

**'BUILDING TRUST AND A NEW RELATIONSHIP – A FUTURE FOR
RECONCILIATION?'**

Parliamentary Library's 2026 Reconciliation Week Address

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INTRODUCTION

- I acknowledge and pay my respects to **the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples**, the traditional owners of the Country on which we gather today. I acknowledge elders past and present and that their connection to this land long predates every institution represented in this place. I thank them for their ongoing hospitality and offering us safe passage and stay while we are here on their Country.
- I also **acknowledge my Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander friends and colleagues here today**, and the Countries you come here from. Thank you for joining me.
- I thank the Parliamentary Librarian, **Mr Steven Fox**, for the invitation to deliver this address, and **the Honourable Anne Stanley MP** for her generous introduction.
- I acknowledge **Dr Steven Kennedy PSM** and **Mr Matt Yannopolous PSM**, respective Secretaries of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the Department of Finance, **Julie-Ann Guivarra**, CEO of the National Indigenous Australians Agency, and my colleagues from **ANU and the Economic Empowerment Alliance**.
- Thank you all for taking the time to come along.
- I would also like to recognise and acknowledge former Yoorook Commissioner **Travis Lovett**, a Kerrupmara/Gunditjmara

and Boandik man, and Executive Director of the University of Melbourne Centre for Truth Telling and Dialogue, who walked from his Country some 900 km away to call for truth-telling, healing and meaningful change, (and all those hundreds of other committed people with him) arriving here at Parliament House yesterday on the first day of National Reconciliation Week.

PART I

- When accepting the invitation to address you today I struggled to resolve how I could **balance talking about the weight of historical failures and the denial of Indigenous rights, with the hope connected to opportunities before us** to progress a more just and reconciled Australia.
- The truth is, I need to talk about both. Both are key to our shared resolve, and to our healing.
- **Reconciliation Week** is now more than thirty years old. **Sorry Day** is nearly thirty. These are sincere traditions and are important opportunities to reflect on our history and the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the wider Australian community. So, I do not dismiss them, and I do not dismiss the goodwill of those who observe these commemorations. But days of recognition, reflection and community goodwill must be matched with substantive social and structural change for reconciliation to mean much.
- We are entitled to and must ask, plainly: **What has changed in the lived reality and in the bones and in the soul of the relationship between our peoples and Australia?**
- Just around the corner in the corridors of this House hang the original **Yirrkala Bark Petitions** from 1963 and the **Barunga**

Statement from 1988, petitioning the Australian government and Parliament to negotiate a just settlement with us as the original owners of the lands, waters and resources. In time, the 2017 **Uluru Statement from the Heart** may well hang alongside those documents of great, unrealised hope.

- Depending on your viewpoint, these documents in this place have differing significance. They are to some **colonial trophies** demonstrating the arrogance of the invader's power displayed in their sacred House – unfulfilled pleadings of hope and justice ignored by those few with the tools to respond to them.
- They are also a **timeless reminder to the nation of constant, dedicated calls for peace and reconciliation** – relevant not just to the past, but to how we conceive of and organise our future.
- My initial intention was to remind us of the **ongoing failures** to address the intergenerational trauma, systemically embedded throughout our lives, not for the purpose of inviting guilt, but as reasoning for why reconciliation must fundamentally embrace truth-telling as a core responsibility.
- I have decided not to go through the volume of data describing our continuing incarceration, recidivism, deaths in custody, impoverishment and marginalised position in Australia. I know you are all exposed to this daily in the media and in the politics of Indigenous affairs generally.

