

# The Voice referendum and the huge “reconciliation” march across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000

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The following article, written in 2000, outlines the political issues raised by a massive “Walk for Aboriginal Reconciliation” across Sydney’s Harbour Bridge that year attended by more than 250,000 people.

Two days earlier, on a “National Sorry Day,” thousands of ordinary people had also marched through major cities calling for an official government apology to Australia’s Aboriginal people for the atrocities perpetrated against them since the arrival of British imperialism toward the end of the eighteenth century. Taken together, these were among the largest political demonstrations in Australian history.

The questions examined, including attempts by the political establishment to cynically manipulate widespread concern over the plight of the indigenous population, have not gone away.

On the contrary, they are directly relevant to the Labor government’s campaign to enshrine an indigenous advisory body to parliament into the Australian Constitution.

The referendum is a continuation of an official “reconciliation” program initiated by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments of 1983-96. It was designed to serve the domestic and foreign policy requirements of the Australian capitalist class, while the social conditions of working-class indigenous people have only worsened.

The Voice would do nothing to resolve those conditions. It would be an unelected indigenous advisory body entrenched at the heart of the reactionary 1901 Australian Constitution and the very same apparatus of parliament, government and police-military forces responsible for the 235 years of oppression.

The architects of the Voice, such as indigenous lawyer Noel Pearson, have long been among the chief proponents of the reconciliation agenda, as they were in 2000. As this article explores, that features so-called economic empowerment, based on the development of indigenous business operations, linked to the creation of legally-recognised land rights as a means to facilitate multi-billion mining and other corporate projects.

This is a racially-divisive program, above all attempting to cut across a unified struggle by indigenous and non-indigenous workers alike against the capitalist profit system itself, which is the source of the deteriorating financial, housing and social conditions confronting the working class as a whole, of whom indigenous workers are the most vulnerable.

In fact, the “reconciliation” program is built on blaming “white society,” instead of the capitalist order, for the oppression of Aborigines, and seeking to divert from the ever-widening social divide between the financial elite and the entire working class.

The article below also explains why the political and corporate establishment heavily backed the government-funded Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation as a means of trying to put a new face on the notorious record of Australian capitalism, particularly in the Asia-Pacific

region. Today, this is an even greater imperative as the Albanese government ramps up, via the AUKUS alliance, preparations for a frontline role in the US-led war against China, including by seeking to bully regional states into Washington’s line-up.

In 2000, the Howard Liberal-National government declined to issue the demanded apology, but by 2007 it had shifted its stance to call for indigenous recognition in the constitution. That project was picked up by the following Rudd Labor government, which issued the phoney 2008 parliamentary apology to the “stolen generations” of tens of thousands of Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families.

The government- and corporate-backed reconciliation and recognition program ultimately led to the Voice proposal. It did not come from the grassroots as the Yes campaign falsely claims. In 2015, the Abbott Liberal-National government convened a meeting with 39 selected indigenous figures and the then Labor opposition leader Bill Shorten at Kirribilli House, the prime minister’s official Sydney harbourside residence, to call for a new type of “recognition.” It launched the orchestrated gatherings that produced the 2017 Uluru statement that endorsed the Voice plan.

While the horrendous social conditions afflicting most indigenous people would continue to worsen, the Voice would further incorporate into the capitalist class and the state apparatus the privileged indigenous beneficiaries of the three decades-old reconciliation process.

That is why the SEP is urging workers and youth to reject both the Yes and No cases presented by rival factions of the ruling political establishment, all of which are committed to the program of war and sacrifice. We are calling for an active boycott campaign to oppose the referendum itself, as part of a broader fight against the capitalist order.

The 2000 article warned that, without a clear alternative political perspective, the hundreds of thousands who sincerely walked for “reconciliation” would become a tool for the very social forces that have proven, throughout the course of the past two centuries, entirely inimical to the interests of ordinary Aborigines. The same warning applies to those considering voting Yes in the Voice referendum.

*Note: Under conditions of compulsory voting, which makes it a crime to urge a boycott of the vote itself, the SEP calls on workers and youth to register their opposition by casting informal ballots and join our active boycott campaign in the lead-up to October 14, that goes well beyond the individual act of voting.*

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1 June 2000

More than a quarter of a million people participated last Sunday in a “Walk for Aboriginal Reconciliation” across Sydney’s famous landmark,

the Harbour Bridge. For five and a half hours, a steady human stream filled the bridge, traversing the four kilometres from North Sydney to the southern end.

The walk followed Saturday's "Corroboree 2000" conference and ceremony, which saw the handing over of a document "Towards Reconciliation" by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) to Liberal Prime Minister John Howard and to state, federal and territory government officials, church leaders and other dignitaries on the steps of the Sydney Opera House, before an audience of several thousand.

