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What is the point of reconciliation?

JCPML Anniversary Lecture presented by Kerry O'Brien on 3 October 2019.

For the first and probably last time in my life I'm going to start this lecture with the aid of PowerPoint. Now if John Curtin were to reappear at this moment and look at the screen, he might think by the standards of his time it was a shockingly explicit picture of a woman's backside. We would have to explain to him that it's actually an expression of sympathy and respect from an Instagram user for the people who suffered the full force of the recent hurricane in the Bahamas—sensitively selected from this woman's holiday snapshot catalogue. The caption: "praying for the safety of this beautiful country #Bahamas".

Here's another: "my heart goes to the families that lost their homes #pray for Bahamas #Bahamas". A heart wrapped in a G-string.

And another: "So many houses, cars, hospitals and places all being devastated by this damn hurricane! Let's pray for #Bahamas".

Then we could try to explain to John Curtin the similarly tasteless and obviously narcissistic Instagram posts from tourists celebrating this year's September 11 anniversary on the Twin Towers site with insensitive selfies; or cartwheeling through Europe's holocaust memorial sites.

We could try to explain to him how a crude, sexist, racist, venal, blatantly dishonest and anti-democratic property developer came to be president of the world's most powerful and inspirational democracy, the nation John Curtin had turned to to save Australia from Japanese invasion and occupation.

What would he make of what's happened to the world since he left it? That world had Franklin Roosevelt in the White House and Winston Churchill in Number 10 Downing Street. Therefore we'd also have to try to explain Boris Johnson to him for comparison—with his own reputation as a liar and flake and how he somehow managed to find his way into the British prime ministership. Or how, given his abhorrence of war and after all his decision-making agonies through World War II, John Curtin would now want to rethink the American alliance he first nurtured, given that that same alliance has led Australia into two other disastrous wars, Vietnam and Iraq, both commitments based on lies and deeply flawed intelligence.

For his defence of Australia's democracy in World War Two and the other inspirational and courageous and principled aspects of his leadership, not least the post-war reconstruction plans he died before he could implement, John Curtin's various biographers have built a case to recognise him as this nation's greatest or at least most respected prime minister. Not the longest serving. Most respected will do.

But, like every person in this room and on the face of the earth, he wasn't perfect and he was also a product of his time. His time was the time of White Australia, and the time when the prevailing policies, federal and state, in relation to the First Peoples of this continent were assimilationist, racist and, arguably, genocidal.

Yet I don't have any doubt that if he had been born into my generation or the generation after mine, and had our education and our capacity to travel the world and soak up its cultures, and been vividly exposed to the deep injustices against Indigenous Australians that were largely hidden from view, he would have wholeheartedly embraced multiculturalism, he would have embraced his own region in the world, and he would have understood the hole at this nation's core that can only be filled by a genuine and practical reconciliation between First Peoples and the rest of us.

The reason I believe that about John Curtin is because by his very nature he was intelligent, principled and a compassionate humanist with an abiding sense of fairness and justice, as he would have been today in a less blinkered world, for all its

vicissitudes and contradictions and social media vanities. And also by his very nature he was a genuine leader. A rare commodity in politics these days.

When I wrote a memoir last year, built around my 50 years as an eye witness to a remarkable and unique period of history, I was very cautious about pursuing my personal family history for the book and only committed to it when I realised, after participating in the excellent SBS Who Do You Think You Are series back in 2011, just how much the story of my ancestors paralleled the story of white settlement in Australia.

Five of my ten primary ancestors arrived in Australia in chains—three from England and only two from Ireland. One stole horses, one stole pigs, one was a prostitute who robbed a client while his pants were down—literally—one pilfered goods from the Royal Navy quartermaster's store, and one stole a wheel of cheese (although he did plead not guilty).

All ten were pioneers who blazed trails, clashed with the real first settlers of this continent as they took their land, bore adversity with great courage, were entrepreneurial and raised and educated their children.

