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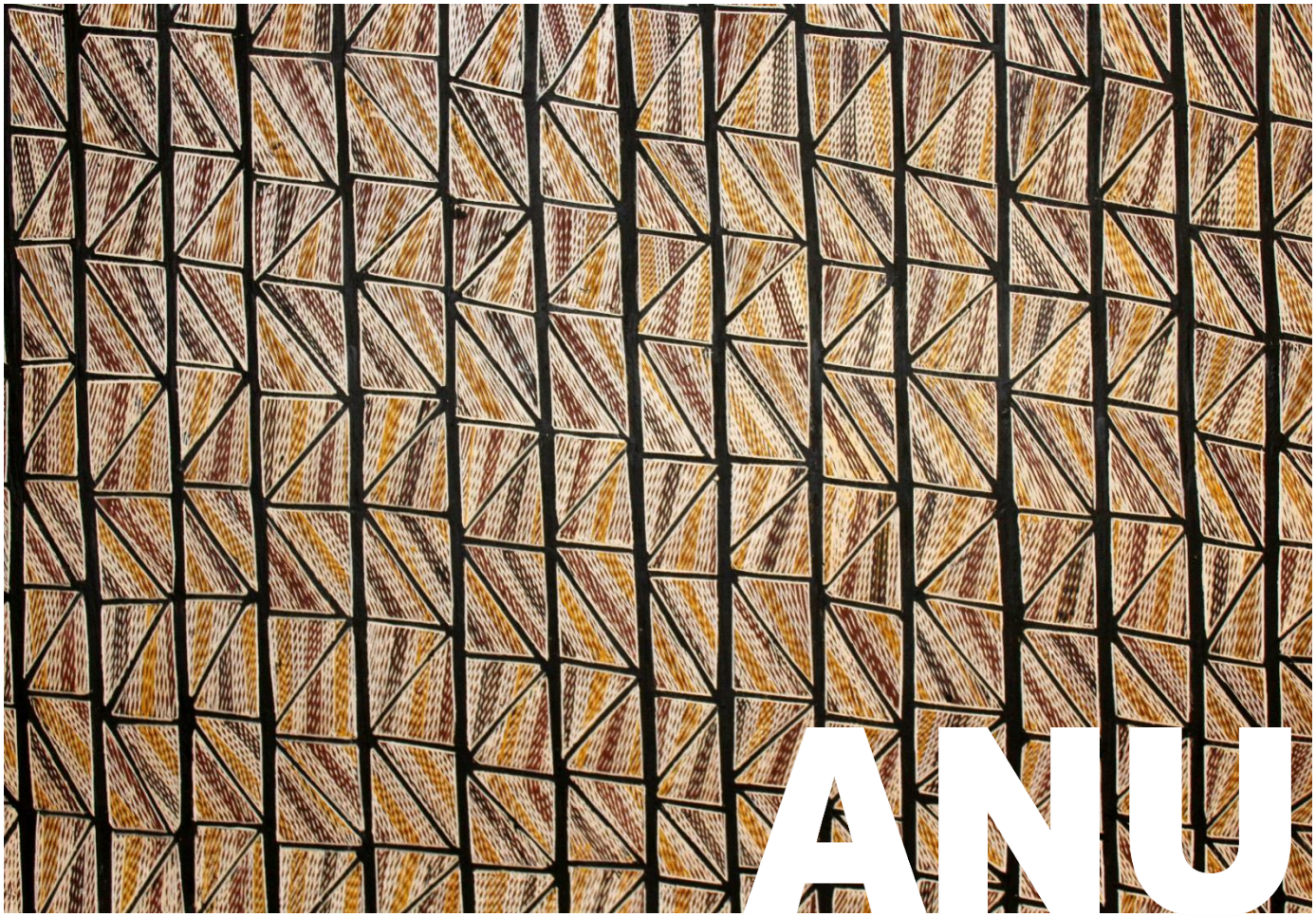

THE OPINIONS OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS VIEWED THROUGH A POPULATION LENS: THE RECONCILIATION BAROMETER

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The opinions of Indigenous Australians viewed through a population lens: The Reconciliation Barometer

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Abstract

It is unavoidable that in discussions of Indigenous affairs we will refer to what Indigenous Australians think and want, but against what 'evidence' should we assess such representations? Since 2008 Reconciliation Australia has conducted a biennial survey, the Reconciliation Barometer, as a way to quantify Indigenous and 'General Community' opinion relevant to 'reconciliation'. This paper examines findings on 'historical acceptance' and 'trust'. Why does a minority of Indigenous respondents not assent to certain statements about Australia's colonial history? The paper notes one likely explanation: the multiple meanings of 'accept' in the survey instrument. As well, the paper suggests that when respondents confront certain 'factual' statements their identities are engaged, influencing their answers. Noting that measured 'trust' has risen over the years, the paper speculates about several plausible explanations. Surveys such as the Barometer facilitate the disaggregated representation of what political rhetoric tends to aggregate – 'Indigenous Australia'. The Barometer views 'peoples' through a 'population' lens.

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Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ANU	Australian National University
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CAR	Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation
IPP	Indigenous Procurement Policy
NATSISS	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey
NITV	National Indigenous Television network
RA	Reconciliation Australia
RB	Reconciliation Barometer

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Introduction

How do we know what Indigenous Australians think? In the discourse of Indigenous affairs it is common to generalise about the interests and outlooks of Indigenous Australians, while conceding that within Indigenous Australia there is variety of circumstance and perspective. There are several ways to address the tension between referring to Indigenous Australians as if they were unified in their historical experience of colonisation and their demands for social justice and conceding that there are many policy relevant differences among Indigenous Australians.

One way to aggregate/differentiate is 'political' – to design representative institutions so as to allow both differences and commonalities to emerge. For example, ATSIC gave institutional form to differences of region. In the wake of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission's (ATSIC's) abolition in 2004–2005, the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples (Congress) was incorporated in 2010. Congress formed after careful consideration of how to make the body 'truly representative of a diverse Indigenous polity (ensuring participation of different groups of Indigenous people including stolen generations, traditional owners, Torres Strait Islanders, youth and women for example' (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2012, pp. 183–184). Congress ceased to exist in 2019, lacking funds, but one of its main activities, the National Health Leadership Forum, has persisted in the Coalition of Peaks, a representative body of around 50 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled peak organisations and members that has recently negotiated with the Australian Government to revise the 'Closing the Gap' targets. The Coalition of Peaks embodies the institutionalised diversity of domains of service and program – education, health, housing – while bringing these multiple service-based perspectives to bear on a single (if multi-faceted) policy question: the strategies for Closing the Gap. Since the abolition of ATSIC, leaders of the Indigenous sector (made up of thousands of government-funded service organisations) have done much to form the sector into an effective *national* political lobby. On September 30, 2020, Pat Turner, in a speech to the national Press Club credibly asserted the *political* claim that the Coalition of Peaks has become the representative voice of Indigenous Australia to government (Turner, 2020). Indigenous leaders have given much thought to institutional design that would balance the demands of diversity and the need for unity among Indigenous Australians. That work of political design continued in 2020 in the Minister for Indigenous Affairs' co-design process, shaping options for the Voice(s) to Parliament.

As well as experiments in political design there are what we might call 'empirical/analytic' approaches to the representation of Indigenous commonality/diversity. It is possible to survey a sample of Indigenous Australians and then to aggregate the responses given by individuals according to variables that seem relevant: by age, by sex, by region, by level of education, etc. The best example of this approach is the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) conducted, in its most recent form, from September 2014 to June 2015 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016). The 2014–2015 NATSISS had a sample of 11 178 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in private dwellings across Australia. The NATSISS seeks to generate self-reported information about such matters as education, health and health risk factors, housing, language and culture, social networks and wellbeing, employment, safety, law and justice. The NATSISS enables us to see precise differentiations of circumstance and experience among Indigenous Australians.

In this paper, I will examine another analytical/empirical approach to representing 'Indigenous Australians' – the biennial survey known as the Reconciliation Barometer (RB). The RB was launched by Reconciliation Australia (RA) in February 2007; the first survey was conducted in 2008. The RB quantifies Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' subjective orientations that RA considers relevant to 'reconciliation'. Each survey has constituted two samples – 'Indigenous' and 'General

Community.' In this paper I will not try to draw conclusions about whether Australia is approaching 'reconciliation'. Rather, my theme is the RB's revelation of the diversity of Indigenous opinion about two matters relevant to reconciliation: whether there is trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and how Indigenous Australians see Australia's history.

