

# Speech for Reconciliation Week

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## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner June Oscar AO made this speech at the WA Reconciliation Breakfast on May 29, 2021

*Yanigi warangira ngindaji yuwa muwayi ingirranggu, Bunuba yani U. Balangarri wadjirragali jarra ningi gamali ngindaji yau muwayi nyir*

Welcome everyone—I acknowledge all the countries we gather on today, for the audience in Perth I acknowledge the Whadjuk and all Noongar peoples. I am beaming in from my beautiful Bunuba country. I pay my respects to all our elders, past, present and emerging.

I hope you are enjoying your breakfast. I thank Reconciliation WA for making this breakfast happen and for bringing together such a wonderful group of speakers.

The theme of this reconciliation week is ‘more than a word’.

In a year where a global pandemic has created mass upheaval, and people everywhere are questioning our current systems and what else could exist to combat rampant inequalities and form just and fair societies, the theme of this week is a timely reminder to ask ourselves: what is reconciliation? What is the intention, the meaning of this word—where has it come from and where is it meant to take us?

Reconciliation—to reconcile—was needed the moment this continent was colonised, in another time of great upheaval. It should have occurred through a process of settlement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and British colonial forces. Agreement should have been made based on the recognition of our unique and equal rights as First Peoples, the custodians of this continent's lands and waters, living within distinct socio-economic, political, and spiritual systems and structures. But those first moments of encounter did not result in any substantive agreement-making between our peoples and the British with our very different conceptions of nationhood.

Too frequently, as we all well know, violence erupted and atrocities were tacitly condoned and then buried while institutional discrimination was entrenched, marginalising our peoples and allowing generational disadvantage to take hold and inequalities to grow.

Over the decades and centuries, the need for reconciliation took on a new and urgent dimension of truth-telling to halt the perpetuation of injustices, and right past and ongoing wrongs through proper compensation and the incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights and self-determination into the fabric of the Australian nation.

Our formal use of the word reconciliation was born from this tumultuous history and a burning need for a process to arrive at structural settlement between our First Nations, all governments and the Australian public.

In 1987, when Prime Minister Hawke sat at Barunga a political commitment was made to treaty and we had promise that this process could soon take shape. Through an intense political debate, a compromise emerged with the passing of the Reconciliation Act in the National Parliament to create a statutory process to work through what settlement would be, and how a real, meaningful reconciled end point could be reached.

And so, the decade of reconciliation began with so much potential, so much more than a word. The Council of Reconciliation was established, led by the Father of Reconciliation, Patrick Dodson. A title that carried all the moral obligation and authority needed, for a process that had to lead an entire nation through historic reckoning with itself. A process of courageous acceptance of a woeful living history that has treated ‘us’ appallingly, where hard truths are voiced and heard and a nation does not turn away in anger, but grieves and learns, reconfiguring its identity to be and do better, beyond reconciliation.

During this period we established the guideposts and vehicles to do this. We had Mabo, terra nullius was condemned as fiction, the social justice principles were formed, Bringing them Home was released, my position—the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner—was tasked on reporting on the state of reconciliation and how we must overcome all forms of disadvantage and drive the realisation of substantive equality.

And finally the statement and documents of reconciliation were to be handed down.

And then we marched, indigenous and non-indigenous, in our tens of thousands. I felt a collective euphoria that in some form of unity we were calling into being a future that all Australians would be proud of, and that we were taking action to make it happen.

But the gates to the road ahead did not open as they should have at centenary.

I honestly believe that the Australian public was almost ready to take the next steps—momentum was building. But Australian governments shut the possibility down out of fear, suddenly realising, I believe, the structural implications of what reconciliation demanded. That governments had to do the hard work of reconciliation, not us—that they had to alter structures to guarantee our equal place in decision-making, and that by doing this it would be impossible to proceed as we had gone before.

There is no other way to reflect on this time other than our political system was not ready, not brave enough to state the truth that we live in an unsettled nation with grievances that will never be reconciled until we have a process of political settlement.

We know what happened from the centenary onward—our call for Australia to reconcile was derailed into a so called ‘practical’ agenda. Somehow the onus of responsibility was flipped and came to sit with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We were expected to find a way to fit, without protest, into current structures, as if our grievances were holding back progression.

Let me be clear, this is not reconciliation. It is all but a word that has simply been co-opted to hide a political refusal to reform structures so that they can guarantee our equal place in the building of a modern, healthy democratic Australian state.