These personal revelations have deepened my understanding of the connection to this country, of the first contacts between its original inhabitants and my ancestors, and how each new arrival made his or her place here and contributed to our history and culture—warts and all. This is far more revealing, far more emotive, far more real than the scant history I was taught at school.

In my case the story starts in Windsor and Richmond, west of Sydney in the 1790s, with William Eaton, cheese thief, and Jane Ison, prostitute, and their 100-acre grant on the Grose River near where it meets the Nepean, after gaining their freedom. They were my great-great-great-great grandparents.

Their son, John Eaton, with his wife, Mary Ann Onus, also the child of a convict, struck out on their own in 1831 with a grant of land on the Wollombi Brook in what is now the Hunter Valley. Their progress north as squatters in little or unexplored country through central-western New South Wales over the next 25 years, opening

various sheep and cattle runs along the way, bearing and raising children as they went, became a classic saga of courageous white Australian frontier entrepreneurialism, as recorded in colonial history. In Indigenous eyes they weren't pioneers but interlopers, invaders, thieves—and possibly worse.

It's extremely well documented in the family history how John and Mary Ann built their first house at Wollombi: "The rosewood and pine used in the finishing were cut away back in the ranges to the west. As the aborigines [sic] were still numerous in the district and those of the ranges were not to be trusted, an armed guard always went out with the men when they were felling the trees. The logs were hauled over the cliff top and shot over into the valley below". John was 22 at the time and Mary was 20.

There are hints through the family history over the next 70 years of John Eaton's life, of his attitude to the people whose own ancestors had arrived here 60,000 years before them, but it's more likely than not that in the early years at least—if not much longer—he shared the view of most settlers that they were rootless, nomadic, uncivilised, inferior. A very convenient view.

It would not have been convenient for colonial settlers to discover, as Bruce Pascoe has so brilliantly chronicled in *Dark Emu*, that this ancient civilisation had its own sophisticated culture; its own laws; its own developed capacity for agriculture far more suited to the environment than much of what was to follow; its own nations that largely co-existed in peace and had deep spiritual connections; and, indeed, its own capacity to put down roots and build settlements.

To have known that would have made it much more difficult to justify the dispossession, and worse, that followed.

Over the next 20 years, John Eaton squatted on various runs north of Wollombi to the Gwydir in the central west of NSW, on to what is now Lismore and Kyogle, and over untamed mountains to Maryborough in Queensland. He passed through Myall Creek just months before a group of white men, including convicts led by a local

squatter, perpetrated the infamous Myall Creek massacre, killing up to 30 unarmed Aboriginal men, women and children without provocation.

This is one massacre that can't be denied because its graphic detail was accepted by the court, resulting in the execution of seven of the accused, a verdict that was upheld by three Supreme Court judges. All seven confessed their guilt in the shadow of the gallows. Even so, there was a strong strand of colonial sentiment sympathetic to the cold-blooded murderers, partly reflected in the judge's difficulty finding jurors who were prepared to sit in judgement. This is what the Sydney Morning Herald had to say during the trial:

"We want neither the classic nor the romantic savage here. We have far too many of the murderous wretches about us already. The whole gang of black animals are not worth the money the colonists will have to pay for printing the silly court documents on which we have already wasted too much time".

Edward Denny Day, the area magistrate who had led a team of police to arrest the Myall Creek killers, also described a "war of extirpation" along the Gwydir River, in which he said: "Aborigines in the district were repeatedly pursued by parties of mounted and armed stockmen assembled for the purpose, and that great numbers of them had been killed at various spots".

The Myall Creek massacre was in fact the second in the area within a few months. There was another in which possibly scores of Aboriginals were killed by mounted police, supported by squatters, at Waterloo Creek (also known as Slaughterhouse Creek) at its junction with the Gwydir River in January 1838. It climaxed a two-month expedition by five police officers and 20 men from Sydney after five stockmen had been killed in separate incidents allegedly by local Indigenous people on new pastoral runs—runs exactly like the ones my own ancestor established on his way to Queensland. Indeed, around the time of the Waterloo Creek massacre, John Eaton may not have been too far away.