What makes the RB interesting, I will argue, is that it uses a technology of representation that is suited to representing Indigenous Australians as a 'population' while eliciting data that is relevant to their presence as a 'people'. In a previous publication (Rowse, 2012), I have argued that Indigenous Australians are now represented in two rather different idioms.[1] On the one hand they are 'peoples' formed by a shared heritage (pre-colonial and colonial) and with modes of collective action (kinship structures, formal institutions) and shared identities (as Aboriginal people, as Torres Strait Islander people and as regionally and linguistically defined 'nations' such as Wiradjuri, Yanyuwa). On the other hand, they are a statistical entity, a definable category of the Australian population made up of many observable individuals and households. Observed characteristics of individuals (sociodemographic, or responses to surveys) can be aggregated to make wholes (e.g. the labour force participation rate of all Indigenous Australians, or the average fertility of all female Indigenous Australians aged 20–39 in New South Wales) according to the analytical interests of the person or organisation that is using the data. These statistical aggregates are not the same kind of 'whole' as we find in a sentence that affirms a quality of Indigenous people-hood, such as 'All Kooris know what it is like to be on bad terms with the police' or 'Indigenous Australians greeted the apology to the Stolen Generations with mixed emotions'. The difference between such statements and statistically-based generalisations that make up Closing the Gap reports is not a difference in their degree of truth but in the conventions by which they are taken to be true.

What the RB offers us is 'peoples' viewed through a 'population' lens. That is, when polling the Indigenous sample, the RB asks respondents about experiences and perceptions that are relevant to being Indigenous peoples living in Australia – such as their understandings of Australian history, their experiences of racism, the value that they attach to their heritage, their 'trust' (or lack of trust) in named authority roles. Unlike the NATSISS, the RB does not ask people about their sociodemographic characteristics (or at least, it does not report such data) because it is not seeking to quantify their features as a 'population'. However, the RB uses the representational technology of a 'population' measuring instrument; it treats the individual respondent as the primary unit of analysis and it aggregates all responses, creating arithmetic 'wholes' expressed as percentages of the sample, as I will show in tables below. When blocs of like responses are formed, the blocs are artefacts of the technology of representation, not actual collectives of people. By aggregating Indigenous Australians into blocs according to their answers to certain questions the RB has opened a unique window on Indigenous Australian diversity. To represent Indigenous Australians as a differentiated array of respondent blocs allows us to take seriously the idea that Indigenous Australians experience Australian society in significantly different ways – different not only to 'the General Community' but also different from each other. Revelation of difference is the effect of using a 'population' lens to generalise about the 'people' dimensions of Indigenous Australia.

However, it has not been the stated purpose of the RB to highlight differences among Indigenous Australians. The differences that my paper reveals are by-products of the RB, and readers will form their own views about their significance.

[1] I was enabled to see the difference between 'population' and 'people' representations by considering, among other things, research by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) on the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) gathering of population data in the census. See Martin et al., 2002; Morphy 2007a, 2007b.

Why the RB was initiated

In 1991 the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act stated the functions of the Council (henceforth CAR). They included:

> *to promote, by leadership, education and discussion, a deeper understanding by all Australians of the history, cultures, past dispossession and continuing disadvantage of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and of the need to redress that disadvantage; and to foster an ongoing national commitment to co-operate to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage; and…to report…on progress towards reconciliation between Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and the wider Australian community; and…to develop strategic plans that include a statement of the Council's goals and objectives in the promotion of the process of reconciliation and of its strategies for achieving them, together with indicators and targets for measuring the Council's performance in relation to those goals and objectives.*[2]

The CAR was legislated to cease on January 1, 2001, after producing a 'Declaration Towards Reconciliation'. Then the CAR was replaced by Reconciliation Australia (RA). In continuity with the CAR, the stated 'Object' of RA is:

> *to give effect to the Australian Declaration Towards Reconciliation through building an equitable, just and reconciled nation, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples participate equally and equitably in all areas of life, experience respectful relationships and have their history accepted in our nation's story.*[3]

RA's activities include 'providing information, education and encouraging discussion on Australia's shared history to build historical acceptance of our nation's past' and 'monitoring and reporting on progress towards reconciliation' and 'providing a forum for discussion about reconciliation'.[4]

By initiating the Barometer RA has taken two steps that make 'reconciliation' measurable by survey. First, it has conceptualised reconciliation as including five variables or clusters of variables.

> *We will know Australia is reconciled when, and only when:*
>
> *1. Positive two-way relationships built on **trust and respect** exist between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians throughout society.*
>
> *2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians participate equally and equitably in all areas of life – i.e. we have closed the gaps in life outcomes – and the distinctive individual and collective rights and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are universally recognised and respected, i.e. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are self-determining.*
>
> *3. Our political, business and community institutions actively support all dimensions of reconciliation.*
>
> *4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and rights are a valued and recognised part of a shared national identity and, as a result, there is national unity.*

[2] *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act* 1991, Section 6(1).
[3] Constitution of Reconciliation Australia, Section 4 'Object' https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/ra-constitution_23-november-2016.pdf Retrieved November 3, 2020.
[4] Constitution of Reconciliation Australia, Section 4 'Object' https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/ra-constitution_23-november-2016.pdf Retrieved November 3, 2020.

> *5. There is widespread **acceptance of our nation's history** and agreement that the wrongs of the past will never be repeated – i.e. there is truth, justice, healing and historical acceptance* (Polity Research and Consulting, 2016, p. 7, emphasis added).

Second, it has sought to operationalise each variable in the form of questions that individuals can answer; the decreasing or increasing frequency of certain answers is taken to be significant, indicating trends towards or away from 'reconciliation' among Australians. In what follows I will focus on two of the above five dimensions: 'historical acceptance' and 'trust'. In the first section, I show that a substantial minority of Indigenous Australians do not commit themselves to agreement with widely accepted narratives about the ill-treatment of Indigenous Australians in the colonisation of Australia; indeed, a substantial minority holds Indigenous Australians – not historical ill-treatment by others – responsible for their own 'disadvantage'. In the paper's second section I draw attention to the Barometer's measurement of an apparent recent rise in Indigenous trust of non-Indigenous Australians; this trend was not diminished by the Turnbull Government's October 2017 rejection of the proposal – presented by the Uluru Statement from the Heart and endorsed by the Referendum Council – that there be a referendum on constitutionally securing a First Nations Voice to Parliament.

Caveats

In the tables below, 'blocs' of opinion are represented in numerical terms – that is, as percentages of the sample. After considering what each Barometer report has said about its methods, I suggest that these quantities not be taken as precise. There are four reasons for such caution. First, the following statement by RA (Polity Research and Consulting, 2018, p. 7) applies to both the Indigenous and 'General Community' samples in the 2014, 2016 and 2018 Barometers.

> *Participants from both groups completed the survey online. Previous studies have shown that online research produces research which is at least as accurate (and sometimes more accurate) than telephone research. Another benefit of this approach is the removal of any interviewer bias that may come into play when discussing sensitive issues. Online surveys also have the advantage of allowing people to respond at their own pace, giving them enough time to properly consider important and complex issues. However, it is possible that this methodology over-samples the computer literate population which on average may be more highly-educated than the general population.*

Second, the sample sizes are small, and there are relatively large estimated margins of error for the Indigenous sample. The sample sizes and estimated margins of error at the 95% confidence interval are given in Table 1.

Third, RA warns of discontinuity between the three RBs up to and including 2012 and the three subsequent RBs. The 2014 Barometer 'contains many new measures, as well as some revisions to past questions.' As well, RA claimed 'improved "random" sampling' of the Indigenous community from 2014. Accordingly, RA advised caution when making 'direct tracking comparisons with 2008–2012 results' (Polity Research and Consulting, 2015, p. 5).

Table 1 Estimated margins of error for each edition of the Reconciliation Barometer, by sample and year of survey

Year of RB	General Community sample (n=)	Margin of error (General Community sample)	Indigenous sample (n=)	Margin of error (Indigenous sample)
2008	1007	+/-3.1%	617	+/-4%
2010	1220	+/-2.8%	704	+/-3.7%
2012	1012	+/-3.1%	516	+/-4.3%
2014	1100	+/-3.1%	502	+/-4.4%
2016	2277	+/-2.1%	500	+/-4.4%
2018	1995	+/-2.2%	497	+/-4.4%
2020	1988	+/-2.2%	495	=/-4.4%

Sources: Polity Research and Consulting, 2015, p. 5; Polity Research and Consulting, 2016, p. 5; Polity Research and Consulting 2018, pp. 6-8, Polity Research and Consulting, 2020, p. 9.

Fourth, RA decided in 2020 that in one question about 'historical acceptance' the word 'accept' was ambiguous and should be replaced by 'believe to be true' (or 'not believe to be true'). RA accordingly advises: 'All results for this question in previous ARB [Australian Reconciliation Barometer] reports should be disregarded.' I will discuss this change when we get to Table 3.

Taking all four problems into account, my approach has been to treat the results reported in the tables below as suggestive, not definitive. The point that each table makes is that there are differences among Indigenous Australians' outlooks that would not be visible other than through the RB lens. This lens does not provide sharp images, but even its blurry outlines of differences and trends are thought-provoking.