The CAR was set up by the Hawke Labor government in 1991, following a recommendation from the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody. Comprising politicians, including former Liberal Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, media and business identities, trade union bureaucrats and Aboriginal leaders, its brief has purportedly been to tackle the country's "racial divide."

On Friday's "National Sorry Day," thousands marched through major cities calling for an official government apology to Australia's Aboriginal people for the crimes perpetrated against them since British settlement at the end of the eighteenth century.

Together, the three days were billed as the culmination of a nine-year process of "reconciliation" between the country's indigenous and non-indigenous populations. They were ostensibly designed to mark the recognition of past injustices, indigenous rights and a new dawn in relations between "black and white."

The walk was led by members of the "stolen generation"—the tens of thousands of Aborigines forcibly separated from their families under the "assimilation" policy pursued by successive Australian governments until the 1960s—and the CAR. Their main preoccupation was to extract the word "sorry" from the prime minister, something he has consistently refused to say. While Howard was conspicuously absent, representatives of his government, which has denied the existence of the stolen generation, and which has presided over ever-worsening conditions for ordinary Aborigines, walked close behind march organisers.

Liberal, Labor, National, Democrat and Green politicians mingled together, along with judges, former prime ministers, church leaders, business executives and various celebrities.

The huge turnout—the largest-ever political demonstration in the country's history—expressed a widespread and entirely legitimate sense of outrage on the part of ordinary people at the genocidal policies carried out over the past 200 years against the Aboriginal population, as well as disgust at the impoverished conditions and discriminatory treatment the majority have continued to suffer under both Labor and Liberal governments.

Participants included a large number of middle class and professional people, working class families with young children hoisted on shoulders, many students and young people, immigrants from many parts of the world, particularly Asia, and contingents of Aborigines from around the country. Most people strolled across the bridge with family and friends, not as part of a specific contingent. Some marched behind the banners of government departments, cultural institutions, schools, universities, unions and political parties.

Dominating the event was the feeling that ordinary people had to take a stand themselves on behalf of the Aboriginal people. Without doubt many around the country, not just those who participated, believe that through the so-called "reconciliation process" the past will, finally, be honestly confronted, and its wounds begin to heal. Only then will the lot of Aboriginal people, in some as yet unexplained way, begin to improve.

"Reconciliation" itself has become a sort of catch-all phrase, encompassing all manner of ill-defined sentiments, meaning different things to different people. Virtually anyone can embrace it.

Marchers interviewed by the WSWS were rather vague about what they

thought it meant: an act of individual contrition, a personal resolve to help change things for the better, social justice, racial harmony, peace, equality, love. But they had no idea as to how any of these would be achieved, and they had little or no trust in politicians or the political establishment as a whole.

None of those we interviewed had considered what the official agenda behind the "reconciliation process" might be, and why it has been so heavily promoted throughout the media. The *Sun Herald*, for example, ran a banner headline on the morning of the march: "Vote with your feet," castigating Howard yet again for not saying "sorry" the day before. The national broadcaster, the ABC, featured almost continuous coverage of the three days' events on radio and television. Those who walked on Sunday, trumpeted Murdoch's *Australian* the next morning, had delivered the "people's apology," in spite of the prime minister.

#### **An apparent contradiction**

Here was an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, tens of thousands were motivated to walk by deep concerns for social justice and equity. On the other, the event was supported to the hilt by the very politicians, business chiefs and media barons responsible for growing social inequality.

The answer to this is to be found in the political agenda guiding the "reconciliation process," revealed in the Documents of Reconciliation prepared by the CAR.

Not surprisingly these have received virtually no publicity. That is because they seek to bolster and perpetuate the same social and economic order responsible for the wiping out of a large percentage of the Aboriginal population and for the ongoing oppression of those who managed to survive.

The documents begin by highlighting the fact that Australia is the only Commonwealth country, and one of the few in the world, that has not signed a "treaty" with its indigenous peoples or provided them with Constitutional "recognition."

Nations that have done so are listed as examples the Australian government should emulate, including Canada, the United States, South Africa, Ecuador, Brazil, New Zealand and the Scandinavian countries.

How the "methods of conflict resolution," "apologies" and "treaties" lauded by the CAR have actually impacted on the lives of the vast majority of the indigenous populations of these countries is not mentioned. And for good reason. In all cases they have served to create a tiny layer of wealthy indigenous entrepreneurs who have used the return of their "native lands" and cash compensation as a means, not for improving the health, welfare and education of ordinary indigenous people, but for enriching themselves through lucrative investments and business ventures, particularly gambling.

New Zealand is a prime example. Throughout the 1990s many hundreds of millions of dollars have been transferred by the government in cash compensation and land to Maori tribal leaders. Maori business interests now control around \$5 billion in assets, excluding housing stock. \$3 billion of this is invested in agriculture, nearly \$1 billion in business and commercial activity and the rest in forestry and fishing.

