

**Gerhardt Pearson**  
Gladstone Conference  
Dinner speech, 8 June 2006

I acknowledge the traditional owners of this country and thank the organisers for this opportunity to share.

The theme of this conference could perhaps be summarised as “reconciliation through business development”.

Over the coming days we will hear detailed presentations on a large number of projects and issues.

I want to use this opportunity when we are all gathered here, to step back and try to capture the big picture, to summarise the big questions, and the answers we are gradually formulating to these big questions.

The first thing we must acknowledge is that the socio-economic gap between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians is the widest in any wealthy nation state that is shared by two or more peoples.

By and large, this gap is not closing.

Some things may improve, but other problems worsen.

Some problems seem intractable, such as the lack of participation in the real economy by my people in Cape York Peninsula.

The two fundamental questions of reconciliation are:

- What are the reasons for our current problems?
- and What are the solutions?

Broadly speaking there are two groups of theories about the causes, and two groups of theories about the answers.

The first group of theories about the causes of our current problems are concerned with the history of dispossession and the era of so called protection that finally ended in the sixties, intergenerational trauma and dispersal of peoples.

The second category of explanations points to the policies of the last three to four decades, and the relatively recent actions and agendas of Indigenous Australians and Non-Indigenous Australians.

In relation to solutions: One category of solutions is based on correcting or acknowledging the wrongs of history, both in a material way, for example land rights and compensation for confiscated wages, and solutions that build on Indigenous Australian culture and connection to land.

This category includes solutions that emphasise removing racism from Australian society.

The other agenda for reconciliation is based on socio-economic advancement and economic integration.

My brother Noel has argued that reconciliation needs to strike a balance between rights and responsibilities, and between symbolic and practical solutions.

Rights and symbols refers to the first category of suggested solutions, responsibilities and practical outcomes to the second.

It is correct to say that we need such a balance, but what does this mean in practice?

In response to this I would like to discuss two unbalanced approaches to the problems of reconciliation.

The first imbalance is that some people, who have a basic conviction that our problems are mainly rooted in earlier history, tend to suggest solutions that are based on land and culture at the expense of integration into the national and global economy.

The second imbalance is that people who see recent policies as a major or the major cause of contemporary problems see economic integration, abandonment of culture and mass migration away from remote and rural areas as possible solutions to the challenges of reconciliation.

There is currently an argument being made for completely disassociating economic and social advancement from land rights, presence on or near ancestral lands and survival of culture

Federal Ministers have shown interest in and support for this school of thought, recently articulated by Dr Gary Johns in a discussion paper from the Menzies Research Centre.

Let me first examine the latter of these two opinions.

We can immediately establish that a permanent exodus as suggested by Gary Johns and others is not going to happen in Queensland.

This option is not part of government planning.

Indigenous Australians are not able to choose this course of action.

Most importantly, we Indigenous Australians do not want it.

For the foreseeable future, there will be an Indigenous presence in the regions of our traditional lands and communities.

The manner of our presence, however, does not need to be identical to the way we live now.

Noel has put a lot of effort into trying to introduce the concept of orbits.

If Indigenous Australians' connection to our ancestral lands is secured, if we know that we can return for longer or shorter periods, and if we have no reason to fear that our children will lose their identity, culture and connection with their ancestral lands, then it will be easier for us to embark on orbits for education and work.

Orbits that might take us to regional centres, interstate or overseas.

This brings me back to the first of the two imbalances I mentioned before, namely the over emphasis on land and culture as remedies to our problems.

I think that the main positive development of the debate during the last decade is that we have established that educational and economic success and social order are indispensable.

One main insight is, I believe, that even if the ultimate causes of our problems are related to a history of dispossession and racism, these traumas do not today maintain the dysfunction that is widespread in our communities.

Passive welfare, substance abuse and other problems have become self-perpetuating causes of disadvantage in their own right.

There are several reasons why there has been opposition to the idea that educational and economic success and social order are our most urgent priorities.

First, many people have felt that this analysis absolves Non-Indigenous Australia from responsibility; that this analysis blames the victim.

My reply to this would be that our practical programme for the future is not necessarily the right place for expressing truths about history.

The other objection which has been voiced to our analysis is that the Cape York Agenda, which is based on social norms, capabilities and incentives, weakens the rights agenda.

This is not correct. The rights agenda is an integrated part of the building of our capabilities; I shall return to this in a moment.

A third objection is that a focus on economic integration is a threat to Indigenous Australian culture and identity.

There are real issues here.

It is a challenge to maintain a language if a large number of the speakers are living far away from their ancestral lands.

However, I think it is now clear that dysfunctional communities destroy Indigenous Australian cultures.

Integration into the mainstream economies is unlikely to be a greater threat to our cultural identity than our current state of social disintegration.

A real economy is probably our best potential support for identity and culture.

A second necessary support for our culture is digitisation. In order to survive, our cultures will have to change and become literate rather than oral.

My main point can be summarised thus: Indigenous Australians and our Non-indigenous Australian supporters who think that the rights agendas and the symbols agenda are vital for reconciliation, should not conclude that the Cape York reform programme seeks to undermine those agendas.

Likewise, the fact that our analysis in Cape York identifies aspects of the policies of the last four decades as a major cause or even the major cause of our dysfunction, and that we recommend that efforts be concentrated on social order, incentives and economic integration, does not mean that we underestimate the vital importance of Indigenous rights for socio-economic advancement.

My conclusions so far are that there is a growing understanding that Indigenous Australian participation in the real economy is the key, firstly to halting our current spiralling social disintegration, but also, necessarily, to social reconstruction and our long term cultural survival.

However, this insight has not lead to the adoption of an assimilationist programme. Governments accept:

- that economic advancement will be partly based on rights,
- and that Indigenous peoples will retain a link to and a presence on their lands.

