

Opinion Piece by

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As two people, one of us Indigenous and the other non-Indigenous, who work together day to day, we head off to the 2020 Summit with a shared conviction that the only way to succeed in Indigenous affairs is to build a relationship between our peoples. A mutually respectful relationship that provides the essential foundation for a national plan to close the gap.

We understand the desire for big new ideas that focus on practical outcomes. But Indigenous Affairs is one policy area that has been plagued by the eternal quest for the 'silver bullet', the next big idea for 'solving the problem'. But the reality is that Indigenous people and their place in this country are not a problem to be fixed and there simply is no silver bullet.

In all our discussions around improving outcomes for Indigenous people in health, education, housing, employment – all basic citizenship rights - we have never stopped to have an honest conversation about the 'how' rather than the 'what' we are trying to achieve.

We need to start by answering these questions: How do we work together? How do we share power? How do we negotiate? How do we respect and learn from each other? The summit discussion on Indigenous Affairs is framed around the wrong set of questions, the same misguided objective of 'overcoming Indigenous disadvantage' rather than 'nation building' and a two-way process of give and take between us.

Indigenous people should be driving the process and developing ideas they want to see realised. Non-Indigenous people should be respecting the right of Indigenous fellow citizens to determine their own futures, listening and asking how we go forward together as equals?

The answer to building these respectful relationships will not be found in any big, new idea – the new idea is the relationship itself. And to build it requires new and creative thinking about how to engage every Australian – from grassroots conversations like GetUp's Reconciliation Get Togethers later this month through to what may well be a decade long national dialogue towards a treaty or some other form of agreement that articulates the relationship.

We will build these respectful relationships if each of us can connect on a personal level, feel it in our hearts as we did for the apology. And use it to generate empathy and understanding between us. We set aside opinions, values and assumptions that are based on what we see on the nightly news or hear in the pub. We start to see that Indigenous culture and history are part of who Indigenous people are, and part of what our nation is. We start to value our Indigenous heritage in a contemporary setting as central to our

national identity – something worth protecting and celebrating and together taking pride in.

So that by 2020 an Indigenous baby girl born on the day of the summit will know that we did something to build her future. At the age of 12, she'll be entering high school with all the hopes of her non-Indigenous fellow students. Her teachers will have expected the same of her as of every other child. They will have examined their own attitudes to Indigenous students and be committed to teaching Australia's Indigenous culture and history from an Indigenous perspective. All students will be learning some Aboriginal language.

Governments will have invested in respectful relationships and changed the way that they engage with Indigenous people. Her parents will see the difference.

This student will enter high school aiming for the best that she can do. If she decides to go on to university she'll be one of many Indigenous students getting degrees in accounting, law, architecture, and other professions. She may choose to spend some time working in an Aboriginal community and this too will be respected and valued.

She will know that her life expectancy is still not equal to that of her non-Indigenous friends but she'll know that we've improved it by perhaps a decade since she was born. And she'll know that her parents have had the opportunity to create new memories for her that are different to theirs.

And how did we create these new memories for the 12 year old in 2020? – we began at a summit in 2008 by recognising the need to step back from the temptation of big ideas to lay the essential foundation where there has never one before, the foundation of a respectful relationship.

Barbara Livesey is the chief executive of Reconciliation Australia. Jason Glanville is the director of programs and strategy. Both are attending the Indigenous stream at the 2020 Summit.