Finally, we must be careful about treating survey responses as 'opinion'. As some authors have pointed out, to represent a response to a survey question as 'opinion' is to reify an artefact of this 20th Century technology of investigation – public opinion research. The matters on which 'opinions' are to be held are determined by the agendas of those undertaking the research – in this case RA. A survey instrument cannot tell us how much a question to which a respondent gives an answer *matters* to the respondent – or indeed, whether it matters to him or her at all. And, of course, no instrument can tell us about opinions held on topics not included in its questions; a respondent may hold his/her most carefully considered views on matters about which he/she has not been polled.[5]

'Historical acceptance'

In RA's view, it is important that all Australians accept certain truths about Australia's past – stories about the colonists' mistreatment of the people whose land they forcefully occupied. In 2018, the Barometer explained how 'historical acceptance' is conducive to reconciliation:

> *We can't change the past but we can learn from it. We can make amends and we can ensure mistakes are never repeated. Our nation's past is reflected in the present and unless we can heal historical wounds, they will continue to play out in our country's future (Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 5).*

[5] See Bourdieu 1979; Osborne & Rose 1999.

As one would expect, a high proportion of the Indigenous sample rate themselves as knowing a lot about Australia's past (Table 2).

Table 2 Proportion (%) of Indigenous sample (General Community sample in brackets) answering 'fairly high' or 'very high' to the question: '*How would you describe your level of knowledge about*…' by year of survey[6]

Knowledge about…	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
The history of Australia	n/a	n/a	n/a	76 (70)	80 (70)	79 (72)	78 (66)
Histor(ies) about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia	88 (42)	89 (39)	86 (42)	73 (39)	76 (42)	74 (43)	75 (40)
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures	84 (31)	85 (28)	84 (31)	65 (30)	74 (33)	72 (38)	71 (34)

Source: Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, pp. 77, 81; Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 80; (n/a = not asked).

It is not surprising that a much higher proportion of Indigenous respondents consider themselves to be highly knowledgeable about Indigenous history and culture. As such knowledge is a subset of knowledge of the history of Australia, the difference in self-rated knowledge of 'history of Australia' is also not surprising.

So what do the Indigenous respondents – relatively confident in their knowledge – know? Table 3 shows the proportions of the Indigenous and General Community samples that *do not accept* the statements offered or who *withhold acceptance* because they are 'unsure' of the statement's truth. It also shows, in the 2020 column, the effect of the change in the question.

Since the 1970s Australia's historical narrative has been revised by research showing that colonisation was violent, and the data in the third and seventh rows reflect that majorities of both General Community and Indigenous samples accept this finding or believe it to be true. What I have sought to highlight in Table 3 is the surprisingly high proportions *yet to be fully confident in their endorsement* of these findings: either they do not accept the statement or (more commonly) they have doubts and reservations that block their acceptance/belief. The Reconciliation Barometer in 2014, 2016, 2018 asked people 'Do you accept or not accept the following as facts about Australia's past?' As I noted above, between 2018 and 2020, the pollsters decided that the word 'accept' might help to explain the surprisingly large proportions unwilling or unable to 'accept' the statements. Accordingly, rather than ask what facts they 'accept', the 2020 RB asked respondents to choose from three responses: 'I believe this is true', 'I do not believe this is true', and 'I am unsure about this'. The 2020 columns must be read with this new question in mind. The effect of changing from 'accept' to 'believe' is generally to diminish the proportion of the Indigenous sample which did not affirm that the statement. However, it would be interesting to know why about one-third of Indigenous respondents and General Community respondents still do not affirm their belief that 'frontier wars occurred across the Australian continent as a result of Indigenous people defending their traditional lands from European invasion' (statement 7)? What doubts remain in the minds of about one-fifth of Indigenous respondents about statements 1 (about child removal), 2 (about withheld voting rights) and 3 (about violent dispossession)?

[6] Note that in the RBs 2008 to 2016 the second question referred to 'history' rather than 'histories' about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia.

Table 3 Proportion (%) of Indigenous sample 'not accepting' or being 'unsure', or (in 2020) not 'believing this is true' and being 'unsure about' statements about Australian history (General Community sample in brackets), by year of survey[7]

Statement	2014	2016	2018	2020
1. Government policy enabled Aboriginal children to be removed from their families without permission until the 1970s	40 (35)	35 (33)	34 (30)	21 (19)
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people did not have full voting rights throughout Australia until the 1960s	37 (36)	36 (33)	35 (28)	18 (21)
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians were subject to mass killings, incarceration, forced removal from land and restricted movement throughout the 1800s	35 (42)	35 (36)	34 (31)	20 (25)
4. Government policy in the 1900s dictated where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians could live and be employed	41 (35)	36 (42)	39 (38)	28 (36)
5. Australia was owned by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities at the time of colonisation in 1770	31 (47)	29 (43)	n/a	n/a
6. At the time of colonisation there were at least 250 distinct Indigenous Nations, each with their own cultural identities and custodial connections to land	n/a	n/a	30 (36)	25 (35)
7. Frontier wars occurred across the Australian continent as a result of Indigenous people defending their traditional lands from European invasion	n/a	n/a	32 (43)	33 (36)

Sources: Polity Research & Consulting, 2015, p. 63; Polity Research & Consulting, 2016, p.102; Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, p. 117; Polity Research & Consulting. 2020, p. 126.

A significant difference between 2018 and 2020 (which we may plausibly attribute to the change from 'accept' to 'believe') is that most of these 'not yet convinced' respondents in 2020 were saying that they are 'unsure' rather than that they do not believe the proposition (Table 4).

The RB cannot tell us what thinking lies behind these rejections, doubts and reservations. However, Table 4 is helpful in that it highlights the uncertainty or lack of confidence among a minority of respondents in answering historical questions about Australia. What is behind 'unsureness'? Perhaps it is not only ignorance (or perceiving oneself as ignorant) but also knowledge? Respondents very confident of their grasp of history may be among those few who deny the truth of the six propositions (3–8% in 2020). They may dispute the exact terms in which each 'truth' has been expressed in the Barometer. For example, one might ask of statement 3: why restrict this to 'the 1800s'? Did not these terrible things happen also in the 20th Century? And were there 'at least 250 distinct Indigenous nations'? Confidently critical and well-informed Indigenous respondents might withhold full assent to some of these propositions.

[7] Should we combine those who do not accept a statement with those who say that they are unsure about whether to accept or refuse a statement? It depends what question we are trying to answer. My question is simply: 'What proportion of the two samples is yet to be convinced of the truth of this statement? I concede the possibility that those 'not sure' may be more willing to change their minds (in one direction or another) than those who are sure that the statement is not true.

Table 4 Proportions (%) of Indigenous sample in 2018 and 2020 not endorsing statements about Australian history

Statement	2018 do not accept	2018 unsure	2020 do not believe to be true	2020 unsure
1. Government policy enabled Aboriginal children to be removed from their families without permission until the 1970s	20	14	5	16
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people did not have full voting rights throughout Australia until the 1960s	17	18	3	15
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians were subject to mass killings, incarceration, forced removal from land and restricted movement throughout the 1800s	18	16	5	15
4. Government policy in the 1900s dictated where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians could live and be employed	18	21	6	22
5. At the time of (British) colonisation there were at least 250 distinct Indigenous Nations, each with their own cultural identities and custodial connections to land	6	24	3	22
6. Frontier wars occurred across the Australian continent as a result of Indigenous people defending their traditional lands from European invasion	9	23	8	25

Sources: Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, p. 117; Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 126.

To return to Table 3, for the Indigenous sample the proportion not accepting/believing is lower than in the General Community sample, as one might expect. It is not surprising that a lower proportion of the Indigenous sample than the General Community sample deny or feel unsure about the two statements about prior ownership (statements 5 and 6); but it is surprising that almost one-in-three Indigenous respondents did not affirm with confidence, in 2014 and 2016, that their ancestors once owned or had 'custodial connections with' the land, for I had imagined that this truth was central to contemporary Indigenous identity. It is even more surprising that, on the statements about child removal (statement 1) – the proportion of the Indigenous sample not yet convinced **still exceeds** the proportion of General Community not yet convinced. However, the difference falls within the margin of error.

The Barometer's switch from 'accept' to 'believe' invites further discussion about how statements about the past are meaningful. When we consider the truth or falsehood of narratives of the national past, we are not simply evaluating historical evidence, we are mobilising identities – emotional investments in a sense of who we are in relation to the nation and who we are in relation to other Australians. That is, the 'acceptance' of 'history' is not simply empirical and rational. 'Acceptance' mobilises feelings: what we can accept emotionally as an account of ourselves and of the communities with which we identify. Historical propositions that we believe or disbelieve have moral significance for us, and our orientation to them (acceptance or belief) is complex.

Even before the Barometer's rethinking of the word 'accept', those who framed certain questions in the RB seem to have been aware that what is at stake in accepting/believing, rejecting or hesitating over certain historical 'truths' is the respondent's moral and political position vis-à-vis fellow Australians. The last four Barometers (2014, 2016, 2018 and 2020) have posed questions about the responsibilities that 'History' imposes on Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' continuing coexistence.