The beneficiaries—a tiny layer of business and political leaders—have reaped handsome rewards, luxuriating in the trappings of corporate success. Working class Maori, on the other hand, have seen their social position decline. Unemployment among them stands at 18 percent, three times the national average, and 30 percent among teenage youth. Every other social indicator—weekly household income, education, hospitalisation rates, youth suicide, mental health, diabetes, rate of imprisonment—has worsened during the past decade.

The CAR's Documents of Reconciliation elaborate a series of strategies for "the steps we must take as we work together towards a reconciled nation."

Most important among them is "economic empowerment," which, the

CAR claims, will lead to “economic independence and self-reliance” and “will not occur through welfare programs.” Significantly this “strategy” dovetails exactly with the right-wing agenda of the Howard government, and the demands of corporate Australia to slash welfare spending and eliminate social facilities.

Not one reference is made to the need for decent-paying jobs, the most urgent demand of Aboriginal workers in urban, regional and rural areas, where unemployment rates can reach as high as 100 percent.

Instead, the CAR calls for better access to capital, business planning advice and assistance, increased networking and mentoring opportunities, promotion and encouragement of small business, and fostering partnerships with the business community.

These proposals are designed to formalise and entrench a process already well under way: a growing social polarisation between a few Aboriginal entrepreneurs, or “Abocrats”—as one young Aboriginal worker described them to the WSWS on Sunday—and the mass of impoverished Aboriginal workers and youth, denied access to welfare, jobs and services, forced either to “work for the dole,” or to be exploited as cheap labour by Aboriginal businesses in partnership with mining and tourist interests.

The documents make a general call for “increased representation in Australian parliaments,” designed to shore up, through the existence of a handful of token Aboriginal politicians, what have become totally discredited institutions, in order to bind the Aboriginal working class ever more closely to them.

#### **Aboriginal land rights**

The demand in the documents for “self-determination within the framework of the Australian Constitution” raises another important feature of the “reconciliation process”: its relationship to Aboriginal land rights and “native title.”

In traditional Aboriginal society, the concept of private property was entirely unknown. To the largely nomadic Aboriginal tribes, with no agriculture or livestock, the land and sea were the sole source of survival, endowed with considerable spiritual significance.

The origins of the “land rights” movement go back several decades. In the 1960s a militant movement began to emerge among Aboriginal workers in country areas, demanding decent wages and conditions. At the same time, the working class in the major cities was becoming increasingly restive. Fearful of the prospect of a unified movement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers, both Labor and Liberal governments alike began the process of cultivating a small privileged layer of Aboriginal leaders. Their function was to act as a lightning rod, diverting common grievances and sowing divisions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Against specifically class demands, these leaders began to champion land rights, or the right of indigenous people to own their ancestral lands.

The demand won growing support, promoted as it was by the Aboriginal leaderships and the “left” radical milieu as a means of protecting important cultural and spiritual landmarks, in trust for future generations and for ensuring the right of impoverished Aboriginal communities to live on traditional lands, without fear of eviction.

But “native title” has meant nothing of the sort. It was created as a new legal entity by the High Court in 1992 in the famous Mabo case, just one year after the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was established.

It renders alienable what was previously “crown” or common land, and endows it with a monetary value. “Native title” was designed by the court to be nothing more than a tradable option, a new private interest in land, that can be bought and sold on the capitalist market.

And that is precisely what it has become. This is why the Mabo case and the “reconciliation process” alike have received such strong support from corporate Australia.

Together, they have become the vehicle through which long-term, capital intensive mining and tourism investments are able to be secured.

“Sacred sites” have been cynically sold off by Aboriginal land councils in exchange for ready cash.

Three years ago, the first “Reconciliation Convention” was held at Melbourne’s World Trade Centre. Costing some \$1 million, it was bankrolled by some of the biggest names in mining and oil, including BHP, Shell, CRA-RTZ, Pasmenco, North Ltd and ARCO Coal. Also contributing were the ANZ bank, Telstra, Canon, Fuji Xerox, and the Tourism Council of Australia (representing the big hotels and tour operators).

Featured as speakers in plenary sessions and seminars were several corporate heavyweights, some of whom marched on Sunday.

The *Financial Review* of May 28, 1997 explained why in an editorial entitled “The business of reconciliation”: “As Australia’s mining industry now recognises, the task of reconciliation is not a bleeding-heart obsession of the white chattering classes, but instead is a matter of practical business.”

Since then Pasmenco, for example, has given regional Aboriginal leaders control over a \$60 million compensation fund as the price for native title rights at the \$1 billion Century Zinc mine in north-west Queensland.