- But we do need to **continually remind ourselves of the lack of progress** on closing any of the disparity and inequalities between us and wider Australia. It is important context to how we conceive of reconciliation.
- Let's be clear and honest here, **we are never going to close the gaps with the current approaches.** No matter how well intentioned it all might be. If we can't see this after 18 years of abject failure, we are in cuckoo land. *It's in the structure and the relationship, stupid.*
- Of course, we need the ongoing investment to address those unacceptable and shocking disparities, but we also need a change in direction. The pictures you see in the town camps in Alice Springs are all around this country. I've seen and been in those environments many times throughout my career spanning over half a century. **The issues are structural and they are relationship based.**
- The foundations of our relationship and the systems used to address our disadvantage reinforce our lived colonial experiences, and our disempowerment.
- **Public policy in Indigenous affairs has for decades focused on our deficit, not on our strengths and what we can contribute.** Notwithstanding the entrenched issues we face, this creates a

relationship of dependency ensuring our ongoing impoverishment and marginalisation.

- For our part, as Indigenous peoples, **we have to take the initiative to not be co-opted** and seduced by this system under the false pretences of self-determination. We have to be smarter and more strategic than that.
- So, the system does not work. With little accountability and appetite in governments to change, what do we do?
- Later in this address I will provide some thoughts on a way forward that I think can help us to better advance reconciliation and a healthier relationship between Indigenous peoples, governments and the wider community.

PART II

- First, though, I want to speak a little about our context. Local and broader global political and economic circumstances influence our capacities for reconciliation.
- “*The only certainty today is uncertainty,*” is a cliché well-worn by political, media and other commentators to explain prevailing circumstances. In my opinion nothing better captures the

relevance of this expression than the position of Indigenous peoples in Australia in 2026.

- Former **Senator Patrick Dodson** recently said to me there was no political agency and little empathy – that the left and right arteries have hardened.
- A few examples are worth addressing.
- When the new **conservative governments took office in Queensland and the Northern Territory**, some of their earliest actions directly undermined reconciliation. They set about dismantling processes for treaty and truth telling which had begun critical work to reshape in a more equitable way the political and economic dynamics between Indigenous peoples and governments. That this was done with little fanfare or resistance speaks volumes of how shallow the roots of reconciliation run in our public policy discourse.
- These governments also implemented policies framed through a punitive lens with direct consequences for our people, particularly our children, who continue to experience harm in detention settings, risking deepening punishment and isolation, where care and restoration are most needed.
- It's plain to me that following the referendum defeat in 2023 Indigenous people in Australia have been the focus of heightened

bigotry and racism. Across Australia's history the story of racism is predominant, but in 2026 *how can we accept it?*

- Last year an **explosive device** was thrown into a crowd on Invasion Day.
- A thirteen-year-old **Noongar girl on a train** in Perth was physically bullied by an off-duty police officer.
- On Anzac Day, there were **coordinated efforts to boo and disrupt Welcome to Country** ceremonies in major cities.
- Last month, the tragic death of five-year-old **Kumanjayi Little Baby** should have called forth national compassion and respect for a grieving family and community. Whilst it galvanised many in an outpouring of sincere support and solidarity, much of the media and social media focus subjected that family to scrutiny at a moment of profound sorrow. We can, and must, be better than that.
- These incidents should not be dismissed as isolated. They reveal a deeper, unresolved wound in the soul of the nation.
- We see currently shifting **political trends towards far-right groups** promoting racist ideology and undermining the core principle of reconciliation. If we don't confront these trends directly, reconciliation will move beyond our reach.
- I recall when **Noel Pearson** spoke with painful clarity after the referendum defeat. He said we are not popular, and that we are

not personally known to many Australians. He said we are a much-unloved people, and that Australia is a hard country.

- Unfortunately, these words ring true.

PART III

- My recently departed close friend and colleague used to say to me that “***incrementalism can make you or kill you***”. I guess this is the thematic proposition I seek to frame my words and proposal around today as it defines reconciliation.
- So far, in the 50-odd years of Indigenous public policy administration, we have been dying a slow death.
- Last week the ANU hosted a meet the author forum facilitated by Frank Bongiorno on ***Remembering the Hawke Government – Gold Standard?*** A recently released publication by well-respected contributors from various disciplines with firsthand knowledge and insights from that era.
- As a panel member I was asked by Frank if it was a Gold Standard period for Indigenous peoples. My response was that *it was gold standard in terms aspirations and what was expected by Indigenous peoples but fell well short of that standard in application and outcomes.*
- The green branches that promised greater Indigenous autonomy in the wake of the Mabo decision thirty years ago and the

recognition of native title have not been nurtured. Instead of building from that opportunity for a genuinely new and more equitable relationship, overwhelmingly, governments have sought to cut and stifle the expansion of Indigenous autonomy. The demise of these opportunities is represented by the referendum defeat.