The moral significance of the past: Paths to 'forgiveness'

The RB gives moral meaning to our shared historical knowledge (what we 'accept' as true) in a question using the phrase 'the wrongs of the past'. In 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2020 the Barometer asked:

> *In terms of the history of European settlement in Australia, which of the following statements do you most agree with? (a) The wrongs of the past can never be forgiven. (b) I don't believe there have been any wrongs. (c) The wrongs of the past must be rectified before all Australians can move on. (d) There should be forgiveness for the wrongs of the past and all Australians should now move on.*[8]

It is important (and all too rare in surveys) that the question included option (b) that allowed a respondent to reject the question's premise. Very few respondents – both General Community and Indigenous – believe that there have been no 'wrongs of the past', as Table 5 shows. Those who believe that there were such wrongs are offered three different ways of attaching moral significance to them. That is, the question presents three possible stances towards future actions (and the question's structure does not allow a respondent to endorse more than one). It is interesting that the question does not make explicit that the Indigenous are the forgivers and that other Australians the forgiven, but in what follows I have imagined that to 'forgive' non-Indigenous Australians is a choice for Indigenous people to make. I acknowledge that there could be other ways for respondents to understand this question.

Those choosing option (a) would refuse to forgive the wrong-doers; this might include, for example, not accepting the February 2008 apologies to the Stolen Generations spoken by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. Option (a) also implies that Indigenous Australians' entitlement to compensatory action would never terminate. Those choosing option (c) could present an agenda of 'rectifying' actions to be undertaken by those who now represent the wrong-doers; this might be an agenda of reforms by Australian governments – such as signing a treaty (or treaties), a referendum on constitutional recognition, new public policies, more resources for programs that Indigenous Australians consider beneficial, thus foreseeing an end – eventually – to Indigenous entitlement to such 'rectifying' steps. Respondents choosing option (d) would not require the representatives of the wrong-doers to take any rectifying action. Without conditions, these respondents would 'forgive' now; they would make no further reference to the wrongs ('move on'). This option could be exemplified by civic ceremonial actions such as representative Indigenous Australians formally accepting the 2008 parliamentary apologies and/or conducting what some now refer to as a 'makarrata' without punishment. Option (d) also entertains the possibility that Indigenous entitlement to compensation will terminate 'now'. I acknowledge that in the above I have presented my understanding of the stances towards the future that these three options imply; readers may see other possible implications.

[8] In 2020, the word 'settlement' was replaced by the word 'colonisation' (Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 8).

Table 5 Proportion (%) of Indigenous sample (General Community sample in brackets) endorsing statements about the 'wrongs of the past', by year of survey

The wrongs of the past	2014	2016	2018	2020
1. Can never be forgiven	14 (5)	14 (6)	16 (5)	13 (6)
2. I don't believe there have been any wrongs in the past	4 (6)	4 (5)	4 (4)	2 (2)
3. Must be rectified before all Australians can move on	37 (23)	44 (28)	40 (28)	35 (29)
4. There should be forgiveness for the wrongs of the past and all Australians should now move on	45 (66)	39 (61)	41 (63)	50 (63)

Sources: Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, p. 132; Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 141.

As Table 5 shows, forgiveness is believed to be possible by nearly all (81–85%, adding rows 3 and 4) Indigenous respondents. However, there are different views about the path to forgiveness. Indigenous respondents are evenly divided about whether conditions – someone's rectifying actions – should be placed on 'forgiving' the wrong-doers. Almost half the Indigenous respondents (45%, 39%, 41%, 50% in row 4) seem to be willing to forgive without placing conditions on forgiveness – at least, no conditions that would delay (beyond 'now') the moment when we can all 'move on'. A greater proportion of the General Community sample (66%, 61% and 63%, in row 4) has been in favour of 'moving on' after acts of forgiveness to which no 'rectifying' action need be attached.

The 2018 and 2020 Barometers took a further analytic step: cross-tabulation of the 'forgiveness' variable with the age of the respondent.

Table 6 Proportion (%) of Indigenous sample endorsing statements about 'wrongs of the past', by age, 2018 and 2020

The wrongs of the past	RB year	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	Over 64
Can never be forgiven	2018	27	19	11	12	5	12
	2020	31	15	8	4	6	0
No 'wrongs' exist	2018	6	4	6	1	2	0
	2020	1	3	3	2	0	0
Must be rectified before all Australians can move on	2018	34	48	47	28	39	41
	2020	28	31	37	54	45	9
There should be forgiveness for the wrongs of the past and all Australians should now move on	2018	32	29	37	59	53	48
	2020	40	50	52	40	49	91

Sources: Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, p. 25; Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 31.

The results (Table 6) show that the most notable difference is between the severity of the young and the lenience of the old. In 2018, in the Indigenous age groups 18 to 44, people who say that the wrong-doers could never do enough to be forgiven or who insist on 'rectifying' action before they forgive comprised:

- 61% (27 plus 34) of those aged 18–24
- 67% (19 plus 48) of those aged 25–34

- 58% (11 plus 47) of those aged 35–44.

In 2020, they comprised:

- 59% (31 plus 28) of those aged 18–24
- 46% (15 plus 31) of those aged 25–34
- 45% (8 plus 37) of those aged 35–44.

In contrast, in the 'elder' age groups (45 and above) shown in the bottom two rows, a high proportion of the Indigenous sample in 2018 and in 2020 (to a lesser extent) responded that forgiveness is possible now, a necessary step if we are to 'move on'.

The difficulty of interpreting data broken down by age is that we cannot be sure whether they are predictive. Will those who were 18–24 or 25–34 or 35–44 in 2018 and 2020 – the cohorts from which the elders of tomorrow will be drawn – continue to hold the convictions that they expressed in 2018 and 2020? As these cohorts age (and the older cohorts die) will there be a 'hardening' in the ways that Indigenous Australians consider the moral significance of the past: an increasing proportion who cannot envisage forgiveness or who will forgive only if they experience 'rectification' of some kind? The alternative way to interpret data broken down by age is to suppose that in every life cycle we pass through ways of reasoning typical of certain age groups. The figures in Table 6 are consistent with the idea that young respondents are more righteous and demanding and that they expect to be dealing with the given problem for a long time, while the old respondents have mellowed, as the end of their life draws closer, because they have learned that to forgive without conditions is inherently rewarding. The 2020 results reported in Table 5 suggest a trend in the total Indigenous sample from 'never forgiving' towards forgiveness now, without conditions.

The moral significance of the past: Explaining 'disadvantage'

The truths of the past are also morally meaningful when we explain current problems as an effect of somebody's past action. That is, historical explanations can be meaningful as ways of assigning responsibility for what has gone wrong (whose fault?) and responsibility for making wrongs right. The Barometer asked questions which implied that history is morally meaningful in this way. One such question was whether respondents agreed that *'many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are disadvantaged today because of past racial policies'*; another question asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed that *'many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are disadvantaged today because of Australia's colonial legacy*'. Majorities of both Indigenous and General Community samples agreed with both these explanations in 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2020. Table 7 draws attention to large minorities that did not agree: they either disagreed with the statement or chose not to express an opinion on it.

Table 7 Proportion (%) of Indigenous sample (General community sample in brackets) disagreeing with historical explanations of 'disadvantage' or not expressing an opinion, by year of survey

Explanation of Indigenous disadvantage	2014	2016	2018	2020
Past race-based policies	32 (48)	26 (46)	33 (45)	30 (41)
Australia's colonial legacy	38 (56)	35 (54)	40 (52)	33 (48)

Source: Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, p. 125; Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 133.

In the 2020 Barometer's analysis, RA differentiated the General Community sample into those with self-rated high and those with self-rated low historical and cultural knowledge (Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 21). The analysis then compared how 'high' and 'low' answered the question about whether Indigenous disadvantage could be explained by pointing to 'past raced-based policies' and to 'Australia's colonial legacy'. A higher proportion of the General Community sample who rated their knowledge highly agreed that these two factors were among the causes of Indigenous disadvantage. However, RA did not apply this analysis to the Indigenous sample. We may *speculate* that among the Indigenous respondents self-rated historical knowledge is associated with affirming these two historical causes of Indigenous disadvantage. But it would be better to know, for as Table 7 shows, large minorities of the Indigenous sample did not affirm these two factors as causes of Indigenous disadvantage. That is, they either rejected these explanations or preferred not to express a view. This is an intriguing phenomenon, worthy of further investigation.

The 2020 Barometer also explored the association between the forgiveness variable and the way people view the past. Unfortunately again, only the General Community responses were subject to this analysis (Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 22). The analysis showed two things. First, there is an association between belief in a certain historical explanation (that past race-based policies and the colonial legacy are causes of Indigenous disadvantage) and a conditional approach to forgiveness (that 'wrongs of the past must be rectified before all Australians can move on'). Second, the analysis showed an association between disagreeing that past race-based policies and the colonial legacy are causes of Indigenous disadvantage and the view that forgiveness could be unconditional. The analysis illuminated the moral and political significance of how respondents in the General Community sample view Australia's past. So why not apply this analysis to the Indigenous sample? It would be good to know whether the Indigenous sample's beliefs about history and disadvantage are similarly associated with their views about forgiveness. Does RA lack curiosity about Indigenous Australians' sense of history's moral significance?

