

### **Interview with Gary Foley (audio recording)**

Charlotta Lomas: Okay, so what is your understanding of the concept of reconciliation in the Australian context?

Gary Foley: My understanding of the concept of reconciliation in the Australian context is as an artificially contrived political ... move on the part of the Federal Labour Government during the Hawke-Keating era. Reconciliation is not a notion that emerged spontaneously from either the Indigenous or the non-Indigenous community in Australia, but rather emerged as an issue of debate in the form of an Act of Parliament by the Hawke government in the lead up to the 1988 Bicentennial celebrations. I say it was a politically contrived notion, because if you look at the context of the time, you see clearly that the Hawke government was absolutely terrified of what Indigenous political activists might do to disrupt the 1988 Bicentennial. And as a result, and they were well, first of all, they were particularly nervous because of the major demonstration which had occurred in 1982 at the Brisbane Commonwealth Games and the same Indigenous political activities who'd organised the successful political protest at the Commonwealth Games in 1982 had declared that they were prepared to challenge the Hawke Government in a confronting way during the year of the Bicentennial because of the Hawke Government's back down on Aboriginal land rights. It's important to understand this context, and I'll explain it a bit further, when the Hawke Government came to power, they had promised Aboriginal people, and publically declared on numerous occasions that they would deliver the Aboriginal people of Australia national uniform land rights legislation along the lines of the Northern Territory 1967 Aboriginal Land Rights Act. That Act gave Aboriginal people the right to claim freehold title, meaningful and real ownership of land. Very soon after Bob Hawke became Prime Minister, however, and after one meeting with the notoriously corrupt Labor party premier of Western Australia, Brian Burke, Bob Hawke did a double back flip over night and declared that Aboriginal land rights was no longer on the agenda. As a result of that, the Hawke government was coming under increasing pressure from Indigenous activists in the lead up to 1988. Hawke was such an egotist that he wanted 1988 to be his great ... moment as Prime Minister of Australia to preside over the magnificent celebration. The only thing that looked possible ... that might disrupt that success for Hawke was these Aboriginal activists. Now, as a result of Hawke's ... fear if you like, the Hawke government did a series of things in the lead up to the Bicentennial, things that were designed to appease, in his mind, appease Aboriginal activists or at least try to bring a level of disunity in the Aboriginal community to diffuse any potential major demonstrations by Aborigines during that year. One of the three things that ... one of the three rabbits that Bob Hawke pulled out of the hat in that lead up to the Bicentennial was this proposition called 'reconciliation'. And, so reconciliation began as an idea in the public domain in Australia as a result of an Act of Parliament by a Hawke Labour Parliament, And that Act of Parliament create a CAR, a Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. So there's no reason anyone can try and convince me otherwise, other than that the notion of reconciliation was born of pure political opportunism; a deliberate cynical political act designed not to create a spirit of reconciliation in the broader community, but designed more immediately to diffuse the possibility of major Aboriginal demonstrations during the 1988 Bicentennial. As a result, the idea of reconciliation, and the whole move toward it, is a fake idea, it's a fake ideology; it has no credibility. Had the idea either emerged from the Indigenous community or from the broader community, in a spontaneous sort of way, then the idea would, you know, have some credibility. But the manner of its formation clearly says this is not a serious idea that is taken, you know, seriously by many Australians at all. You know, this is despite the fact that many Australians may well have picked up on the broader, you know, notion of reconciliation and

consider it to be a good thing, but I think that people who think like that should look towards South Africa and look what they did at the end of the Apartheid era. They didn't come up with some Mickey Mouse meaningless idea of reconciliation. They created a thing called the Reconciliation and Truth Commission, you know.

CL: I'm getting to that.

GF: I see the current project in Australia and the push for reconciliation to be a fairly meaningless and pointless sort of exercise, for the simple reason that it has no real political credibility and from what I can see has no real general acceptance in the broader Australian community.

CL: Yep. Okay, so what do you think about nation states apologising for past injustices?