Often the Indigenous side of these stories relies on oral history handed down through generations (once dismissed by the conservative historian Keith Windschuttle as

“tales my granny told me”) but at Waterloo Creek even a police officer who participated, Sergeant John Lee, estimated for the official record significant Aboriginal deaths: “The men spread out so much that it was impossible for any one person to put a stop to the firing at once. From what I saw myself, I should say that from forty to fifty blacks were killed when the second firing took place”.

The two senior officers in the party were absent from where the action happened, one of whom later said he had only seen three bodies. Windschuttle concluded in that case that there was only sound evidence of three being killed. Sergeant Lee’s evidence apparently didn’t count. Historian Lyndall Ryan, who wrote a strongly researched chapter on the Waterloo Creek massacre on a book of essays by 15 historians, *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, details the inadequacy of a belated inquiry into the incident, which carried the telltale signs of a cover-up. Ryan concluded that the killings were an act of revenge.

When the English Secretary of State for the colonies, Lord John Russell, read the inquiry’s report, he wrote to the NSW governor Sir George Gipps that, “In the case before me, the object of capturing offenders was entirely lost sight of, and shots were fired at men who were apparently only guilty of jumping into the water to escape from armed pursuit”.

Ryan is now in the process of painstakingly compiling a massacre map, with hundreds of sites pinpointed mostly down the east coast of Australia and in Tasmania, with more to come. Her working measure of a massacre is where at least six people were killed without resistance.

The Eaton family history makes no reference to actual violent conflict between John Eaton and the Indigenous people in the various areas he settled, but clearly there were run-ins. Throughout the 1830s and into the 1840s, Eaton had taken up large runs through the central west of New South Wales. One of them, on the Moonie River in the Murray-Darling catchment “on the very outskirts of European civilisation”, he shared with his brother-in-law William Onus. He is said to have abandoned that property when Aboriginal people had “driven off their herd of 1,100 head of cattle”. There was no reference to actual fighting.

After eventually settling on a 50,000 acre run outside Maryborough, John Eaton also established a sugar plantation and invested in a Pacific Island slave ship called the Jason, one of many ships that brought an estimated 62,000 Pacific islanders—men, women and children—from Melanesia to Queensland between 1863 and 1904 to work as indentured labour in the sugar industry. An untold number of them did not survive to return home. 13,000 of them came from the New Hebrides—now Vanuatu—which was where the Jason “recruited” its cargo of workers. The concept of indentured labour was introduced in British colonies as a cheap labour replacement for slavery when it was abolished, but it was wide open to abuse and Queensland was no exception.

Theoretically, the Islanders freely entered a contract to work on a plantation for a set period of years before being returned home. In practice, many of them were tricked onto the boats or brought on board at the point of a gun. Conditions varied from plantation to plantation in Queensland in the same way they did for slaves on the cotton plantations of America’s deep south—from barely passing muster to wretched.

On wages alone they were shamelessly exploited. Many had little or nothing to show for their labours when they were returned home. An untold number died of disease or malnutrition, many of them buried in unmarked graves. One of the excuses for using Islanders was that white men weren’t suited to work in the tropics, but the hard truth is that they would not have been prepared to work for the pay and conditions to which the Islanders were subjected. The Jason’s skipper, John Coath, went to jail for five years for the abduction of men and boys from the New Hebrides, but was subsequently pardoned. After the scandal involving the ship and its captain, John Eaton withdrew his investment.

As my great-great-great grandfather and his growing family continued to prosper, rough justice was being meted out to Indigenous people right through regional and remote Queensland. Although as I say, I could find no evidence that he participated in any of the many outrages and massacres, nor is there any indication that he thought any differently to the widely propagated view in editorials and through the police culture, and much of the population, that Indigenous Australians were inferior,

murderous, thieving and even vermin. If a single white man was killed by Aboriginals, a hundred or more Indigenous people might be killed in retaliation.