Disadvantage differentiated

Disadvantage comes in many forms. One question distinguished nine kinds of disadvantage, asking: '*How much do you agree or disagree that race-based policies of past governments are a cause of the following disadvantages suffered by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians?* Table 8 shows the results. Many respondents did not wish to express a view: on all responses, in both samples, throughout four surveys (2014, 2016, 2018 and 2020), the proportion answering 'Neither agree nor disagree'' was within the range 17–30%. Perhaps such people did not agree with the question's premise that Indigenous Australians suffer from these nine 'disadvantages', or perhaps they did not feel confident of their historical knowledge of government policies or did not understand the phrase 'colonial legacy'. The proportion of Indigenous respondents responding 'neither agree nor disagree' was always lower than the proportion of the General Community sample, consistent with the finding (reported in Table 2) that a higher proportion of the Indigenous sample rated their knowledge of Australian history as 'high' or 'very high'.

Table 8 shows that, in explaining each of the nine 'disadvantages', the policies of past governments were held by between one-half and three-quarters of both samples to be 'a cause'. The proportion of the Indigenous sample endorsing that explanation was higher than the proportion of General Community, in respect to every variable. These are not surprising results. The question did not ask respondents to consider *what weight* to give to government policy compared with other possible causes. Indigenous Australians have had many experiences of government that justify thinking that government must have had *something* to do with causing the named 'disadvantage'.

Table 8 Proportion (%) of Indigenous sample (General Community sample in brackets) responding 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that past government policies are a cause of 'disadvantages', by year of survey

Disadvantages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	2014	2016	2018	2020
Lack of respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	72 (54)	76 (57)	70 (57)	71 (60)
Discrimination	74 (58)	71 (61)	71 (61)	70 (64)
Poor education	73 (58)	72 (58)	69 (58)	72 (62)
Low employment	70 (53)	78 (56)	66 (56)	69 (57)
Alcohol and substance abuse	69 (52)	71 (54)	63 (53)	66 (57)
Poor health	72 (54)	74 (55)	65 (53)	68 (58)
Lack of confidence and low self-esteem	70 (54)	74 (55)	70 (53)	68 (58)
Inadequate living conditions	65 (49)	72 (50)	67 (53)	64 (55)
Lack of personal responsibility	57 (49)	61 (51)	61 (50)	65 (49)

Sources: Polity Research & Consulting, 2015, pp. 65, 66; Polity Research & Consulting, 2016, pp. 99, 100; Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, pp. 126, 127; Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, pp. 134–135.

So, it is all the more remarkable that 20–40% of the Indigenous sample did not endorse 'race-based policies of past governments' as a cause of the nine named 'disadvantages'. Many of those not agreeing were in the 'neither agree nor disagree' camp, but the proportion of the Indigenous sample disagreeing – that is, affirming that government policies had no causal significance – was 5–15% across the nine named 'disadvantages'. I find it surprising that *any* Indigenous respondent disputed that government policies were, to some degree, a cause of a 'disadvantage'.

Responsibility: A puzzling word

Let us examine the 'disadvantage' item for which the proportion disagreeing that government policies were 'a cause' was above 10% across all four Barometers in which this question has been asked. As the bottom row of Table 8 shows, 'lack of personal responsibility' was the 'disadvantage' least likely to be blamed on government policies (by both samples) either because they disagreed or because they neither agreed nor disagreed. The proportion of the Indigenous sample *disagreeing* that governments policies were 'a cause' of a lack of personal responsibility was 14% in 2014, 12% in 2016, 11% in 2018 and 12% in 2020. It could be argued that intrinsic to the very idea of 'personal responsibility' is the supposition that no other agent can be blamed for one's lack of it. Perhaps the idea behind this particular refusal to blame past government policy was that Indigenous Australians must hold themselves responsible for their flourishing or their failure. How could a lack of personal responsibility be caused by someone other the person him or herself?

That a relatively high proportion of respondents was puzzled by this issue – whose responsibility is personal responsibility? – is shown in Table 9. In both the General Community and Indigenous

samples more than one-in-four did not know how to respond to the survey's suggestion that government policies could be one cause of Indigenous Australians' supposed lack of personal responsibility.

Table 9 Proportion (%) of Indigenous sample (General Community sample in brackets) answering 'Neither Agree nor Disagree' to the statement that past government policies are a cause of Indigenous Australians' lack of personal responsibility, by year of survey

Lack of personal responsibility as a disadvantage	'Neither Agree nor Disagree' 2014	'Neither Agree nor Disagree' 2016	'Neither Agree nor Disagree' 2018	'Neither Agree nor Disagree' 2020
Past government policies are a cause of Indigenous Australians' lack of personal responsibility	29 (30)	27 (28)	27 (28)	20 (30)

Sources: Polity Research & Consulting, 2015, p. 66; Polity Research & Consulting, 2016, p. 100; Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, 1p. 27; Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 134.

When the RBs uses the word 'responsible', we are reminded that its meaning is tricky. The word 'responsible' marks the intersection of two discourses that should be distinguished but often are not: a discourse about what happened in the past to give rise to the present and a discourse identifying an agent who could and should act to remedy the resulting problem. 'Responsible' may point both to cause (who or what made something happen) and to remedy (who is morally obliged to fix up what happened). It is logically possible to think that while government actions have largely created Indigenous disadvantage, Indigenous people are best placed to overcome their disadvantage (as government action has proven to be ineffective or worse). That Indigenous Australians are largely or solely 'responsible' aligns with the idea that Indigenous Australians are (or could be) 'self-determining'. It aligns also with the idea that they are authors of their own problems and that they can be blamed if their problems persist. One influential view is that Indigenous Australians have a right and a duty to take responsibility for themselves; another is that governments have never lived up to their responsibilities to enable Indigenous Australians to take such responsibility. Noel Pearson was wrestling with the complex meaning of 'responsibility' when, in his October 2016 Keith Murdoch Oration (Pearson, 2016), he told of his journey through the writings of Daniel Patrick Moynihan and William Ryan and his understanding of the problem of (what some call) 'blaming the victim'. The implications of 'responsibility' are at the heart of the conversation that Indigenous Australians are having among themselves and with the makers of social policy.

Table 10 Proportion of Indigenous sample (General Community sample in brackets) agreeing, disagreeing or refusing to offer a view on whether Indigenous Australians are responsible for their own disadvantages, by year of survey

Response	2014	2016	2018	2020
Agree	25 (34)	24 (32)	33 (35)	28 (29)
Disagree	45 (30)	51 (32)	41 (33)	41 (40)
Neither Agree nor Disagree	30 (36)	25 (36)	25 (32)	32 (30)

Sources: Polity Research & Consulting, 2015, p. 64; Polity Research & Consulting, 2016, p. 98; Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, p. 124; Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 131.

It is therefore not a straightforward matter to interpret data elicited by a Barometer question asking people to agree or disagree with the statement *'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are responsible for their own disadvantages today*' (Table 10). I sympathise with the many respondents that neither agreed nor disagreed with such a puzzling statement, and I wonder what those of definite opinion (agreeing or disagreeing) were thinking.

I suspect that those who 'disagreed' were thinking about causes of disadvantage that are currently beyond Indigenous people's control; they were exonerating Indigenous Australians and hoping that the actions of others (particularly governments) would become more enabling. But what was on the minds of the Indigenous respondents who 'agreed'? Were they 'blaming' Indigenous Australians for the persistence of their 'disadvantage' and implicitly urging them to make a greater effort? Or were they asserting a claim to empowerment? Or both – for these two thoughts are not logically incompatible. Another interesting feature of Table 10 is that the responses of the Indigenous and General Community samples have become more alike in their distribution across the three possible answers. Perhaps 'responsibility' is an enigma we all share?

Measuring 'trust'

As I pointed out in my Introduction, RA reasons that certain changes in the subjectivities of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are essential to reconciliation, and the Barometer names and seeks to measure two subjective variables: 'trust' and 'respect'. In this section I will deal with 'trust'. RA's interest in measuring 'trust' rests on the common-sense view (which I do not dispute) that trust is necessary if a relationship is to be strong. In its 2010 report on the Barometer, RA (Auspoll, 2010, p. 22) said: 'Some of the most defining measures of the Barometer examine how well we regard the overall relationship between us, as well as the fundamental levels of trust and acceptance that underpin a strong relationship.' The 2018 RB (Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, p. 5) affirms: 'to achieve reconciliation, we need to develop strong relationships built on trust and respect, and that are free of racism.' But how is 'trust' to be measured in a survey?

The Barometer does not ask each respondent to give their own rating of the trustworthiness of Indigenous Australians or 'other Australians'. Rather, the Barometer asks respondents to be observers of others' trust or lack of trust: *How would you describe the level of trust between the following groups of people?* (Auspoll, 2010, p. 27). The survey then nominates the two 'groups' as being 'Indigenous Australians' and 'other Australians'. The Barometer reports have treated perceived trust between these two social categories as if it were a proxy for actual trust between people belonging to the two social categories. That is, the Barometer's interpretive rule is that if it is the opinion of a large proportion of respondents that trust between groups X and Y is 'very low' then trust between individuals from X and individuals from Y must be very low.

