

Reconciliation News

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Partnerships are the key

In commenting on Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's second *Closing the Gap* report card, Reconciliation Australia Co-Chairs Professor Mick Dodson AM and Mark Leibler AC said they were encouraged by the emphasis on promoting genuine partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and the importance of Indigenous-led solutions.

Professor Dodson said that the Prime Minister's recognition of Indigenous-led solutions supported Australian and international evidence, that locally driven initiatives are the keys to real progress on the ground.

'Much of the evidence presented in the report card shows that progress comes from the ground up, rather than top-down and that the roles of governments and others is in supporting and working closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and communities to address their issues,' Professor Dodson said.

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The powerful photographic exhibition *Marnti Warajanga* — we're travelling — is on show at Old Parliament House in Canberra, see [story on page 11](#)



Reconciliation
AUSTRALIA

Can Australia follow Obama's lead?



Barack Obama, courtesy of Newspix AFP photo/ Emmanuel Dunand

Stephen Cornell is a faculty associate of the Native Nations Institute, professor of sociology, and director, Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy, all at the University of Arizona. He also co-directs the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development. Stephen has made a number of visits to Australia in recent years to discuss Indigenous governance issues.

His article was prompted by US President Barack Obama's recent commitment to effectively empower American Indian nations to re-build their own decision-making capability. The President recognises that genuine self-determination is not only good public policy but is essential for moving forward. Stephen suggests that in Australia the evidence similarly shows that when Indigenous communities make their own decisions, the outcomes can have a transformative impact on people's lives.



Stephen Cornell

Last November, President Barack Obama hosted a White House Tribal Nations Conference in Washington. Addressing an audience of more than 400 — the largest gathering of tribal leaders in United States history — the President explicitly recognised that the U.S. and its Indigenous peoples have a ‘unique, nation-to-nation relationship’.

He also acknowledged that for many American Indians, U.S. history up to the present day has been characterised by violence, disease, and poverty. He argued that in addressing these issues, Washington can’t and shouldn’t dictate a policy agenda for Indigenous peoples. ‘Without real communication and consultation,’ he said, ‘we’re stuck, year after year, with policies that don’t work.’ He committed himself to ‘a lasting conversation that’s crucial to our shared future’.

These were important words for the Indigenous peoples of the U.S. to

hear. They reaffirmed two principles of late 20th-century U.S. Indian policy that have been gradually undermined or ignored since century’s end: (1) the federal policy of tribal self-determination, and (2) a government-to-government relationship that not only recognises Indigenous nations as decision-making entities but keeps the focus of the policy conversation on tribal *communities* and their hopes and dreams, not simply on individual Indians and their personal socioeconomic fortunes.


Over the last two decades, the U.S. Supreme Court has chipped away at the self-determination policy, producing a set of decisions that have reduced the range of tribal decision-making power. This has occurred despite ample evidence that the U.S. policy of self-determination — formally adopted in the 1970s — is the only U.S. Indian policy ever linked to sustained improvement in socioeconomic conditions in Indian communities. The North American experience shows that self-determination pays off, provided tribes not only assume responsibility for their own affairs but invest time and energy in building governing institutions that can capably exercise decision-making power and that have the support of their own peoples — and provided central and other governments take self-determination seriously.

Allowing Indigenous peoples to design their own governance solutions is not always easy for central governments, with their preference for imposing

their own templates on Indigenous organisation and decision-making, to swallow. But despite much misunderstanding of the term, this is what self-determination means. It is not about letting Indigenous peoples run programs someone else designed for them — a policy that central governments like to call self-determination but that is nothing more than self-administration. It involves instead a substantive transfer of decision-making power, plus programs and resources that can assist Indigenous peoples — denied that power for generations — in rebuilding their own decision-making capacities.

As for the government-to-government relationship, it too has received mostly lip service since 2000 as the U.S. government backed away from commitments to consult with Indian nations on policy issues where they were involved or were likely to feel the consequences. President Obama acknowledged as much to tribal leaders at the November meeting, noting that ‘President Clinton issued an executive order establishing regular and meaningful consultation and collaboration between your nations and the federal government. But over the past nine years, only a few agencies have made an effort to implement that executive order. And it’s time for that to change’.

Words are only words, of course. We’ll see how much change takes place. The President gave each of his cabinet-level departments 90 days to produce concrete plans for ‘the full



implementation' of the Clinton executive order, plans that are being issued now. It is the next three years of the Obama administration that will demonstrate whether all the talk and all the plans make a difference. But for the first time in nearly a decade, there is someone in the White House who apparently believes that American Indian nations themselves are the ones who can best address the catastrophic legacies of colonialism, and that empowering and supporting them in that effort is good public policy. Not only does this please American Indian leaders. It conforms to their experience over the last few decades.

Lessons for Australia

What, if any, relevance might all this have for Australia? That's for Australians to decide, but a couple of thoughts occur to me. Back in 2002, I was one of several North Americans — some Indigenous, some not — asked to talk about Indigenous governance at a conference in Canberra. Much of the audience was made up of Indigenous Australian leadership. We talked about what American Indian nations in the U.S. and First Nations in Canada had been doing over the last three decades: reclaiming control over their affairs, searching for and, in many cases, creating or reviving governance solutions to the difficult issues they face; building legislative and judicial capacities; creating records of success in law-making and enforcement, resource management, economic development,

education, cultural and language revitalisation; making plenty of mistakes, yes, but in growing numbers digging their way out of the miasma of poverty and despair.

At a break in the meeting, an Aboriginal man came up to two of us. 'We know this isn't the United States,' he said. 'We know we're not Indians. But you have to keep telling us these stories. They give us hope.'

Perhaps it is more than hope. Perhaps it is affirmation, for Australia has its own record of this sort of thing. There's ample evidence of it, for example, in the Indigenous Governance Awards, a scheme coordinated by Reconciliation Australia in partnership with BHP Billiton that recognises Indigenous communities and organisations that are resourceful and innovative, that are building capable, responsible governance structures of their own design, and that are having a transformative impact on people's lives. *That's* where the real hope lies.

Meanwhile, the Indigenous Community Governance Research project carried out by Reconciliation Australia and the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the ANU found solid evidence of the ability of Australian Indigenous communities, when given the necessary freedom and support, to develop creative governance solutions to current problems. Such solutions may be rooted in Indigenous tradition, invented to deal with new circumstances, or borrowed from outside. The point is that these solutions, whatever their

provenance, were generated through processes of Indigenous choice, which gave them power.

Tragically, just when that research project was generating compelling findings, identifying successful governance strategies and key factors that made them possible — just when it was beginning, in other words, to produce the evidence that a genuinely evidence-based Indigenous policy requires — government decided to drop the funding, and the project came to an end.

I mention these two programs because I am familiar with them, but they are not the only ones. I know there are others in Australia as well that have learned, as we have been learning in North America, that imposed solutions seldom work, and that Indigenous communities can effectively address many of the problems they face. What they need is time, support, the freedom to be ambitious and creative and to be themselves, some knowledge of what has — and hasn't — worked elsewhere, permission to make mistakes, and a stable policy environment that searches for, encourages, works with, and supports Indigenous solutions.

President Obama's words were encouraging because they reflected those lessons and the idea that, as he put it in November, 'tribal nations do better when they make their own decisions'. These are lessons that both our countries, as different as they may be, can learn from and build on.