Chevron recently cleared the way for a \$3.5 billion gas pipeline along the Queensland coast by allocating \$6 million to the First Nations Joint Company to disperse among 26 Aboriginal groups with native title claims. Chevron also left open the possibility of the Aboriginal company taking a 2 percent share in the project.

Not surprisingly, Corroborree 2000 and the “Walk for Aboriginal Reconciliation” were also sponsored by major corporate interests, including Toyota, Ansett, mining companies and PBL, the media company owned by Australia’s richest man, Kerry Packer, while the New South Wales and federal governments devoted considerable resources to its organisation.

One notable participant was the executive director of the Business Council of Australia, David Buckingham. He told the *Financial Review* that the walk was a “very significant national event” which would “hopefully set the tone for resolving and concluding these issues in the future.”

#### **Saying sorry**

The insistence of big business, the media, the CAR and the various Aboriginal leaderships that the prime minister “say sorry” needs to be viewed within this context.

Lowitja O’Donoghue, former chairwoman of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, explained the issue during an ABC television forum last Monday evening. O’Donoghue was asked what difference had been made to the lives of ordinary Aborigines by the fact that all the state governments had already apologised. She replied that their apologies had enabled Aborigines to work “more closely” with these governments, and that was why Aboriginal leaders wanted an apology from Howard. It would help cement a close working relationship with the federal government in the future, she said.

Nothing could more clearly expose the real agenda of the “reconciliation process.” Its aim is to utilise a carefully selected and highly promoted layer of petty-bourgeois Aboriginal bureaucrats to “reconcile” the vast majority of Aboriginal people to the requirements of capital.

These people want to “work more closely” with a government that has presided over a major offensive against the jobs, working conditions, welfare and social services of the entire working class.

The CAR’s final recommendation in its Documents of Reconciliation is the establishment of a “reconciliation foundation” to perpetuate the existence of reconciliation bodies that will continue to work with “governments at all levels.”

Apologies, expressions of regret, references to “human dignity,” “mutual respect” and “justice” are the means through which the CAR, the government and the media seek to enlist the support of wide layers of

ordinary people for this reactionary perspective.

Howard's refusal to co-operate has provoked scathing criticism from editorial writers and corporate boardrooms alike. He is being increasingly lambasted for placing political expediency above a recognition of the importance of "reconciliation" to corporate Australia. Facing a growing electoral backlash against his government's harsh social and economic policies, Howard has sought to rebuild support among right-wing and racist elements in rural and regional areas on the basis of "law and order." He has also encouraged the scapegoating of Aborigines and immigrants for the destruction of jobs and basic social services.

Monday's *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial thundered: "People are tired of the evasion, the point-scoring and the sheer mean-spiritedness of the Federal Government on questions of relations between black and white." Howard's course, it went on, was "narrow" and "destructive."

Hugh Morgan, chief executive of Western Mining Corporation, and well-known right-winger, told the Nine network's "Business Sunday" program that while the Howard government had shown "courageous leadership" in some areas, he was disappointed with its performance on "reconciliation."

"We get plastered overseas with stories," he said. "It consumes political debate here ... we don't need it. We don't need these sorts of internal dissensions."

In an article in Wednesday's *Financial Review* entitled "The practical business of reconciliation." Robert Champion de Crespigny, the CEO of Normandy Mining Ltd and a member of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, underscored Morgan's concerns:

"Reconciliation is obviously an issue of significance to Australian business.... With the growing internationalisation of business and the ever-present eyes of the world media, Australia risks becoming a pariah nation, in some respects like the old apartheid era South Africa. Such notions, however incorrect in reality, could easily take on a life of their own.

"This would create considerable difficulties for Australian businesses operating overseas as well as for expatriates. It would also be a tragedy as Australia is one of the most successful multicultural nations in the world."

"Reconciliation" has, in this way, become a significant factor in foreign policy. Howard's continuing failure to issue an apology has received attention throughout the Asia-Pacific region, an area of vital economic concern to corporate Australia. Fears are being expressed that Australia's capacity to "engage" in the region, under the banner of defending human rights, will be compromised if it continues to project an image of callous indifference to its own Aboriginal population.

Many thousands participated in last weekend's events out of a sense that only by demonstrating en masse, could their concerns about both the past and the present be heard. This is, in itself, significant. But the vital and outstanding issue remains one of perspective. Without a clear alternative, the hundreds of thousands who walked will simply become a tool for the very social forces that have proven, throughout the course of the past 200 years, entirely inimical to the interests of ordinary Aborigines.

The terrible oppression of the indigenous population will continue and deepen unless and until a mass political movement of the working class emerges, uniting Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and armed with an independent socialist perspective challenging the very basis of the profit system. Only by reorganising society from top to bottom, by taking the ownership of the major industries, mines and banks out of private hands and placing them in the hands of the working class as a whole, can the social, economic and political rights of the Aboriginal people be secured.



To contact the WSWS and the  
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