The Barometer reports have not ever acknowledged that this inference is debatable. However, one question in the 2012 Barometer gave grounds for doubting whether perceived trust between two named social categories is a good proxy variable for the trust that respondents actually place (or refuse) in persons or organisations from a named category. Respondents to the 2012 survey were asked to agree or disagree with the statement *'I would feel fine if I had a child who decided to marry an Indigenous person'*. Reporting that only 14% of the General Community sample disagreed with this proposition, the Barometer (Auspoll, 2012, p. 31) commented:

> *Most [general community] respondents would feel fine if they had a child who decided to marry an Indigenous person… It is encouraging that this very personal measure of the relationship is*

> *strong despite the perceived high levels of prejudice and low levels of trust outlined [elsewhere in this report].*

The Report was referring to the finding that, in 2012, 78% of the General Community sample said that 'Trust that other Australians have for Indigenous people' is fairly low or very low (Auspoll, 2012, p. 9). The difference between the two measures of trust, in the same survey, is intriguing. When General Community respondents were asked about what they themselves would think and do in a situation specified by the question, they were more likely to give an answer aligning with the ideals of reconciliation than when they are asked to generalise about what 'other Australians' think. Which question in 2012 better measured general community 'trust' towards Indigenous Australians: asking what the respondent would think about their child marrying and Indigenous person, or asking the respondent for a generalised view of the attitudes of people like him or herself in any situation? The RB dropped the 'child…marry' question, for reasons that RA has not explained. Whether the reader thinks that the question should have been continued or abandoned, the issue underlines the difficulty of surveying 'trust'. Readers should receive what follows with caution.

Early (2008, 2010, 2012) Barometers: Trust is absent

For the moment let us go along with the idea that perceptions of others' trust can be quantified as 'trust' itself. What results have been obtained? In the first three Barometers (2008, 2010, 2012) RA inferred that there was little trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Here is a summary of the measurement of trust (based on Auspoll, 2012, p. 30).

The General Community sample's perception of Indigenous trust for 'other Australians'

In 2008, only 12% of the 'general community' said that the 'Trust that Indigenous people have for other Australians' was very high or fairly high, 81% said it was fairly low or very low, and 8% did not know. These proportions had changed little in 2010. The 'trust that Indigenous people have for other Australians' was still perceived as very high or fairly high by only 9%, and 81% still rated that trust as fairly low or very low, and 10% did not know. In 2012, 11% of general community respondents said that the 'Trust that Indigenous people have for other Australians' was very high or fairly high, while 78% rated the level of trust as fairly low or very low. There was a slight increase to 11% of the sample who did not know.

The General Community sample's perception of other Australians' trust for Indigenous Australians

In 2008, only 12% of the 'general community' said that 'Trust that other Australians have for Indigenous people' was very high or fairly high, 82% said it was fairly low or very low, and 6% did not know. These proportions had changed little in 2010. Only 13% thought that other Australians' trust for Indigenous Australians was very high or fairly high, and 81% thought that trust was fairly low or very low – with 6% not knowing. In 2012, 13% said that 'Trust that other Australians have for Indigenous people' was very high or fairly high, while 78% rated it fairly low or very low.

The Indigenous sample's perception of Indigenous trust for 'other Australians'

In 2008, 12% of the Indigenous sample thought that Indigenous people have very high or fairly high trust for other Australians, and 86% thought Indigenous Australians had only fairly low or very low trust for other Australians, and only 2% did not know. These proportions had not changed in 2010. In 2012, 15% thought that the trust that Indigenous people have for other Australians was very high or fairly

high, while 84% rated it fairly low or very low. The proportion who answered 'don't know' fell from 2% to 1%.

The Indigenous sample's perception of 'other Australians'' trust for Indigenous Australians

In all three surveys, no Indigenous respondents thought that 'other Australians' had very high trust for Indigenous Australians. In 2008, only 4% of the Indigenous sample thought that other Australians had fairly high trust for Indigenous Australians, while 91% thought that other Australians had very low or fairly low trust for Indigenous Australians – with 5% not knowing. These proportions had changed little in 2010, with 91% continuing to see 'other Australians' as having low or very low trust for Indigenous Australians. The proportion not knowing was down to 3%, and only 6% thought that 'other Australians' had 'fairly high' trust for Indigenous Australians. In 2012, only 5% of the Indigenous sample thought that the trust that 'other Australians' have for Indigenous Australians was fairly high, and 93% thought that 'other Australians' had fairly low or very low trust for Indigenous Australians. The proportion not knowing remained low at 3%.

In summarising all four measures of trust, the Barometer 2012 said: 'There is a low level of mutual trust between the two groups' (Auspoll, 2012, p. 9). As well, we should note three features of the 2008, 2010 and 2012 data series:

1. The proportion of the General Community sample 'not knowing' is roughly double the proportion of the Indigenous sample. Perhaps the question of trust between Indigenous and other Australians was salient to a larger proportion of the Indigenous samples?
2. Both samples saw the category to which they belong as more *trusting of* the other than *trusted by* the other.
3. No Indigenous respondents rated as 'very high' the perceived trust of other Australians for Indigenous Australians.

If we go along with the idea that 'perceived trust' is a good proxy for actual trust, then it seems that 'reconciliation' suffered from a lack of mutual trust in the years 2008–2012.

The measured growth in trust 2014–2020

In 2014, RA reviewed its survey instrument, discontinuing some questions, continuing others and adding some new questions. The question used for quantifying trust remained as it had been in the 2008, 2010 and 2012 surveys. That is, in 2014, 2016 and 2018 the Barometer continued to use a question that elicited *perceptions* of trust: *'How would you describe the level of trust between the following groups of people?'* The two 'groups' were 'other Australians' and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' (Polity Research & Consulting, 2016, p. 28).

As Table 11 shows, the percentage of each sample perceiving high or very high levels of trust had risen considerably – particularly in Indigenous sample responses.

The proportion of Indigenous respondents who think that other Australians have fairly high or very high trust for Indigenous Australians was 34% in 2014 and had risen to 47% by 2020. The proportion of Indigenous respondents who feel that Indigenous Australians have fairly high or very high trust for other Australians was 39% in 2014 and 44% in 2020. It would appear that there has been growth in the proportion of Indigenous Australians who perceive themselves to be trusted by, and to be trusting of, other Australians.

Table 11 Proportions (%) of General Community and Indigenous samples answering 'fairly high' or 'very high' to the question: 'How would you describe the level of trust between the following groups of people?' by year of survey

Year	General Community perception: other Australians' trust for Indigenous	General Community perception: Indigenous trust for other Australians	Indigenous perception: other Australians' trust for Indigenous	Indigenous perception: Indigenous trust for other Australians
2014	26	20	34	39
2016	24	19	35	46
2018	27	21	40	46
2020	30	22	47	44

Sources: Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, p. 30; Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, pp. 36, 154, 162, 163.

The rise in the proportion of 'General Community' respondents who feel that Indigenous Australians have fairly high or very high trust for 'other Australians' was not as great: about one-in-five throughout the period 2014 to 2020 (up from 12–13% in the period 2008–2012). The proportion of 'General Community' respondents who feel that 'other Australians' have fairly high or very high trust for Indigenous Australians rose from 26% in 2014 to 30% in 2020.

Indigenous trust for specific categories of actors

Continuing to develop its approach to measuring 'trust', RA added in the 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2020 Barometers: *'Overall, how much trust do you feel there is between you and the following groups?* This question was new in two ways: the question elicits the respondent's *own feeling of trust or distrust*, ('you'); and the question nominates certain institutional roles as those with whom the respondent might or might not feel mutual trust, not the generalised categories 'other Australians' and 'Indigenous Australians'. In reporting the data, I will confine my attention to the Indigenous sample, as it is the trust felt by Indigenous Australians that really interests me in this paper.

Table 12 Proportion (%) of Indigenous sample answering either 'fairly high' or 'very high' when asked how much trust there is between themselves and certain institutional authorities, by year of survey

Institutional role	2014	2016	2018	2020
Doctors, nurse, medical staff etc.	87	84	82	86
Police	70	60	68	67
School teachers and principals	69	67	63	72
Local shop-owners and staff	76	72	74	77
Employers	64	60	59	63
Real estate agents	33	35	33	49

Sources: Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, pp. 40–41; Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, pp. 39, 41.

When Indigenous respondents were given the opportunity to think about their interactions with named institutional authorities a large proportion reported mutual trust – with the exception of how they feel

about real estate agents. (A relatively high proportion of Indigenous respondents (27% in 2020) answered 'Don't Know' when asked about trust between themselves and real estate agents; perhaps many respondents have not found their housing through the rental market or bought or sold a house.)

Four observations emerge from the history of the RB's 'trust' question. First, as the 2020 Barometer pointed out, in the questions that specify particular professions as objects of trust the proportion of 'Don't Know' responses has fallen during 2014–2020 (Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 43). Perhaps the question has become more salient to Indigenous respondents. Second, it is apparent that the 'trust' measures used in the Barometer differ. Whereas questions that elicit respondents' own 'trust' and which specify an institutional role of some kind with whom the respondent interacts show that a high proportion of Indigenous Australians reported feeling trusting and trusted, questions that elicit respondents' opinion about the trust felt by others yield data suggesting much lower 'trust levels'.[9] Third, Indigenous respondents differentiate among the institutions that they deal with; they sense a trusting relationship with some institutions more frequently than with others. Fourth, while the question 'How would you describe the level of trust between the following groups of people?' is open to criticism, its consistent use over seven Barometer's shows increases in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who see trust between Indigenous and 'other Australians.' Why might there have been such increases in perceived trust?