Much of this extermination was carried out in particularly odious fashion: the colonists using so-called native police, usually imported from south of Moreton Bay, to do their dirty work for them. In the official records their work was referred to as dispersals. In truth, it was slaughter. In 1857, two years after the Eatons settled their cattle station west of Maryborough, 11 settlers on a property called Hornet Bank Station on the upper Dawson River, about 500 kilometres due west, including eight members of the Fraser family who ran the property, were brutally killed by a raiding party from the local Iman clan.

The prevailing story for white consumption at the time was that the Aboriginal raiders were opportunistic thieves who ran off the Frasers' sheep after killing the family. Further research has thrown up other versions: that the Fraser men were in the habit of "forcibly taking" Indigenous women; that the Frasers had poisoned to death an unknown number of Imans with Strychnine-laced Christmas pudding; and/or that the Fraser killings were in retaliation for the shooting deaths of 12 Imans over the spearing of cattle. One documented comment from a former member of the native police read: "The Frazers (sic) were famous for the young gins."

The news of the family massacre would have shocked white squatters and their families throughout the colony, presumably including the Eatons. The more remote the settlers, the greater the fear it would have sparked. The reprisals that followed were another matter. Punitive expeditions including squatters and native police were conducted throughout the region, and many scores of Aboriginal people were killed at random.

According to the historian Jonathan Richards in his book *The Secret War*, a neighbouring grazier named George Serecold sent a letter to his brother in England saying he and a reprisal gang "killed every grown up black" they found for a hundred miles over three weeks. "Whatever ever you do, be careful," Serecold wrote, "as I do not wish anybody to be able to read what I have written... in dealing with savages you must make yourself feared".

John Eaton would certainly have been aware of the existence of the native police, who had a base in Maryborough, if not possess a knowledge of the crimes they perpetuated in the ongoing suppression of Indigenous resistance as white settlers extended their frontiers further and further into the north and west of the state. According to Jonathan Richards and other credible sources, much of the killing was indiscriminate. They were invariably led by white officers, some with a military background.

One of the earliest such officers was a man named Frederick Wheeler, who “openly killed Indigenous people for almost 20 years”. He expressed the view in a letter that Aboriginal people “must be held responsible for the guilt of others”. That was certainly the approach taken in the Hornet Bank reprisals, where native police were involved in the Indigenous dispersals.

About 400 kilometres north of Maryborough, the editor of the Rockhampton Bulletin wrote of Aboriginal people in November 1870, “They may be tolerated and treated kindly as long as they refrain from mischievous acts, but when they rob, steal or murder, they must be treated as enemies of the state and shot down with as little compunction as soldiers shoot each other in battles amongst civilised men.”

The veteran award-winning Queensland historian, Professor Raymond Evans, paints a picture of wider complicity: “Private individuals illegally accomplished more genocidal outcomes than did the state via its military, police and native police forces, but the state was complicit via its failure to prosecute Europeans for the killing, kidnapping or injuring of Aborigines.” The use of the word genocide will always be contentious, but the historical weight behind the charge of complicity is strong.

During my research for the book I learned it wasn’t until 1876 that Aboriginals in NSW won legal entitlement to give evidence in the court room. The debate between the NSW government and the British Colonial Office had gone on for 40 years before it was resolved—and most of the resistance came from within the colony.

Even allowing for all the exposure I’ve had to racism in the 20th and 21st century—including institutionalised racism—I was still shocked when I stopped to think about

that; that even with every other part of the deck stacked against them, Indigenous people weren't even entitled to be heard in the courtroom. That is, if they lived to tell the tale.

One argument against that right—a right for white settlers but not those who came 60,000 years before them—was that if an Indigenous person couldn't read the bible how could he or she swear on it to tell the truth.

This is a part of the history of which most Australians are still ignorant today. Worse than that, the efforts of a small but noisy band of commentators sought to muddy the waters, mostly in the Howard era, and confused the picture that built on our national ignorance. Those efforts have now been buried under an avalanche of carefully tallied evidence of hundreds of massacres across Australia.