G: Well, again, it's interesting to compare the apology that's been made in Australia and events in comparable Western nations with so called Indigenous problems. In Canada there's also been an apology, but that apology has also been accompanied by vast resources in terms of compensation and significant financial reparations, financial and land reparations. In New Zealand, whilst there hasn't been a formal apology, they didn't necessarily need one, they had a treaty called the Treaty of Waitangi and under the Treaty of Waitangi and the broader policies toward Maori people in New Zealand, this has resulted in the Indigenous people of New Zealand having vast wealth and vast acreage of valuable lands under their control. In Australia, what have we got? ... We've got empty words without no substantial back up and if there is any substantial backup, it is suggested by the Prime Minister that all the resources are going to go into their intervention may be regarded as part of this package. Which is a load of rubbish, you know, Australians need to look at other nations like us and see how lacking and mean spirited ... and mean Australian government proposition are in relation to this. So you know, Aboriginal people have heard empty words from a never ending succession of Prime Ministers and politicians for, you know, a hundred years. Why should this bunch of meaningless words lead us to think this it's going to change anything?

CL: Okay, so what did you think was good about the National Apology, if anything, and why?

GF: I thought it was a good opportunity only in the sense that I saw that, saw through what happened at my daughter's school and what I saw of the large numbers of Australian school kids who watched the Apology in Federation Square where I accidentally happened to be that morning. I was quite moved by the spontaneous response of the large Melbourne crowd that turned up in Federation Square but I mean one has to temper this emotion by pointing out that is, after all, Melbourne and it's the sort of this that I would have expected from a Melbourne community and Melbourne audience. The only positive thing I saw in the Apology was the possibility that a new generation of Australian school kids can have the chance to grow up free of the illogical and irrational guilt that seems to have permeated their parents' and grandparents' generations when it comes to thinking logically and rationally about Indigenous affairs and the state of Indigenous people in Australia. If that generation can grow up free of that guilt and learn and accept and acknowledge and gain strength from a different perception and understanding of Australian history than their parents' and grandparents' generations, I think it creates at least a little bit of hope for an Australia of tomorrow and Australia that will be here when I'm dead.

CL: And what do you think was bad about the National Apology, if anything and why?

GF: I thought it was bad, A: because it was, it was after all an apology to the Stolen Generations. Why should the Stolen Generations jump the queue and get an apology before the rest of Aboriginal Australia? Why should the Stolen Generations be privileged, you know, in the historical political debate? I mean, what is it about the Stolen Generations that make them more important than the Aboriginal people who weren't stolen who had to suffer through the protection systems, the apartheid system, the concentration camp system, and the intense perpetual discrimination. I mean, you know, in certain respects many of the Stolen Generations have gained a certain level of socio economic success in the Australian community despite them having been stolen. I mean, you know, the majority of people who seems to work in numerous Aboriginal organisations these days, and thereby get jobs, are in fact Stolen Generation people who gained an education by virtue of their being stolen, so I think it's a bit *rude* for the Stolen Generations to jump the queue and I don't see why the apology shouldn't have been directed at *all* Aboriginal people. So that's something that was significantly wrong with it for a start. And it creates the false impression amongst all Australians, as indeed the Native Title Act created the false impression that land justice had been delivered to Aboriginal Australians, so the apology creates the false apology for all Australians that that is all behind us, that's now in our past and we can move on. And it's obvious by any, any of the social indicators that Aboriginal people are *still* at the bottom of the heap not just in terms of Australian society, in world statistics, you know, Aboriginal people live in 3<sup>rd</sup> world conditions in this country. So whilst ever that continues to happen, and while ever Aboriginal people continue to be denied self-determination, an apology at the end of the day, is just empty words.

CL: And to what extent, do you think, the National Apology has repaired the moral order of Australian society?

GF: It hasn't in any way, shape or form.

CL: To what extent does the National Apology address the past? You've probably already answered this, but I'll ask it again, to what extent does the National Apology address the past?

GF: The National Apology did *nothing* to address the past. Um... it ...in certain respects, it subverted our understanding the past by somehow or other inherently suggesting that the Stolen Generations were more important than the vast majority of Aboriginal people who were victims of the State who still haven't received an apology or any sort of reparation or compensation or justice.

CL: So as proposed in the National Apology, by the Prime Minister, do you think Australia, as a nation, can now 'move on'?

GF: No.

CL: Do you think the members of the Stolen Generations should be compensated?

GF: No

CL: Why/Why not?

GF: I don't think that the members of the Stolen Generations should be compensated *before* the rest of Aboriginal Australia, the ones who really suffered through Australian history. And even then any compensation for Stolen Generations people, I consider, should be means tested.