- Governments have lost some of their will, and our people have had too much of our autonomy absorbed by bureaucracies and political caution. Some positive examples, such as developments related to **treaty in Victoria** are a cause for hope, but building on that important work requires confronting the entrenched issues I am talking about today.
- My response to my friend was that without a relationship with governments based on *trust* and with limited independent financial capacity to underpin our socio-cultural resilience, autonomy and sustainability, then it will be a monumental task to accept incrementalism in a fractured system as a solution to our marginalisation.
- So, what is the alternative?
- Here I want to speak about ***trust***.

PART IV

- **Trust** is not a bureaucratic concept. It is the very tissue of human relationships. Without it, nothing holds. Without trust reconciliation is a word ungrounded and without real meaning.
- Important to building trust is **honesty** - telling truths about our fraught past and our uncertain present.
- The *truth* is reconciliation has not delivered the transformation promised. **Closing the Gap** has not led to a marked shift in our wellbeing, or in our relationship with governments and wider society.
- If we are to have any hope at improving our relationship and realising reconciliation we need to focus on building trust, and mutual respect.
- There are **three specific and immediate priorities** I want to highlight. These I think can contribute to a new dynamic in the relationship between Indigenous peoples, governments and the wider community – one that contributes to meaningful reconciliation.
- **The first** is a ***new federal policy architecture built on trust***: not programs delivered to us, but partnership built with us.
- **The second** is a ***reshaped economic and fiscal relationship with this nation***. This means treating us not as welfare recipients, but as equity holders; as economic actors with rights and

interests in this land and with great things to bring to our national economy and prosperity.

- **The third** is the ***unfinished legal business of our peoples***. The courts have moved this country further than many parliaments have been prepared to go. That legal work remains vital.

1. National Indigenous Relationship Agency

- To the first point:
- There is currently no formal engagement pathway with the Commonwealth government to develop and consider specifically nation-building, strategic endeavours aimed at improving the relationship with Indigenous peoples and to implement substantive reconciliation.
- We have various agencies at the Commonwealth level engaged in different policy initiatives related to Indigenous Australians. **The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)** plays a central role. None of these agencies however are specifically focused on the big-picture political and economic transition in the relationship with Indigenous peoples that needs to occur if we are to make progress on reconciliation.
- I have thought for some time that that the Commonwealth government should **separate policy and program functions of NIAA**. The program and service delivery function, including

related to the national partnership on closing the gap, should continue to be the responsibility of NIAA and other designated government agencies.

- To focus specifically on strategic and nationally significant policy matters related to the political and economic relationship between government and Indigenous peoples in Australia, there should be a fit-for-purpose resource.
- A **Commonwealth Indigenous Relationship Agency** could be a separate, independent agency operating under the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. The agency would be headed up by a senior Indigenous person and supported by a majority run Indigenous reference board, mandated to engage with community (Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and including the corporate sector) and bring forward new policy proposals-based on *rights, reconciliation and building trust*.
- Some of the **key reform agenda items** could include;
 - Operationalising the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**, a critical framework for substantive reconciliation which the Australian government endorses but has generally not engaged with.
 - Advancing a **national Truth-Telling framework**.
 - Establishing a **national native title compensation response**.