John Howard as Prime Minister would occasionally acknowledge that Indigenous Australians had been treated badly—although I never once heard him give an example—but he always framed that acknowledgement in the prism of the past, as if we can all now move on from that legacy. But I'm sure every person in this room knows, if we're being honest, that we can't. The injustices of today may not be on the brutal scale of the massacres of the past, and the racism is not as broadly spread or quite as naked, but they're an undeniable and significant part of contemporary Australia and they show little sign of diminishing.

In 1975, as a young journalist on Four Corners, I reported on the case of an Indigenous woman named Paula Sweet who, according to police, had been raped and brutally bashed to death by six young Indigenous men.

In a nutshell, Sweet was in a de facto relationship with a white resident in the town and had been killed some time after a drinking session in the Todd River. The six accused, from the Papunya settlement, 200 kilometres north-west of Alice, had been interviewed by police, signed confessions and were committed for trial. Although Aboriginal liaison officers had been available as interpreters, they weren't asked to attend. The six young men served four months in prison before the police case fell

apart in their Supreme Court trial. They'd had bail applications refused five times, despite the fact that even the police hadn't opposed it on the fifth occasion.

There were three elements in the accused men's favour during the trial. A sharp young Melbourne lawyer named Geoff Eames, working with the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, had taken up their case and enlisted the language skills and cultural knowledge of a white Congregational minister named Jim Downing, who had come to Alice Springs from his ministry in Sydney's Redfern, established an Institute for Aboriginal Development and taken the considerable trouble to learn the Pitjantjatjara language.

The two became convinced that the men were innocent and had been coerced into signing the confessions. The third element was that Eames persuaded top silk Ian Barker to take the case, but Jim Downing was crucial and his evidence made a complete mockery of the confessions. He demonstrated that the concepts behind key words attributed to the accused men in the police interviews had no equivalent in Pitjantjatjara.

Police were forced to admit that in their experience, Aboriginals virtually never sought legal assistance and overwhelmingly confessed to whatever crimes they were accused of, in stark contrast to white offenders. The compelling conclusion drawn by Eames, Barker and Downing was that there was no rape by six to 12 men in the Todd River as alleged, and no assault that night.

So if these young men weren't the killers, then who was? The real suspect, who had received almost no police attention, was Bernard Grondman, Paula Sweet's white de facto partner, who had long since disappeared. Police were deeply embarrassed as the story emerged that Grondman had a history of assaulting Sweet, and that the injuries she sustained had probably been inflicted at least ten hours after she left the company of the Papunya men.

Ian Barker described the police practice exposed in the Paula Sweet case as a process "repugnant to our system of justice". In acknowledging "absurd inconsistencies" in evidence the police should have picked up, including Paula Sweet's injuries, the judge

said there were some things the police could have done “a bit better”. Even the judge didn’t quite seem to get it.

In our story Geoff Eames spoke of the likelihood that many other Aboriginal men were in jail for crimes they hadn’t committed, and Jim Downing urged a complete overhaul in police culture related to Indigenous citizens. Both men called for a royal commission.

It wasn’t hard to feel the burn of injustice as I stood beside the single bunch of dead flowers in the red dust at the foot of an insultingly dismissive stick in the ground marking the pauper’s grave where Paula had finally come to rest, but for a brief moment it seemed her death might be more than just another incidental tragedy in Aboriginal history.

The story prompted the Whitlam government to announce a royal commission into relations between police and Aboriginal people, but it never happened. Five weeks later, the government was sacked. I was subsequently told by an aide to Les Johnson, the Aboriginal affairs minister at the time, that Johnson’s request for the terms of reference for the royal commission was still sitting in the in-tray of the department’s legal adviser, who had been on sick leave. The incoming Fraser government chose to drop what would have been a seminal inquiry for its time.

Such are the elements of chance that decide history, but would that royal commission have made a difference? Late in 1985 David Marr reported for Four Corners a searing story of black deaths in custody in Western Australia, and again on the yawning gap between black and white justice in Australia. It took another 18 months for the Hawke government to act, but the subsequent Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody investigated more than 100 deaths in prisons across the country and made 339 recommendations.

