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# 'Reconciliation' shouldn't just be driven by Indigenous people

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[Celeste Liddle](#)



Celeste Liddle: "I encourage people to reflect upon what a true vision of reconciliation would look like in this country and certainly, as beneficiaries of Indigenous displacement, how they can further this agenda."

Following National Sorry Day on the 26th of May – the anniversary of the tabling of the "[Bringing Them Home](#)" report on the Stolen Generations in federal parliament – [National Reconciliation Week](#) kicks off for another year. This time of year marks a number of important dates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As well as Sorry Day preceding it, the [27th of May](#) marks the anniversary of the successful 1967 Referendum leading to Aboriginal people being counted in the census.

The final day of Reconciliation week, the 3rd of June, coincides with the anniversary of the handing down of the [Mabo Decision](#) by the High Court of Australia, in which Meriam people challenged the legal fiction of "Terra Nullius" or land belonging to no one, and won.

National Reconciliation Week also contains a number of events and celebrations across the country, from flag raising ceremonies, to Stolen Generations commemorations, to luncheons and film festivals. This is also the "[Indigenous Round](#)" of the AFL, where Indigenous performers are showcased as part of the pre-game and half-time entertainment particularly during the Essendon versus Richmond game which is referred to as "[Dreamtime at the G](#)".

Yet the concept of "reconciliation" is one that I have long found problematic, not least because it almost always seems to be something which needs to be driven by Indigenous people for the receipt of non-Indigenous people. In my mind, it should be the other way around. Indigenous people have continuously bore the brunt of colonisation agendas, oppressive policies and the removal of human rights. "Reconciliation" should therefore be an opportunity for mainstream Australia to redress this. Certainly, when I think of the Mabo decision, and note that this country is yet to negotiate a treaty with first peoples, I do wonder when we will see significant change. I have also found that many Australians still hold little knowledge of Indigenous struggle and indeed, when I mentioned Mabo to a few of the "[Reclaim Australia](#)" protesters as a way of my highlighting why I felt they had nothing to reclaim, I was met with blank stares (though was frankly unsurprised considering that crowd).

Likewise, in my time working in the trade union movement, I have seen many examples of workplaces adopting Reconciliation Action Plans as a way of promoting collaboration. When it comes to the everyday workings of these plans though, most seem to fall back to Indigenous staff to implement. Indigenous staff organise the launch parties, they contact elders to do Welcome to Country ceremonies and they're generally left with the sole responsibility of trying to reach parity rates for Indigenous employment in their workplaces. Unless it's a special event, striving for equity on an everyday basis seems to be a peripheral consideration.

When then Prime Minister Paul Keating gave his [Redfern speech](#), and people around the country heard him state "we took the traditional lands, we committed the murders, we took the children", I felt hope that things could indeed move forward to a more equitable future.

Yet the Howard years followed, reinforcing the idea that investigating Indigenous experience was focussing on a "[black armband](#)" version of Australia. Howard's downplaying of Indigenous suffering was so despicable that Indigenous people took to turning their back on him in public forums. Howard also introduced the concept of "[practical reconciliation](#)" - an agenda which seemed heavy on the symbolism and assimilation, yet light on the recognition and transformation.

That the current Abbott government stripped \$500 million out of Indigenous affairs in 2014, yet funds the Recognise campaign while ignoring Indigenous dissenting voices seems proof to me that real advancement on the reconciliation front is still unlikely. The Howard-era sentiments continues on today, as many people talk about how best we can address Indigenous disadvantage using non-Indigenous benchmarks. Society hasn't shifted and, if anything, the visible reminders we get every Australia Day of how Aboriginal people don't fit into the national consciousness are proof of this.

I encourage people to get involved in Reconciliation Action Week. I particularly encourage people to educate themselves about the significance of the days contained within this week and how things have changed, or not, since these important events in Australia's history. Most

of all though, I encourage people to reflect upon what a true vision of reconciliation would look like in this country and certainly, as beneficiaries of Indigenous displacement, how they can further this agenda.