A change in Indigenous mood?

If the increases in 'trust' are not merely an artefact of a changed sampling procedure between 2012 and 2014 (recalling RA's caution, quoted in my Introduction) then what could explain the change?[10] What has made more Indigenous respondents feel that Indigenous Australians trust other Australians – a rise from 12% ('very high' plus 'fairly high') in 2008 and 2010 to 46% ('very high' plus 'fairly high') in 2016 and 2018, and 44% in 2020? What explains a huge increase in the proportion of the Indigenous Australian sample that sees 'other Australians' as trusting them, from 4% ('fairly high') in 2008 to 47% ('fairly high' plus 'very high') in 2020? What events in Australia's very recent history (since 2012) have given rise to a more widespread perception among Indigenous Australians that they can trust other Australians and are trusted by other Australians? I do not know, but here are some possible explanations.

Constitutional recognition

A nation-wide program of consultation about possible forms of 'constitutional recognition' took place in 2011, initiating a debate – still running at the time of writing – about several recognition options. In the period 2013 to 2018 there were programs of public consultation by Joint Select Committees of the Australian Parliament and by the Referendum Council. It is likely that through this sustained and unprecedented series of consultations many Indigenous Australians have come to feel that their opinions really matter to the wider Australian community; they may also have perceived that non-Indigenous Australia was poised to make substantial redress for past actions, in the form of constitutional recognition, after listening. In surveying the context of the Barometers in 2014 and 2016, RA (Polity Research & Consulting, 2016, p. 7) said:

[9] Comparison of the data in Table 11 and Table12 is also limited by the fact that all of these institutional roles may be filled by both Indigenous and 'other Australians'.

[10] Notwithstanding the Barometer's expressed caution – quoted in my Introduction – the 2018 report includes a graph showing 'trust' data from 2008 to 2018 (Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, p. 30). The 2020 report graphed the years 2014–2020 (Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 154).

The Coalition under both Abbott and Turnbull has shown strong support for Constitutional Recognition, although the process has slowed to undertake Indigenous consultation. These 'mixed messages' are arguably both helping and hindering the reconciliation cause.

The survey for the 2016 Barometer was deployed between July 14 and August 8, 2016, at the same time as the Referendum Council (appointed by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in December 2015) was in the first phase of its program of consultation: 'leadership meetings' with approximately 150 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional owners, peak body representatives and individuals, held in Broome (June 28–29, 2016), Thursday Island (July 12–13, 2016) and Melbourne (July 18–19, 2016). While RA may have seen this as 'slowing down' and as sending mixed messages, it is possible that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public read the process more positively: as a continuation of a very welcome commitment to listening by Australia's political elite. The Indigenous sample 'trust' data for 2014 and 2016 may measure widespread Indigenous satisfaction with evident political progress.

If being consulted about constitutional recognition engendered the feeling among more Indigenous Australians that they were in a trusting and trusted relationship with non-Indigenous Australians, then we would expect that the 'trust level' would have fallen in 2018 and stayed down in 2020, for in October 2017 the Turnbull Government responded negatively to results of these consultations – the 'Uluru Statement from the Heart' (2017) and the *Final Report* of the Referendum Council (2017). Indigenous leaders expressed dismay at the government's rejection of the proposal that an 'Indigenous Voice to Parliament' be put to the Australian voters as a constitutional amendment. But did this diminish 'trust'? No. As Table 11 shows, the 2018 Barometer recorded *not a fall but a rise* in the proportion of the Indigenous sample perceiving other Australians as trusting Indigenous Australians, and it found no decline in the proportion perceiving Indigenous trust for 'other Australians.' These buoyant results continued in the 2020 Barometer. Many non-Indigenous Australians have expressed public support for the Uluru Statement and the Referendum Council report; and they have criticised the Turnbull and Morrison Governments. Perhaps this reassured the Indigenous respondents in 2018 and 2020 that there is much trust in their relationship? And perhaps there have been other factors in the lives of Indigenous Australians that have sustained the belief that Indigenous Australians are trusting and are trusted?

Indigenous public culture

One possible source of confidence that trust has been growing is the emergence of self-consciously 'Indigenous' public culture. Two notable examples are 'the Deadlys' and the National Indigenous Television network (NITV). The Deadlys were the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Music, Sport, Arts and Community Awards, annual prize-giving from the mid-1990s to 2014. According to Michelle Kelly (Kelly, 2019, p. 40) they 'enacted the will of Australia's Indigenous peoples to assert value without reference to the field of cultural legitimacy implicit in prizes awarded by industry or government.' The Australian Government became a sponsor of these increasingly popular events run by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, before withdrawing support (inexplicably) in 2014. While the Deadlys lasted, they engendered great pride and they affirmed belief in criteria by which Indigenous Australians valued one another. A parallel development in public culture was the inception of NITV. Has it not been a profession of Indigenous Australians' self-belief that they can enjoy seeing programs by and about 'our mob' and invite other Australians' to share in that pleasure? NITV launched with limited coverage in 2007, and it became a national free to air service, as part of the Special Broadcasting Service, in December 2012. Both the Deadlys and NITV realised a widespread aspiration by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be entrusted with public resources to represent themselves within Australia's public culture. It is plausible to conjecture that both the

Deadlys and NITV have helped to sustain the idea – among Indigenous Australians – that they are trusting and trusted in their relationship with Australians at large – that is, that they are appreciated for what they *are*. Of course, this is no more than my conjecture. There are no data in the 2014–2020 RBs that record Indigenous Australians' interest in or feelings about NITV.

Cultural confidence

However, there are data on what we might call 'cultural confidence'. The 2014, 2016 and 2018 RBs asked the Indigenous respondents: '*Can you be true to your culture or personal beliefs in the following contexts?*.[11] In 2020 this question was modified by deleting 'or personal beliefs': The contexts specified were: 'In the general community', 'in my interactions with government departments', 'in my interactions with police or the courts', 'at work', and (introduced in 2018) 'in my interactions with educational institutions'.

Table 13 Proportion of Indigenous sample answering 'yes, always' to 'Can you be true to your culture [or personal beliefs] in the following contexts?' by year of survey

Context	2014	2016	2018	2020
General community	51	53	50	42
Interacting with government departments	47	46	45	43
Interactions with police or the courts	46	47	45	41
At work	50	52	42	47
Interactions with educational institutions	n/a	n/a	53	45

Source: Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, p. 112; Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 118.

The data in Table 13 do not tell us whether the five contexts challenged the respondent (so that 'being true' took an effort of courage, will and defiance) or whether these contexts were experienced as welcoming the respondent's 'culture'. The 'yes, always' response measures confidence that the self can be expressed, and that there are non-Indigenous interlocutors – various in their disposition – who are taking notice of them as the Indigenous persons that they wish to be. Such cultural confidence is not the same thing as 'trust', but it is possible that people who feel the confidence to be themselves also find it possible to see themselves as trusting and being trusted in their relationship with non-Indigenous people.

The ABS has talked to Indigenous Australians about what I am referring to as 'cultural confidence'. It is well known that since the late 20th Century the total Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population has been rising faster than can be explained by births to Aboriginal women. Among the growth factors is an increasing willingness to identify self and/or children as Indigenous. To explore this factor, the ABS conducted a series of focus groups in 2012 (ABS, 2012). Focus group participants were self-selecting: participation was open to people who identified as being an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person. Because a self-selection bias toward consistent identification is possible in the participants' views, the findings are not representative of the views of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but they point to what may be on people's minds when they respond to the census by identifying themselves or household members as Indigenous. The factors militating *against* identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander were:

[11] It is a pity that this question was not put to the General Community sample among whom there may be many who find that Australian society makes it difficult for them to be true to their culture and personal beliefs. We do not know what proportion of non-Indigenous Australians experience these alienations.

> *The belief and experience that identifying can have negative repercussions for the individual and the wider community. The belief and experience that identifying may lead to racism, discrimination or differential treatment. Learned behaviour as a result of past experiences. Being offended at being asked the identity question in certain contexts. Needing more information about the reasons the information is being collected* (ABS, 2012).

From the continuing strength of the 'identification' factor in the growth of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population we can infer that these discouraging factors have been abating.

A sense of opportunity?

Not only did the 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2020 RBs elicit unprecedented levels of Indigenous respondent perceptions of Indigenous trust and Indigenous perceptions that they were trusted; they also elicited a comparatively optimistic Indigenous respondent outlook. The evidence for Indigenous respondent optimism is in how they answered the question: *Thinking ahead 12 months, how do you see your prospects will change in the following areas?* As Table 14 shows, from 2014 to 2018 a higher proportion of Indigenous Australians than the General Community sample expected improvement in 'home life', 'financial situation' and 'working situation'.