The commitment of governments to those recommendations varied significantly from state to state, but there were shortfalls everywhere and the incarceration rate of Indigenous Australians remains obscenely high today. Well over 300 Indigenous Australians have died in custody since. In 2016, Four Corners again prompted a royal

commission with shocking disclosures of the treatment of Indigenous juveniles in detention in the Northern Territory. And such stories continue to this day.

Let me go back briefly to John Eaton, who was 93 when he died in June 1904, three years after Federation, and nine years before my mother was born in Maryborough, and he already had great-great-grandchildren by the time he died—with, according to the Maryborough Chronicle, a staggering 300 living descendants. The Chronicle's obituary described him as having an iron constitution hardened by a very tough bush life. "We have lost from our midst," the obituary said, "a grand old man, most upright in his dealings and generous to a fault. His honoured name... will be indelibly impressed upon the history of the early pioneering days and development of Maryborough and the Wide Bay district."

The Chronicle described the generations John Eaton had helped spawn as "an excellent group of settlers on the land". So the evidence is strong that the white society of which he was a bedrock judged him to be a good man of considerable achievement, sometimes in the toughest of circumstances, who had raised his children as "an excellent group of settlers". An Indigenous perspective on John Eaton is more difficult to find.

The point I take from this personal family narrative is that the history of this nation post-white colonial settlement is not a simple one of good on one side and evil on the other, of virtue and guilt. The deeply chequered history of colonialism per se is one thing. It suited the colonial masters to see those they were conquering and subjugating as inferior beings needing to be saved if they were capable of being saved. Terra Nullius was a wonderful convenience for the British empire.

The individual stories of those who played their part, many of whom had no choice in the matter, are nonetheless stories of nation-building, and it's important and necessary that they are rightly acknowledged on the road to reconciliation. But they will mean nothing if we, the non-Indigenous inheritors of the privilege that came off the back of that colonialism, cannot honestly acknowledge the undeniable collective shame of it all. And that's not just about saying sorry, as Kevin Rudd did on that remarkable day in the national parliament in February, 2008. And it's not just about

an annual review about whether we're closing the gap. It's deeper than that. Far deeper.

Perhaps the greatest injustice of all from these past 231 years, is that we, the perpetrators have largely not worn the shame of it; the original inhabitants of this continent, the custodians of a rich, unique, 60,000-year-old culture, *have been made to wear it.*

For instance, despite all that we learned from the searing stories of the Stolen Generations—or should have learned—about the massive damage done to many tens of thousands of Indigenous families in the name of assimilation, racist assimilation, the system of government that rules in this country is still taking the children in great numbers and still failing to solve the problems causing family dysfunction in Indigenous communities. It is the system of government that is still locking away Indigenous children and adults in numbers that are obscenely disproportionate to the non-Indigenous occupants of prisons and detention centres.

It is in this context that the power of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, shaped by 250 First Nations leaders speaking in unison and putting their own differences aside, comes through. I believe it is a document of integrity, that demands to be read by us all, and reflected on.

I want to read the opening words of this remarkable document, words that resonate more powerfully and meaningfully for me for having come to understand in a very personal way, as best a white person can, what this statement is about. And I would ask you to hear these words in the context of the narrative I've told today.

"We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart.

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from

the Creation, according to the common law from 'time immemorial', and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co- exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are aliened from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness.

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country."

How can the rest of us not respond seriously to this? I feel no guilt for what my great-great-great-grandfather or his white workers did or might have done as part of an ambitious pioneering but at times fearful and ignorant generation of settlers placed by history in an often harsh and foreign land, whose Indigenous people were deemed to have no prior right to occupation, and to be inferior to boot; where the killing of a

single white person regularly excused the killing of many more black people in return, whether they had any involvement in the white death or not.

But I do feel shame (the definition of which is the painful feeling arising from the consciousness of something dishonourable done by oneself or another) for what was perpetrated in the name of white progress and selective prosperity, of which I am a beneficiary. It doesn't mean I walk around in a hair shirt with my head hung low.

