is the base-line of any meaningful sense of material reconciliation. And that will take a considerable amount of time.

But at least with the Closing the Gap targets, we know roughly where we stand. The targets have tangible, measureable end-points. They form, if you like, the skeletal structure of reconciliation.

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Building the soft tissue of reconciliation – reshaping the inter-personal relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians – is just as critical: but it is a less tangible, more amorphous endeavour. In this field of inter-personal reconciliation our essential task is to build the social tissue of understanding, trust and respect that will unify Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

I believe we have already taken many important steps towards this unity. They include the headline events - the Redfern Park speech, the Sea of Hands, the bridge walks – right through to the recent formal Apology to the Stolen Generations made by the Prime Minister. Each is a marker and a catalyst of a new relationship founded on equality and respect.

All this is positive. The concept of reconciliation is broadly accepted. The fruits of reconciliation, based on respect and trust, are strongly desired. We have moved from important gestures and statements of principle to action – to community and institutional engagement – to make a material difference and to build a new relationship.

The Reconciliation Barometer measures and compares the perceptions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The findings do not tell us so much who we are, as who we think we are and what we think of each other.

Both as an Indigenous person and as Australian of the Year, I am deeply heartened by the strongly held view shared across our country that the relationship between Indigenous and other Australians is important to Australia’s future. There is a close convergence of thought on this: 100 per cent of Indigenous and 91 per cent of non-Indigenous Australians agree that our relationship is important to our country. You can’t build a better future unless you believe in it.

The most graphic demonstration of this lies in the Barometer’s measurement of our perceptions of ourselves - and each other - as Australians. There are striking similarities in the way both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians see themselves. There is a shared perception of our core national characteristics.

A consistently high percentage of Australians across the board (between 84 and 96 per cent) believe we are welcoming, good humoured, friendly, good at sport, proud, easy going and family oriented.

There is another way of looking at these figures.

If you turned the lights out, and asked Australians to form into various groups based on their perception of the degree to which they possessed these seven qualities - within a margin of 10 per cent - blackfellas and whitefellas would form one group based on their own perception of their identity.
Poor educational outcomes have less to do with poverty than with the strength of racial stereotypes and expectations of success. Our thoughts give shape to reality. And reality shapes our thoughts. Real progress in *Closing the Gap* in life expectancy, infant mortality, education and employment outcomes is essential to improving the perceptions that so profoundly affect the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians at a personal level.

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We must be frank in recognising that the Reconciliation Barometer currently shows a low level of mutual trust – but it also shows us another previously unobserved fact – from which I take courage.

While levels of trust remain low, the national sample shows a higher level of trust in Indigenous Australians than Indigenous people believed existed, and Indigenous people report a higher level of trust in Australians generally than the national sample believed existed. In fact, we have a higher level of trust in each other than we think.

We now know that we share a great deal more in common as Australians than we previously thought, and that there is a great desire to know more about each other.

On this we can build. *

*Mick Dodson is Director, National Centre for Indigenous Studies, ANU; Co-Chair, Reconciliation Australia; and Australian of the Year 2009. The full text of this lecture is available at www.reconciliation.org.au*