

Reconciliation – In or Out of Step?

By Tim Martyn

Just what is ‘reconciliation’ anyway? Is it a process or an outcome? Is it something ‘practical,’ or is more soul-searching required?

On Thursday the 2nd of June 2006, two teams of highly respected Indigenous commentators, educators, activists and entertainers came together to debate just what ‘reconciliation’ is, and whether Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians were on the right track towards achieving it.

Representing the affirmatives were Vicki Walker, co-coordinator of the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Melbourne, Lisa Belleair of the Black Women’s Action in Education Foundation and 20 year-old, stand-up comedian: Lionel Austin.

The negative team was comprised of Lillian Holt: one of Australia’s first Aboriginal graduates and current fellow of the University of Melbourne, Gary Foley: writer, actor and activist, and Professor Elanor Burke, Co-chair of Reconciliation Victoria.

In between the two sides stood moderator and cherished Melbourne comedian, Rob Quantock.

‘Reconciliation,’ it seems, began as Recommendation 339 of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody back in 1991. Since then, the ‘Reconciliation bus,’ as Professor Burke dubbed the process of reconciliation, has had a succession of drivers and passengers, spurring it down a succession of circuitous roads. Along the way there has been talk of treaties, apologies and now, under this Federal Government, of more ‘practical reconciliation,’ towards disadvantaged Indigenous communities. Yet the consensus from all six speakers was that we’re not there yet.

Reconciliation, as Vicki Walker pointed out is, in a literal sense, about understanding that we’ve done wrong, saying sorry and then the finally, being able to forgive. It’s about the opportunity to tell the stories that so many just want to forget or assign to the ‘black arm band’ discard pile of history.

The sad reality is that few Australian children get the chance to learn Australian history, let alone Indigenous Australian history at school. Confronting the truth in the pursuit of justice just won’t happen until we’re able to reflect upon the past.

Reflection isn’t just about ‘white’ or non-indigenous Australians reflecting upon the plight of our Indigenous population. As Lillian Holt pointed out, it’s just as important to understand, “that what has diminished me as an Aboriginal person in this country has also diminished you as a non-Aboriginal person.” We have to understand the centrality of past and present prejudice in our own diminishment; that when, as Lionel Austin put it,

“yuppies on Chapel Street lock their cars twice when they see an Aboriginal ‘feller,” we all lose.

The onus for reconciliation can’t be on Aboriginal people, all the speakers agreed. Its no good, as Lillian Holt explained, to “keep on researching and studying and dissecting and labelling” Aboriginal people until non-Indigenous Australians are willing to reflect upon the past, and act in the present.

While, according to the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, fewer than seven percent of Australians have any regular contact with Indigenous Australians, the responsibility for reconciliation really lies with the Australian people. We can’t expect leadership until we’re ready to make the first move.

The next step on the path to reconciliation is really up to you!