Table 14 Proportions (%) of Indigenous and General Community (in brackets) respondents' expectations of change in the next 12 months, by context and year of survey

Expectation	2014	2016	2018	2020
My home life will improve	29 (22)	34 (20)	31 (21)	27 (17)
My financial situation will improve	29 (24)	36 (24)	33 (25)	29 (21)
My working situation will improve	26 (19)	35 (20)	27 (21)	25 (17)
My home life will get worse	13 (7)	11 (7)	12 (8)	13 (7)
My financial situation will get worse	27 (22)	21 (22)	24 (18)	17 (19)
My working situation will get worse	16 (11)	13 (10)	16 (10)	15 (12)

Sources: Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, p. 63; Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 66–67.

To be sure, Table 14 also shows that a higher proportion of Indigenous respondents than in the General Community sample thought that things will get worse.

In Table 15, we can compare the Indigenous and General Community samples in another way: the proportions who expected things to stay the same. The data in Table 15 suggests that a lower proportion of the Indigenous sample than the General Community sample expected no change in their home life, finances and working life in the next 12 months. That is, Indigenous respondents were more likely to be experiencing their social environment as dynamic – soon to change for the better or the worse. Change was afoot, and a higher proportion of the Indigenous respondents were anticipating change for the better than change for the worse. As the 2016 Barometer commented (Polity Research & Consulting, 2016, p. 85): '…for many people in the Indigenous community, there is more room for things to get better than they are currently, but also a growing optimism they will.'

Table 15 Proportions (%) of Indigenous and General Community (in brackets) sample respondents expecting no change in the next 12, by context and year of survey

Expectation that things will stay the same in next 12 months, in…	2014	2016	2018	2020
Home life	58 (72)	55 (73)	58 (71)	60 (76)
Financial situation	44 (54)	43 (54)	43 (57)	54 (60)
Working situation	58 (70)	52 (69)	57 (68)	60 (71)

Source: Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, p. 63; Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, p. 66.

Expected improvements in the immediate future may be a portent of actual upward social mobility. One of the factors making upward social mobility possible is the willingness of teachers and employers to value people on their merit, regardless of their sex, age, 'race' or ethnicity. The RBs have asked Australians what they think about the dynamics of schooling and labour markets – whether they deal with each individual on his/her merits. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statements *'Employers in Australia follow the Equal Opportunity laws'* and *'The Australian education system prepares people well to find a job'*. We can interpret their answers as indicating whether respondents think that that they will find a place in society that reflects their merits: from schooling that is effective they will enter labour markets where prejudice is minimised by legal regulation.

Table 16 Proportion (%) of Indigenous sample (General Community sample in brackets) agreeing with statements about education and employment, by year of survey

Statement	2014	2016	2018	2020
Employers in Australia follow the Equal Opportunity laws	32 (41)	35 (41)	42 (44)	51 (43)
The Australian education system prepares people well to find a job	27 (32)	26 (30)	32 (32)	38 (34)

Sources: Polity Research & Consulting, 2018, p. 64; Polity Research & Consulting, 2020, pp. 68, 150.

The data in Table 16 suggests that only a minority of all Australians (between one-quarter and one-half) have confidence that schooling and labour markets work helpfully. However, we should note two points. First, many people were not sure how to answer: the 'Don't Know' responses were a high proportion (22–35%) in both Indigenous and General Community samples. Second, the proportion of the Indigenous sample with confidence that school and labour market work well for them seems to be rising, while the figures for the General Community sample are static (up and down within the margin of error).

My final suggestion about possible reasons for an apparent rise in Indigenous perceptions of trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is to point to the growth in the number of Indigenous enterprises: it has been 'much higher than that of other Australian businesses for more than a decade' (Hunter & Foley, 2019, p. 191). Hunter and Foley attribute this 'partially…to the Indigenous Procurement Policy.' The Australian Government Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP) has grown rapidly in the period since 2012, from 30 Indigenous businesses winning $6.2 million of Commonwealth contracts in 2012–13 to over 1400 Indigenous businesses winning $1.8 billion in Commonwealth contracts since the introduction of the IPP. [12]

[12] As reported by Ben Morton in Parliament Thursday, CPD HoR 19 September 2019, p. 3730.

To sum up Part Two: insofar as the RB *can* measure Indigenous trust in fellow Australians and in Australian institutions, there seems to have been a rise, since 2012, in the proportion of Indigenous Australians who think that they trust and are trusted by 'other Australians'. If this change is not solely an effect of changed sampling, we need an explanation. I have pointed to the following as contexts relevant to the growth of perceptions of trust and actual feelings of trust: the improved standing of Indigenous people and their cultures, in the eyes of other Australians, including public endowment of the means of self-representation; the recent program of organised consultations about the possibility of constitutional recognition; a growing proportion of Indigenous Australians' perceiving prospects of improvements in their home life, finance and work situation; a growing proportion perceiving schooling as effective and labour markets as fair; and an expanding IPP that substantially improves the environment of Indigenous businesses.

Conclusion – Policy relevance?

Reconciliation has been a bipartisan policy commitment since 1991, and RA presents the RB as a statistical measure of progress in the pursuit of reconciliation. However, although the 'trust' measures (and others which I have not mentioned) do point to progress in reconciliation, it is not my purpose in this paper to say what is working or not working in public policy. My reading of the Barometer is relevant not to 'policy' but to habits of thought and figures of political rhetoric in which Indigenous Australia is represented as a unitary entity. I take advantage of the fact that the RB views the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'peoples' through a lens that reveals intra-Indigenous differences.

That lens is a survey. The relevant characteristics of the survey as a technology of representation are that (1) surveys treat the individual respondent as the basic analytical unit and (2) survey analysis can aggregate individual responses to produce quantified differentiations within the population represented in the sample. Like the census and the NATSISS, surveys of Australians can represent Indigenous Australia as a defined 'population' with certain sociodemographic characteristics. As I explained in my Introduction, the RB is not interested in a sociodemographic representation; the more important data that it seeks are about 'opinions', experiences, feelings and understandings of history – 'cultural' variables. Using a 'population' technology of representation – the survey – the Barometer asks 'people' questions and the data suggest that to every generalisation about Indigenous Australians there are many significant exceptions. There are two possible ways to read RB data. One reading emphasises the commonalities among Indigenous Australians – what they 'mostly' think – and pays little or no attention to two kinds of answers: those in the numerical minority, and the 'Don't Know' answers through which respondents hint their lack of empathy with the question. The other way to read the Barometer – the way that I have pursued in this paper – highlights differences.

To dwell on the commonalities is to follow well established political habit, treating the Barometer as an evidentiary base for representations of Indigenous Australians as a whole and reproducing the idea that the sample represents a 'people' ('Indigenous Australians'). Australia's political life abounds in generalised statements – of varying plausibility – about what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people think and what they consider to be their rights as Indigenous 'peoples'. Recently, with enormous political effort, it has been possible to constitute the Indigenous Australian public through a series of assemblies – 12 regional and one national – at which delegates addressed the issues of constitutional recognition and produced a moving and consequential 'Statement from the Heart' (Uluru Statement from the Heart, 2017). The result was a politically significant artefact: a consensus statement by Indigenous Australia. Such statements are politically important and I do not wish to denigrate them. However, we have a choice about whether to use the Barometer only to evidence united peoplehood. What the Barometer adds to politically crafted representations of collective

'Indigenous opinion' is the public opinion survey's unique facility for dis-unification of 'peoples.' My reading of the Barometer has looked for differences, rather than commonalities.

If we take seriously that there are significant differences of experience and outlook among Indigenous Australians, then why not take the opportunity to ask: what differences does the Barometer reveal? Such a reading cannot show differences with precision. While the RB can be read to delineate differences among Indigenous Australians, the small samples used mean that the outlines of these quantified distinctions are not sharp but blurred.

Nonetheless, reading for difference brings surprises and puzzles – especially in the domain that RA calls 'historical acceptance' – a phrase that refers not only to factual knowledge but also to the emotional, moral and political significance of such facts. For example, what understandings of Australian history and what self-understandings underpin some Indigenous respondents' non-agreement with or uncertainty about the statements that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people once owned Australia and were violently dispossessed of it? What work of identity-formation is effected by declining to endorse statements about the removal of children? What understandings of 'responsibility' – individual and collective – are engaged when people are asked to think about the 'colonial legacy' and to consider history as 'wrongs of the past' for which forgiveness (condition or unconditional) may or may not be possible? How do Indigenous respondents reason about their own agency when considering the historical roots of 'disadvantage'? What sense of belonging to a community shapes a respondent's answer to a question about one kind of Australian 'trusting' another kind of Australian? Why do some Indigenous respondents feel a relationship of trust with police, while others do not? The RB constitutes differentiated Indigenous blocs of 'opinion' on such issues, but the thought processes giving rise to these data are illuminated no better than when a lightning bolt flashes over a landscape at night. What we can be sure of, thanks to the RB, is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of thinking about their past, present and future relationship with the rest of Australian society are more complex and differentiated than any single political evocation of their peoplehood can encompass. This is the sobering result of viewing 'peoples' through the lens of a 'population' technology of representation.

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