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Unleashed

Any move towards a bipartisan position on one of the elements of reconciliation is to be welcomed. And I do welcome it. In the fever of a pre election campaign when divisions and differences stand to be emphasised in the struggle for votes it is even more significant that the Government has moved towards a bipartisan position on constitutional recognition of the special place of Indigenous people within the nation. At last symbolism intersects with practical reconciliation.

Is this a new dawn? All supporters of reconciliation will hope so. What we know is that it is and can only be one piece of the jigsaw and that no one piece will do the job.

There are some obvious points to be made.

For even this initiative to succeed there will need to be proper consultation with Indigenous people, the majority population will need education on why it matters, and bipartisan support.

Beyond this particular initiative lie other essential elements.

Governments can't cherry pick the reconciliation agenda. The recent response to the Anderson Wild report saw much needed action on child abuse but the clear interrelated agenda set out in that report was ignored in favour of a focus on policing rather than the underlying issues.

Action cannot be unilateral if it is to succeed. Without respectful consultation with Indigenous people and their positive engagement interventions fail.

Relations have to be respectful. Respect has been conspicuously absent from past pronouncements.

Policies must be long term in both content and entrench the financial commitments needed to remove large infrastructure and service deficits. That means they must be bipartisan so that they transcend individual Prime Ministers, Ministers and Governments.

Substance must not just occasionally intersect but be alongside symbolic issues as they interact.

And saying sorry is a bit of the jigsaw. Saying sorry is not an admission of personal guilt but an acknowledgement of long term official wrongdoing by those elected to represent us as a community. It is what our POWs sought from the Japanese, it is an acknowledgement that wrong things were done. It is notable that the apologies by all State Premiers have not been the basis of claims for damages as the scare campaigners claim. It is just a bit of common decency.

Fred Chaney  
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