Of course, over this period there have been worthy and ongoing attempts to build Australia’s capacity to actually engage in reconciliation, namely through Reconciliation Action Plans. But reconciliation was never meant to be reduced to RAPs alone. They were just one necessary part of the journey toward settlement—designed to improve corporate, business relationships so we could better establish our economic empowerment and self-determination. As important as they are, and they have brought many of you to this breakfast today, we’ve got to take RAPs to the next level and reposition them in the bigger agenda of social, political and economic settlement so they can be a driving force for self-determination.

And to do that we have got to put the big agenda back on the table, and remember RAPs have their place, but reconciliation is far more than this word.

We may not have been ready 20 years ago for what our peoples were proposing, but I know Australia is ready now. The Uluru statement has reawakened everyone to the need for a fundamental re-set in the relationship between First Nations peoples and all Australian governments. It is a unifying poetic call to strive for true justice, reminding us all that First Nations peoples are not the problem, the problem lies in structural inequality and exclusion, where we are not ever given the authority and capacity to make the decisions that impact our lives.

For politicians and business leaders still hesitant at the start line, trust me, it is time to take the leaps required to catch up to the overwhelming public support for our First Nations voices to be permanently enshrined into the structures that form and enact national policy and legislation. When the Voice is established, in whatever form that takes, institutions, organisations, state and territory governments and the non-government sectors need to be prepared and willing to respond.

Processes are already taking hold across every state and territory—in WA we have the development of the empowerment strategy and the establishment of representative structures, and in NT, VIC and Queensland treaty-making is underway and arrangements are being legislated to ensure First Nations peoples are leading the dialogues. We are enlivened again to the notion of relationship building which sits at the heart of reconciliation. I hope this morning you can all feel it in the room around you—the desperate overwhelming need to come together, to admit in complete honesty that whatever approach we embarked on hasn’t worked and it is time to re-set, and we can do it!

This is where we all have a responsibility for reconciliation. Legislated processes are entirely necessary, but they mean nothing without our human involvement. It is up to all of us to engage in dialogues of substance in equal partnership between Indigenous and non-indigenous peoples that are absolutely committed to action and paving the way for agreement-making.

Like the decade of reconciliation, we are in need of guideposts for our time to do this work. Late last December I released Wiyi Yani U Thangani, the Women’s Voices report. It is a landmark document, the first time in a generation that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls, from all areas of Australia, have been heard as a distinct collective, to comment on their own terms about their rights, challenges, and aspirations. The Federal Minister for Indigenous Australians described it as a line in the sand. I feel the same. It sits on the landscape as the framework we need right now to support our journey in reconciliation and guaranteeing structural change. It sets the tone for how we should engage in dialogue, based in genuine co-design and self-determination, propelled by truth-telling, honesty, integrity and healing. And it gives us the substance to talk about if we are to reach settlement. It may not say it in so many words, but the message the report delivers is clear: we will never be reconciled without an agreement to transform our systems from punitive top-down interventions to holistic, culturally and community grounded approaches across all sectors and aspects of life from housing to child protection, education, training and employment to the emergence of new and restored country-based economies.

I am now socialising the report across Australia and we are using it as a tool for dialogue and to take action on critical issues that need to be reconciled—to overcome systemic inequalities and discrimination. It is here in WA that I feel the door has opened to really allow this to take effect. The WA government has been constructive about working together. Next month I will be co-convening a Ministerial roundtable with Minister Dawson to respond to Wiyi Yani U Thangani and to consider how it can be a vehicle for change in this state. I am confident these discussions will lay the groundwork for dialogue at a National Summit that I am planning to convene in 2022 to advance the rights and wellbeing of First Nations women and girls, so they are equal partners at every table in determining the future toward a purposeful reconciled moment in our nation’s history.

I really do believe that these relationships we are forming are a commitment from the WA government and others to engage in genuine reconciliation. The time has come that this must be how we move forward.

Let me finish by saying, I am under no illusion of how hard the path ahead will be—and that our people will only believe that reconciliation is real when governments and other non-indigenous Australians carry their weight, go beyond words, and genuinely act—do all that they can in their power and privilege—to change people’s lives.

What we must reconcile is immense. In my own life I have seen how the history of this nation has ripped families apart, destroyed lives, and trapped women, children and families in endless cycles of poverty. But I have, perhaps, seen something even more powerful—when Indigenous and non-indigenous family members come together to heal from pain, to accept brutal histories, believing that unity, love and care is greater

than the energy generated by the anger of division and difference. It is those moments that I have been a part of—when we cry, hurt, laugh and share—which can only be described as the spirit of reconciliation.

It is time that we reflect this humanity, all of who we are, in the structures and potential of the Australian nation.

Ms June Oscar AO, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner