



Reconciliation, culture and leadership

by Linda Burney

Adult Learning Commentary Number 11, 23 May 2001

I live in a country struggling to come to terms with a brutal past, and not only in the relationship between black and white Australians. Much of Anglo-Australia arrived in chains as convicts; men, women and children who suffered terrible brutality.

The formal, legislated, 10-year reconciliation process in Australia aimed at healing the wounds between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Many Aboriginal people argue that this process delivered more for white Australia than it changed the life chances or progressed the rights agenda for Aboriginal Australians. The general public has improved its understanding of indigenous people, experience and culture. But there has been little advance in the rights agenda. Equity and the 'fair-go' – the cornerstone of the Australian ethos – is so removed from the daily experience of indigenous people that it is meaningless.

True reconciliation between the Australian nation and indigenous people requires national acknowledgment of the dispossession, oppression and degradation of Aboriginal people. As Sir William Deane once said: "Where there is no room for national pride or national shame about the past, there can be no national soul. The past is never fully gone. It is absorbed into the present and the future." Current statistics on indigenous mortality, health, education and employment tell a sorry story of sickness, suffering and death. The overwhelming disadvantage of Aboriginal people today flows from past injustice and oppression.

I describe myself not as an Aboriginal leader but as an Aboriginal person in a leadership position. The notion of being a leader in the Western sense does not sit easily with me. In our cultural context, leadership is not about the individual. It is not given or measured by money, media attention, high-level appointments or other white constructs. Leadership is attained when you have proven

you understand and can deal with responsibility. Acting as a leader requires considering the whole indigenous story including the abuse of our human rights; our aspirations and humour; our solidarity and our differences; our diversity of 300 nations and languages; our connection to country; and our dire socio-economic circumstances.

Good leadership is about inclusion, a common ownership and a common direction. If we can create situations where people can truly belong, then we can begin to address the terrible alienation that Aboriginal people experience within Australian society today.

And why is that? I grew up in a country whose mirror did not reflect me or my people. Our image in that mirror was ugly, distorted or non-existent. Australia's history has been written by the conqueror. For the first 10 years of my life I did not enjoy citizenship and along with my family, I was categorised under the Flora and Fauna Act of New South Wales.

In the context of the campaign for reconciliation in Australia, Patrick Dodson said something that I carry with me, and often think about and use as a tool for leadership. "Together, indigenous and other Australians are called on to choose the path we now take; our choices will determine the future shape of our nation."

Will Australia heal the wounds of its past, with a generosity of spirit and a wisdom of intellect? Or will the wounds of dispossession and injustice fester, and the same old conflicts linger, because the imperative of reconciliation did not inform crucial decisions?

Indigenous or not, the biggest mistake that we make is to think that we sit completely away from each other. Yes, in many ways we are different, but true leaders look at our similarities and our collective understanding. We need to put our differences aside, and to focus on what unites us.