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Carnes,R 2015, Who decides? A question at the heart of meaningful reconciliation, The Conversation.

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THE CONVERSATION

May 26, 2015 12.10pm AEST

Who decides? A question at the heart of meaningful reconciliation

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While plans to close 'unsustainable remote communities' have triggered recent protests, at the heart of the issue is the nature of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. AAP/Richard Iskov

The recent ABC Four Corners program *Remote Hope* was marketed as "an unflinching portrait of Australia's remote Indigenous communities and their struggle to survive". It could decide if it rehashed stereotypes or if it would break new ground – which would mean also being unflinching in portraying systemic issues central to gaps in social determinants of health such as housing, employment, health and education and incarceration rates.

While the program endeavoured to provide a range of views and experiences from the past, present and future, it fell short of tackling what lies at the core of the issue: the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Four Corners focused on the Kimberley region of Western Australia and WA Premier Colin Barnett's approach to potentially "unsustainable remote communities". However, the issue goes beyond the Kimberley and the belated decision to consult communities in that region. Northern Territory Senator Nova Peris has condemned a similar deal being discussed by the NT government and the federal government.

In recent weeks, South Australia has struck a deal with the federal government for funds to keep communities open.

This pattern of uncertainty for Indigenous people is fuelling fear of being forcibly removed from homes – a fear grounded in a lack of trust created at colonisation.

A fractured relationship from the start

Three core assumptions at colonisation set the foundation of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and who has the ultimate power in decision-making.

Under international (read European) law, Australia was claimed by the British as **terra nullius**. Indigenous people were viewed as inferior uncivilised savages who had no real place in a civilised society.

Aboriginal people were seen to be an inferior **dying race**. All that could be done was to smooth the pillow of the dying race with policies of segregation, assimilation and control.

Aboriginal people were seen as a homogenous group. There were actually **hundreds of nations** at the time of colonisation, each with distinct cultural protocols and complex kinship systems. Law was inextricably linked with country and community.

This has been the context of a constant stream of policies, negotiations and deals on “Aboriginal affairs”. So, the key question is, when it comes to the lives of Indigenous people, who decides?

Who decides?

This question delves beyond what is portrayed in *Remote Hope*, providing a glimpse into why there have been many missed opportunities to strengthen and build that relationship. The past cannot be changed, but it is important to realise it continues to shape the present and future for as long as it is not directly addressed.

The relationship is now mired in a **cult of forgetfulness on a national scale**, a deep-seated psychological motivation to forget. This prevents painful, identity-altering experiences from being recalled and incorporated into our nation’s history.

The consequences include assumptions, largely unaltered since colonisation, about who has the right to be the final decision-makers, which in turn has led to many missed opportunities for building strong relationships.

Missed opportunities

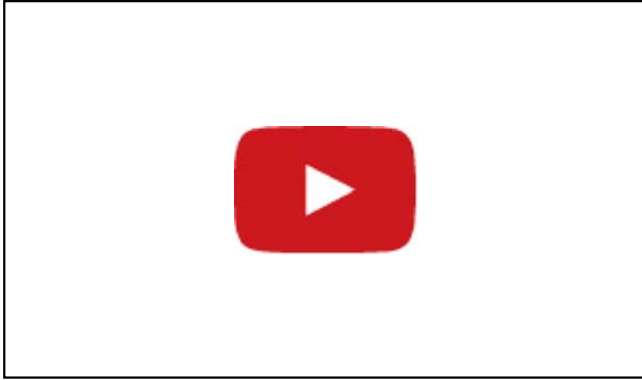
Australia’s history is littered with missed opportunities for building strong relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. An example is the **Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody**. The commission made 339 recommendations in 1991 to address underlying and systemic issues.

The majority of the funding from the federal government was allocated to underlying issues facing Indigenous people and communities – 1.9% of the A\$400 million went to reforms of policing, custodial arrangements, criminal law, judicial proceedings and coronial inquiries.

Yet little real progress has been made in many socio-economic indicators since that time. Attention is still focused on underlying issues of Aboriginal people and their need to change, rather than reform of the system itself.

Prime Minister Paul Keating's Redfern Speech on December 10, 1992, provided another chance to move forward and build strong relationships. He identified that:

... the starting point might be to recognise that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians ... it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases and the alcohol ... We took the children from their mothers ... if we have a sense of justice, as well as common sense, we will forge a new partnership.



Paul Keating's Redfern Address provided an opportunity, sadly missed, to build a new relationship.

From there the reconciliation movement was formalised and the ongoing struggle for Indigenous rights took another step forward. Mainstream government decided to build a movement with Patrick Dodson leading the way.

But a change of government and a new prime minister, John Howard, meant the momentum was weakened by 1997. The stronger relationship did not build; another opportunity was lost. Mainstream government once again decided.

These examples illustrate the way a parade of governments "decide" and broker deals and "manage" Aboriginal lives.

Currently in Australia we have a non-Indigenous prime minister who decided to identify as the prime minister for Indigenous Affairs. He decided to take advice from a handpicked, as opposed to elected, Indigenous Advisory Council chaired by Warren Mundine. He also decided to appoint non-Indigenous billionaire Andrew Forrest to chair the Indigenous Jobs and Training Review.

In the 2015 budget, the government decided to cut expenditure on Indigenous housing. Such decisions have been accused of lacking transparency, fuelling uncertainty for Indigenous people and failing to build strong relationships.

Working together builds relationships

There are examples of wonderful successes across Australia, including in the Kimberley and Northern Territory. They provide templates for what works, for how Indigenous people working as true partners in their own enterprises can live a life that is both culturally and economically sustainable.

These Indigenous people have decided and have the support of non-Indigenous groups who are willing to learn from and with them. These are examples of what can work when

relationships form and grow strong, where two-way decisions are made together.

There is, in the current situation, an opportunity to change the nature of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. It begins with considering the question “who decides?” It involves recognising that, though no-one today is responsible for creating the currently damaged relationships between Indigenous peoples and systems they are forced to interact with, we are the only ones who can be involved in healing and nurturing those relationships in the here and now. It requires humility, transparency and the courage to own our ignorance and fear.

Seeing Aboriginal people as some kind of social experiment, or as childlike and in need of protection by paternalistic policies and processes where government departments and governments broker deals and make decisions for and about them, further damages the already rocky relationship. The core issue is identified by Patrick Dodson, the father of reconciliation, who has asked the direct question:

Does Australia want to have a relationship with Aboriginal people, or does it not? Or does it simply want to improve the management and control systems over the lives of Aboriginal people? That's the seminal issue.