- Implementing and coordinating a comprehensive **Fiscal and Economic Policy Framework** for Indigenous prosperity, and;
- Refreshing and reinvigorating **policy ideas relevant to truth and reconciliation** – including the national agreement on closing the gap and a more comprehensive Social Justice Package as envisaged by the Keating Government in 1994.
- I am not here promoting the type of shuffling of deckchairs within Prime Minister and Cabinet previously attempted by Australian governments to address Indigenous disadvantage. What I am talking about is restructuring the national public policy administration so that it is better organised and capable of making a positive difference in the lives of Indigenous people, and to the relationships that struggle when worked with tired bureaucratic tools.
- A focus of a new agency would be coordinating and implementing policies that drive our economic revival. A **national Indigenous Fiscal and Economic Policy Framework** is one such priority.

2. National Indigenous Economic Framework

- This is the second idea I want to speak to.
- Indigenous peoples now hold recognised **legal interests over almost sixty per cent of this continent**. In northern Australia,

the figure is closer to eighty per cent. The minerals beneath that land - including the critical minerals this country and the world will need for the clean energy transition - lie overwhelmingly on Aboriginal Country. And yet we remain among the poorest Australians.

- That is not a natural outcome. It is the result of policy choices and institutional design that have allowed dispossession to continue in economic form.
- As Indigenous peoples, we have **for thousands of years sustained economic systems and trade relationships** that stretched across the continent and to adjacent islands. We managed sustainably the first economies on this continent. Colonisation systematically undermined these pre-colonial economic systems through the establishment of foreign institutions of law and commerce. Our economic marginalisation has been a feature of colonisation, punctuated by the dispossession of our lands.
- **The High Court in *Mabo (No 2)* acknowledged this dispossession** – Justice Brennan saying that Indigenous people had been “*dispossessed of their land parcel by parcel, to make way for expanding colonial settlement.*” Our dispossession “*underwrote the development of the nation,*” he said.

- Rebuilding our economic autonomy should be a priority of governments. Although we have a lot to offer the economy, we have limited machinery to support this endeavour.
- **Native title has been important but critically limited** in delivering us genuine autonomy and economic opportunity in relation to our traditional lands. We remain constrained by restrictions on how we can use our land, by limited access to capital, and by the terms we are often asked to accept when others seek to use our Country.
- Beyond native title and our rights and interests in land and water, **our cultural and intellectual property is precious and valuable**, but arrangements are not well geared to ensure sufficient protection and opportunity related to these interests.
- **Our knowledge of and care for our Countries are valuable** to building a sustainable economy that works in harmony with the natural world and its finite resources. But our capacities in this space have never been properly, strategically considered in the context of pursuits for a more environmentally sustainable economy.
- **Indigenous businesses** are a growing part of Australia's economy and make an important contribution to productivity and economic prosperity. On the international plane, our potential is

significant and should be a factor in international trade and investment considerations.

- We have been asking for a long time for those with their hands on the policy levers of our Commonwealth to work with us to develop solutions that will improve our economic autonomy, reduce public outlays, and create our own source revenue in the pursuit of more equitable, sustainable economic outcomes for us and the wider Australian economy.
- There are examples of improved, effective arrangements in our international partners. **In Canada, efforts towards economic reconciliation are notable.** Bespoke statutes and institutions and a focus on agreement-making have seeded the beginnings of a transformed economic relationship between Indigenous peoples, governments and the wider economy.
- Loan guarantees, affordable finance, long-term beneficial leasing and supports for local revenue capability are not utopian ideas. They are workable policy tools. The question for Australian governments is whether the *will* exists to build them here.
- What we need to realise this ambition is **a coordinated economic and fiscal policy framework for the Commonwealth.**
- In 2024, **Prime Minister Albanese acknowledged at Garma** that Australia had never pursued a comprehensive economic policy

for Indigenous peoples. That admission was honest, and it was overdue. The Prime Minister undertook to develop such a policy.