From the last point it follows that there must be a role for Indigenous Australian organisations and governance structures.

How will government deal practically with the fact that Indigenous Australian rights and organisations will continue to be important?

The answer to that question depends on the answer to another important question, which unfortunately is difficult to raise.

Earlier I said that the two fundamental questions of the reconciliation process are:

- what are the causes of the situation we have now, and
- what are the solutions.

The third question is the difficult issue of what expectations governments and Non-Indigenous Australians have of we Indigenous Australians.

This is perhaps the most pressing issue for reconciliation.

When formal discrimination or colonisation has been removed, there is an insidious threat facing peoples in our situation.

The self-fulfilling prophesy of low expectations.

Obviously, one of the gravest dangers facing former colonies in Africa has been the assumption that those countries will not be capable of managing their own affairs.

Those of you who are not Aboriginal have perhaps tried to imagine what it would be like to be a young African American, living from your first year with the expectation that you are going to end up relatively uneducated and with a high likelihood of being dysfunctional. Those of us who are Aboriginal Australians do not need to take this imaginative journey.

There are two factors complicating this discussion.

The first is that people are understandably loath to discuss their private thoughts regarding the competence or otherwise of Indigenous Australians.

The second factor complicating this discussion is that there is, of course, a problem with lack of capabilities among Indigenous Australians.

This issue needs to be brought into the open.

The risk is that we otherwise end up with entrenched but unspoken convictions among Non-Indigenous civil servants and other important people that the role of the organisations of Indigenous Australians should be minimised

I and other leaders from Cape York Peninsula can sense this attitude beneath the surface of our dealings with Non-Indigenous decision makers.

The dilemma that we are facing is that if we object to this attitude we will be seen as playing the race card – trying to avoid accountability by implying that Non-Indigenous people are racist.

Being an Indigenous Australian working for development is to be in a difficult position – our awareness of our lack of experience is perhaps a source of collective low confidence.

But at the same time we must insist that Australia as a country does not fall into the trap of entrenching a culture of low expectations of her minority people.

I want to conclude by mentioning two examples of the problem of low expectations.

Most of you will all be aware of, or directly affected by, the plans for a gas pipeline.

This project was first driven by Chevron in the mid 90's.  
Our plans for Indigenous involvement were then comparatively passive.

Over the intervening ten years our thinking and our expectations in Cape York Peninsula have come a long way, illustrated by a comparison of the Chevron opportunity of the 90's with the AGL opportunity that we are working through currently.

Though I believe that Non-Indigenous people still think in terms of off-the-shelf standard compensation for Indigenous parties, now there are many more options available.

We would like to move away from the off-the-shelf thinking.

Government's role should not be to restrict opportunities to standard clauses for Indigenous compensation and Indigenous involvement.

Its role should be to support our commercial activities, support our efforts to engage with the hard end of business, to find capital, not only for equity, but also for businesses linked to the main projects such as earth moving contracts.

The Government still does too little to encourage indigenous enterprise.

I wonder why.

It is perhaps understandable that the Government sees first and foremost to the interests of the companies wanting to exploit resources on Aboriginal land.

But it should not be the case that Government regards Indigenous economic development as a complication or a distraction.

I get the feeling that the Government sees its role as facilitating these companies' progress through the maze of Indigenous rights, environmental issues et cetera.

We have also seen that the Native Title Act can be used as a threat towards Indigenous entrepreneurial aspirations.

The resource development negotiations I have experience of have occurred outside of processes described in the Native Title Act.

Companies have agreed to negotiate in good faith "as if native title exists".

If the process outlined in the Native Title Act is followed, there will be clear timelines which traditional owners and the company have to abide by.

But the timelines of the Native Title Act will not work in an environment of commercial realities.

There will be opportunity for the Government to step in and make a decision.

We will be disadvantaged if this happens.

The important and respectful principle of negotiating on an "as if" basis is the best way to achieve Indigenous economic development as one of the results of resource exploitation.

What is the reason for the lack of understanding of our point of view?

I fear that lack of expectation on behalf of government is an underlying reason.

I also want to say something about our experiences of government funding and the question of whether services should be delivered by Indigenous or Non-Indigenous organisations.

We in Cape York Peninsula communities have long experience of partnerships with private companies such as Westpac.

We have cooperated with them in economic development, finding business solutions, and in developing ways to fight passive welfare.

But to establish such partnerships, we need government funding.

The partnership with Westpac and others is valuable to us.

This is more than the contribution of both governments together, BUT if Balkanu were not funded by government we would not have been able to develop these partnerships.

I think that our organisations in Cape York Peninsula find it much easier to access government funding than organisations in other regions.

There is an increasing disquiet in Aboriginal Australia about governments being so ungenerous towards Indigenous community organisations.

Governments must find ways to fund SUCCESSFUL organisations.

In my region, there are communities with long track records of running reasonably successful CDEP programmes.

Currently, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations is mainstreaming CDEP.

I believe this will in some cases be bad for communities where small organisations which run arts, craft, childcare, and sports programmes that are vital for communities, do not win the CDEP tender.

In Cape York Peninsula I have seen this outcome of the tender process at Injinoo Weipa, New Mapoon , Laura and Cooktown.

Non-Indigenous companies with no experience of remote communities will run the programmes in the future.

Representatives of government departments would be able to justify these decisions on objective grounds.

But I have a lingering suspicion that low expectations play a role again here and will continue to play a role in the interaction between governments and our communities.

The last thing we need is to have things run by consultants, and have community capacity further diluted.

Finally, I want to say that I hope that Indigenous and Non-Indigenous participants at this conference will gain much insight and learn much from each other about how to get Indigenous business development going.

Thank you