CL: What do you mean by that?

GF: I mean, some Aboriginal people who were members of the Stolen Generations have ended up relatively wealthy, and I've never been a believer of middle class or welfare for the wealthy. And if people have benefited enormously financially from their having been stolen, then that needs to be taken in to account when, when calculating any compensation that might be due to them, which would mean that in some instances that some people wouldn't be deserving of compensation at all ... not a lot, but some.

CL: Where do you perceive responsibility for the past ending?

GF: Say that again?

CL: Where do you perceive responsibility for the past ending?

GF: With the Australian government. Since 1967, it's only been successive Australian governments that have deliberately subverted the expressed wishes of the Australian people, as expressed in the 1967 referendum. So at such time as the Australian government ends its duplicity ... and ends its obscuration and ends its lies and ends its denial, there will be no solution. It's ultimately up to Australian governments. And when one considers that both the ... the political parties that are likely to form government in this country in the next 20 years, the Australian Labour Party and the Australian Liberal Party, both vehemently anti-Aboriginal and anti-self-determination and anti-Aboriginal rights in their agendas, it doesn't look too positive for the near future.

CL: Other than a National Apology, in your opinion, how else might Australia as a nation improve relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians?

GF: What?

CL: With respect to the past, other than a National Apology, in your opinion, how else might Australia as a nation improve relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians?

GF: In the context of that question, I mean an apology is meaningless ... an apology has nothing to do with justice... and I mean, you know ... an apology is meaningless, what is necessary is reparation, justice. Ask the question again.

CL: Other than a National Apology, how else might Australia as a nation improve relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians with respect to the past?


GF: The only way there can be a resolution is through giving justice to Aboriginal people, which means acknowledgment of Aboriginal sovereignty, which means vast reparations for land alienated, which mean compensations for 200 years of criminal neglect etc. So we're a long way from it and in the context that, an apology isn't just even on the agenda. You know, like I said Aboriginal people... an apology is not a notion that came out the Aboriginal community, it's not an Aboriginal peoples' idea, you know, so an apology just doesn't even fit into what Aboriginal demands have been the last, you know, hundred years or more.

CL: And finally, in post conflict states, where conflict has been relatively recent, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions have been readily deployed as a means to addressing the past or past injustices. In the much

revered South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the production of 'collective memory' through truth-telling is perceived as fundamental to its success. I know you mention the Truth and Reconciliation Commission before. So do you think the production of a collective memory through truth-telling, as in the South African case, could be applied effectively in the Australian context?

GF: I believe that what happened in South Africa is precisely what should have happened in Australia and the significant weakness in what happened in Australia is the difference between what happened here and there. I mean, it's all fine and dandy to have a Prime Minister mouthing, you know, meaningless words of apology, but without a nation confronting, seriously confronting and coming to terms with its own past, rather than living in the state of denial that Australians do, the whole thing is meaningless. That's why I said in the beginning then, it seems to me that at least in South Africa there was a much more serious and honest attempt to confront issues of the past. You know, at least... even though it wasn't wholly successful, there was at least some meaningful attempt to address the past and come to terms with the past and sort of try and seek some form of resolution through the national debate that took place regarding the past. Whereas in Australia any discussion of the past is always about denial; denial on the part of Australians about the truth of their own histories. So a Truth and Reconciliation Commission seems to me, is absolutely vital in Australia because, you know, until Australians do at least know a little bit more about their own history than they do, because they know woefully little, then how is it possible to have a rational intelligent national debate about what justice might mean for Aboriginal people? You know, so it's a vital prerequisite in the long-term gaining of justice by Aboriginal people.

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**From:** Jirra Lulla Harvey

**Sent:** Tuesday, 8 July 2008 4:44 PM

**To:** K Kinsela

**Subject:** ³A Time Like This² A Koori Perspective

# “A Time Like This” – A Koori Perspective

2008 marks a centenary of non-Indigenous women’s franchise in Victoria. A new body of work by artists Lorraine Connelly-Northey and Bindi Cole in collaboration with curator Jirra Lulla Harvey re-assesses the suffrage movement from a Koori perspective.

“Australian politics, art and ethnography have presented a distorted image of Aboriginal womanhood. This project has been about us reclaiming agency over our own representation,” says Harvey.