You don't have to grovel in the shame, but how can you claim genuine meaningful pride in the many notable achievements of your nation if you feel you have to hide or understate those parts of your history you don't like but that are an undeniable part of the whole? Or worse, exploit the often ignorant racism that still remains, for political gain rather than to call it out for what it is.

As a journalist I have watched and reported on the halting steps towards reconciliation over the past 25 years in particular. The work of the Reconciliation Council, Bob Hawke's flawed attempt to negotiate a treaty that never got off the ground, the Mabo Decision in the High Court, the Stolen Generations Report, that extraordinary march across the Sydney Harbour Bridge on Sunday May 28, in the year 2000, and all the other marches around the country, the apology in the national parliament eight years later. I was on the bridge that day and I was in the parliament for the apology. I'll never forget either. Good days in the story of this nation.

Much of the work of those earlier attempts at reconciliation was sabotaged by the so-called history wars and the attempt to undermine the credibility of serious academic work as a black armband view of history. But for all that, we have arrived at a moment in our history where I think we non-Indigenous and Indigenous people can now deliver the goods. It shouldn't actually be too hard,

but it will still take time to get it right, particularly if we are to achieve constitutional change.

But surely the greater onus falls on the non-Indigenous inheritors of the fruits of white colonial invasion to come genuinely to the party, and for our national and state leadership—governments and oppositions—to be what they say they are and

actually lead. This should not be allowed to become just another depressing political football.

The Uluru statement is an important and impressive start. It is incumbent on us all not just to be satisfied with news reports of what the statement says, but to read the document for ourselves, understand it, reflect on it and pass our understanding on to others.

It encompasses a three-step process to genuine reconciliation measured in a seriously meaningful way. The Voice to Parliament—not in parliament, to parliament—the Makarata, or truth-telling and a treaty. The concept of a voice is not as some are claiming, a third chamber of parliament. It would be a representative body of First Nations to advise the national parliament on policy that might impact on Indigenous communities. It would have no more power than the strength and integrity of its arguments.

The Makarata is a concept deeply imbedded in Aboriginal culture, and we've seen its application elsewhere—the extraordinary work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa after the birth of democracy there. And treaties between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are considered unremarkable in countries like Canada, America and New Zealand.

In fact the Waitangi treaty with New Zealand's Maoris was negotiated and signed while New Zealand was still part of the New South Wales colony. And when it's said, as John Howard did as Prime Minister, that a nation can't have a treaty with itself, what do you think happens in our Federation when a state signs agreements with the Commonwealth? Two sovereign entities within a nation reaching an agreement. And it needs to be remembered that Indigenous nations never ceded their sovereignty.

As it happens the states have a big role to play in both the negotiation and delivery of a reconciliation contract. In a sense some are starting to show the way where the Commonwealth appears to have stumbled. Victoria is more than two years into a process that will hopefully end with a treaty or treaties. They already have an independent treaty commissioner.

The Northern Territory is making a similar move, and Queensland is about to embark on a series of consultations in 26 remote, regional and urban communities stretching from the Torres Strait Islands and the tip of Cape York, down the coast and through the sprawling outback to the NSW border—Indigenous and non-Indigenous Queenslanders plotting their own path to treaty.

The bottom line is we will not be complete as a nation until we have resolved this.

A NSW Labor premier, Neville Wran, once observed that leaders could not afford to get too far ahead of the mob. This is one occasion when I suspect the mob is actually ahead of its leaders, and I don't think leaders can afford to get too far behind the mob either.

Thank you.

Kerry O'Brien

Kerry O'Brien is one of Australia's most distinguished and respected journalists with six Walkley Awards for excellence in journalism including the Gold Walkley, and the Walkley for Outstanding Leadership. Other industry awards include a Logie for public affairs coverage, and he was recently inducted into the Logie Hall of Fame.

He has been a journalist for 53 years covering print, television and wire service, as a reporter, feature writer, columnist and foreign correspondent. He has specialised in national politics for the ABC, as well as the Ten and Seven networks, and was press secretary to Labor leader Gough Whitlam.