# Bevan Warner's speech 6 June 2016 for National Reconciliation Week

Welcome, everybody, and thank you for coming. Reconciliation Week, 27 May to 3 June each year, spans and commemorates the 1967 referendum where the Australian public voted overwhelmingly to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Census, paving the way for voting rights in a land that was always theirs.

The landmark 1992 Mabo High Court decision – which rejected the legal fiction of terra nullius and which legally recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples maintained a special relationship to the land – a relationship that existed prior to colonisation, and that still exists today – paving the way for a limited form of land rights or a native title that is still being negotiated and resolved in courts in specific places throughout Australia 25 years later.

Both legal events set modern Australia on a course of recognising the obvious and correcting past injustices. To be very clear, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were here, are still here and, despite all the wrongs that have been perpetuated, have a surviving culture that should be a source of pride and a cause of celebration for all Australians.

So I'd like you to join me in offering our thanks to Aunty Georgina Nicholson for performing that wonderfully warm welcome to country to open our event. And I also acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation in doing so.

I'd like us to pay our respects today not only to the traditional owners of this land that we gather on, but to all the traditional owners of all lands across Australia who share an ancestry dating back 50,000 years and a cultural heritage shared across hundreds of languages.

When we acknowledge elders of the past and the present it is worth remembering how different those worlds now are, but how important leadership continues to be in fostering the wellbeing of any and all communities.

So in Reconciliation Week I want to invite you to make it personal. National Reconciliation Week gives us all an opportunity to personalise our past and to reflect on the cultural load of an often brutal, and certainly discriminating, history and how we can work towards reducing its influence today.

It is a week most of all for non-Aboriginal Australians of all ages and cultures to deepen their knowledge, to overcome avoidance, to confront ignorance and to take proactive steps towards genuine understanding and engagement with our indigenous brothers and sisters.

The internet of things, the organisations and people we work with, and the access to cultural awareness training that is now provided, and that some staff have so eloquently written about on our online blog, ensures that there is no excuse for not deepening our knowledge.

I know that my own journey is incomplete and it remains a work in progress. I remember with some discomfort my ignorance as a 30 year old, my assumptions about a single Aboriginal culture, that all Aboriginal people would all think the same way in some sort of single body politic, and the generosity that was displayed to me by new friends and colleagues when I naively sought to compare the societal progress of African Americans and Aboriginal Australians.

Much like Kelly and Wanda have done through their cross-cultural training, I was gently guided through the different trajectories of dispossessed first peoples, as compared with new migrant and refugee communities, and certainly the bastardry of slavery that was corrected by the bravery and belief of fellow countrymen who stood up and risked their own lives in the American Civil War to end slavery for a group that was certainly disenfranchised, yes, but who were a transported and transplanted culture and who were not connected to country in the way we now understand all first nations peoples to be. Contrast this support with modern Australia's treatment of our first peoples, who we continue to deny even existed until a short time ago.

For me, Reconciliation Week is all about respect and understanding, and I'm pleased, at mid-year, the number of staff who've taken up cultural awareness training is already three times more than last year. In preparing for today I had intended to quote Prime Minister Paul Keating in his famous 1992 Redfern address. Although I commend Keating's Redfern address to all of you, having reread the staff blog last night, I prefer to reference what some VLA staff have said instead.

This is a country staff member writing. I often do things in relation to a problem like global warming or racism where I don’t look at it directly. I look a little to the side of it because to look at it directly is so overwhelming and depressing that I feel helpless and guilty that I'm not doing something significant to right it. I'm aware I'm not unique in this respect.

One of the obvious problems with this approach, of course, is that the fear of not doing enough to often paralyses us into doing nothing or, more harshly, is twisted into an excuse for doing nothing. Along the way, however, things happen that pull us up. Attending VLA's cultural training this year was one of those things for me.

This is a city staff member – Australia needs to move past its denial to face itself as it is rather than as it has told itself it is. The very same people who would tell Aboriginal people to get over the past and steadfastly ignore their stories often seem obsessed with romanticising other parts of Australian history, like Gallipoli for instance. I once heard an Aboriginal man say reconciliation, that’s white fellow business, and it stuck with me as true.

A new staff member – a larger truth is that too many of us don’t understand or respect the centrality of culture and community to Aboriginal history and wellbeing. Broader Australian society doesn’t get how disconnection with culture and family causes so many issues and the continual denial of what it means to be Aboriginal.

The dominance of concepts such as individual rights and property ownership has shaped many of non-Aboriginal personal and political approaches to this. We don’t have a readily available frame of reference that allows us to see what it means to be part of a more collective society where individuals belong to community and to the land through an immutable spiritual and physical connection to place formed over tens of thousands of years.

The cultural awareness training is so important because it gives us a window into what happened and why it continues to have such lasting and devastating impacts. Listening and understanding helps us to develop the empathy for people that can turn us from bystanders into agents of change, but doing so also exposes us to a different way of being in the world, where we are more connected to our fellow citizens and our planet.

In an era of environmental disasters and crushing inequality in living standards it's a reminder that reconciliation is about more than making amends for the past. It's also about us learning from this land's first peoples and forging a sustainable future together in this place.

You can read more about what other staff have said, including [Anna Chalco-Nicholas's] lead piece on our Heads Up blog. I commend it all to you.

So what are we doing? We've introduced two days of cultural leave for indigenous staff. We are communicating and being publicly accountable for what we achieve. In the past 12 months we've helped more than 1800 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people with their legal problems. However, we know that there are significant numbers of Aboriginal people who do not seek help in the initial stage of their legal problem and who feel alienated in the legal process and, perhaps, unwelcome at VLA.

That is why we've been building relationships and awareness to improve cultural safety and access to legal services. We have supported innovative programs, including Sisters Day Out, run by the Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service, and its Koori Women's Hub. With funding from our CLC innovation and transformation fund to the visitors to the Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative in Shepparton will soon be able to get legal advice from a Goulburn Valley CLC lawyer.

Our first Associate Director of Aboriginal Services, Meena Singh, has returned to us only a few weeks ago, and she will be recruiting three new staff to pilot new ways of working with community to identify and respond to legal need earlier and more effectively.

Where we have seen opportunities to learn from Aboriginal led organisations we have taken them. Last week staff leading our review of child protection legal aid services – myself and others – met with Andrew Jackomos, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, to learn about his review of how the Victorian child protection system is failing Aboriginal children and what we might do about it.

Our board met in Mildura last year and learned from Aboriginal service providers and young Aboriginal leaders who shared their experiences willingly and generously. On the strength of that engagement we are now supporting the input of a young Aboriginal leader from the Mallee who has been recruited to our sector innovation planning committee, an important advisory body to the sector.

But we can do more. While we have done some significant preliminary work in delivering on our reconciliation action plan, there are areas where attention is still needed. We will need pioneers and further innovation to ensure that the path to employment with us is accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

I'm also looking forward to working with our partners to conceive and mount legal proceedings that challenges systemic injustice for indigenous people. So get involved. Our reconciliation action plan is a living document, and I urge you to familiarise yourself with it, it's goals, and to ask yourself how you can take part or contribute.

I'd like to end by talking about leadership, by noting the sentiments of a man who has been fighting for justice for Aboriginal people most of his life, our newest senator, Patrick Dodson. He says leadership is an elusive concept. It is more evident in its absence, so that when leadership is needed its lack is sorely felt.

So I hope that the plaques we unveil in our offices this week – here in Queen Street and throughout Victoria – will be a daily reminder on the obligation on all of us to show leadership in contributing to social change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Thank you very much.

[Applause]