- We now have, for the first time, **a First Nations Economic Partnership agreement between the Commonwealth, the Coalition of Peaks, and the First Nations Economic Empowerment Alliance**, which I Chair. The Treasurer and Minister for Indigenous Australians signed it. It is a beginning.
- The Partnership Agreement commits to the establishment of a **First Nations Economic Framework**. We have recently commenced this important work. As part of the Partnership, we are also considering policy and reform possibilities related to access to finance, the role of Commonwealth Specialised Investment Vehicles, and institutional reform, as well as employment and career pathways.
- But the Partnership and the Economic Framework commitments must become more than a beginning. They must translate into reforms and initiatives that drive a new economic relationship between our peoples, government and the wider economy.
- This work, properly realised, can make a difference to reconciliation.
- Finally, let me say something about unfinished business and the law.

3. Unfinished business and the law

- **The courts have been critical forums for the recognition of our rights and interests as Indigenous peoples.**
- We have seen since the early 1970's various arguments about Indigenous rights put to superior courts in Australia. Some of these, such as in the ***Mabo (No 2)*** decision, have helped to redefine the foundations of our legal relationship. From a history of legal invisibility, to one of limited recognition, the persistence of our communities to ask difficult questions of Australian courts has been critical.
- In the last ten years we have seen an important evolution in Australian jurisprudence – the **Timber Creek** and more recently **McArthur River** and **Yindjibarndi compensation cases** have, despite various issues, established a powerful foundation for native title compensation relevant across Australia.
- **Decisions by the High Court** in ***Love and Thoms*** and last year in ***Yunupingu*** have stretched conventional understanding of the relationship of Indigenous peoples and the Constitution.
- These cases have led to limited protections for Indigenous peoples being read into the Constitution – acknowledgement by the courts of the *deeper truth* of our nation's history. Our societies were here with systems of law and economy before anyone else

arrived. We are here still, practising our laws and customs and protecting our countries and cultures.

- Although the wheel of justice may be slow turning. Our efforts in the courts will be important to lighting a path for our futures, for giving some definition to a relationship with Australia based on mutual respect, truth-telling and recognition of the past.

Importantly, **strategic efforts in the courts may provide some momentum to take us into a future of reconciliation** tethered to substantive, real-world outcomes and a deeper trust between Indigenous peoples and the governments of Australia.

- The role of government in responding to any questions brought before the courts will be important and watched closely, including arguments put against our communities about **the value and nature of our inherent rights**.
- There is an opportunity in this evolving legal landscape for governments to have sophisticated discussions with our communities about settling past grievances and negotiating a better, more constructive future relationship.
- This too, is an opportunity for reconciliation.

PART V

- Let me close with this.

- We are living through an uncertain moment in global history. The world is shifting beneath everyone's feet. And we know - our communities know - that **uncertainty often reaches us first and hardest**. Fuel shortages in remote communities. Infrastructure that does not arrive. Services that do not reach our people with the consistency and dignity they deserve.
- But this moment also creates possibilities. The world needs what lies beneath our Countries. The world needs **renewable energy**. The world needs Indigenous knowledge about **sustainable land management**. We are not only cultural custodians. We are potential economic partners in a transition that the whole of humanity must now make.
- As Indigenous people, the decisive factor in our future will not be government alone. It will not be Reconciliation Weeks and commemorations, however well intentioned. It will be us - as Indigenous peoples - deciding **how we organise ourselves, how we assert our direction, how we work to shift or move beyond political frameworks that limit our agency**, and how we build the structures that allow our people to exercise power responsibly and for the benefit of our communities.
- We are not asking for charity. **We are asking for recognition. For opportunity. For rights. For the tools to determine our own futures on our own terms and on our own Country – for ways to develop trust.**

- Only when those tools are genuinely secured will the gap close. Only then will reconciliation become something more than a word. Only then can Australia stand tall as a nation - not despite Indigenous peoples, but because of them, with them, in a genuine, enduring and honourable relationship.
- Let us all join **Travis Lovett** and the many hundreds of Indigenous people and supporters in their walk for truth, listening and national repair through reconciliation.
- They are principles we should all be working toward.
- *Galiya.*