



# ANOTHER STEP TO RECONCILIATION

*A symbolic gesture perhaps, but not without meaning*

**BEN WYATT**

SITTING on my office desk is a file created by the Office of Native Affairs. It tells the story, in great detail, of the life of my grandmother and her baby son, my father. It is a file that carries great emotion for me. It tells a story of government control over the life of people considered by officialdom to be “half caste”.

There are the details of my grandmother’s wages, taken from her and never returned. And it tells the story of the birth of my father and the government’s interaction with his father — a man I never met.

This file was created by the laws of its day, which allowed Aboriginal people to be discriminated against. Sadly, traces of those views continue to stand in the rules of our nation.

Our country’s Constitution is a product of its era. It was penned at a time when the first Australians were not even counted as citizens in our own land. Since then, many of our day-to-day laws have evolved and responded as Australia has matured and come to a greater pride and understanding of the value of our country’s unique Aboriginal people and cultures.

The Constitution is, necessarily, a skeleton document that our national parliament and High Court have taken and filled in the blanks over the decades. However, very occasionally, it is the people of Australia who need to amend the Constitution to make it better reflect who we

truly are. Such a time has come with the proposal to remove the ability of our federal government to discriminate against people on the basis of their race and to recognise the original inhabitants of our country.

Not one single Australian need fear such a change. Indeed, such a change will give cause for every Australian to celebrate. Our history with Aboriginal Australians is our national achilles heel, the one issue that other nations struggle to associate with the vibrant, positive, inclusive, energetic democracy we are today. Every Australian can own such a change and celebrate the fact that Aboriginal people have lived in, and protected, our nation for more than 40,000 years.

Is this symbolic? Of course. But symbols inspire us, and unite us. And they have a power to make people feel included, and that will spur on and complement the practical agenda on jobs, health and education.

Look at Kevin Rudd’s apology. It was received with such powerful emotion and goodwill that it is clear that the impact of symbolism is not gone, not lost. The merits of “practical reconciliation” go hand in hand with symbolic gestures of humanity and decency.

To ignore the symbolic is to take a profoundly small view of the very nature of humanity. Human beings are motivated and inspired by the symbol, we are

not creatures who live in isolation from each other, rather, are connected by the intimate social connections of relationships. These connections are with each other, with our nation and with our history. Our relationship with Aboriginal Australians is just as much a relationship with ourselves as with the history of our nation and Constitution.

The apology from the national parliament has created a sense of opportunity in Australia, last seen with the 1967 referendum. Unfortunately the full opportunity of 1967 was lost, not for lack of goodwill, but for lack of thought and consideration. We need to finish the job.

I encourage every Australian to think about the founding document of our nation, our Constitution, and what it says about us, as a nation, a people, as we move further into a world of many cultures, languages and histories. We need to cherish our uniquely Australian identity — and this remarkable founding story now shared by every Australian — so that it is not lost or obscured for future generations.

We are all invested in the future of Aboriginal Australians and recognising their incredible history, in our country, in our time, is the right thing to do.

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*Ben Wyatt is WA opposition Treasury spokesman.*