



Australian Government
Department of Immigration and Citizenship

Launch of the Reconciliation Action Plan

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Secretary
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Thank you Ruth for your welcome to country. And thank you for sharing your experiences—these certainly bring to life the importance of each step we take towards closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage.

Before I launch the department's Reconciliation Action Plan, I wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on today, the Ngunnawal people and the continuing contribution they make to the cultural life of this city and the region. I also acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are attending today's event.

I particularly welcome our special guests, Professor Mick Dodson, Director of the National Centre for Indigenous Studies at the Australian National University; Tom Calma, former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and Board Member of Reconciliation Australia; the chief Executive Officer of Reconciliation Australia, Leah Armstrong and her staff; representatives from the Australian Public Service Commission, and those representing Canberra tertiary education institutions.

I also welcome all staff here today—particularly those who have travelled such a long way from the Torres Strait.

This is a significant occasion for the department. From today, we have a formal framework to give life to our commitment to reconciliation, through our reconciliation action plan, or the RAP, as it is known.

Development of the action plan was driven by the department's RAP working group. The working group represents a cross-section of the department, with members from different business areas and state offices across the country and non-Indigenous Australians working together with staff from the Indigenous employee network. I thank members of the working group and acknowledge their commitment to developing the plan.

Since former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology on behalf of the government to the stolen generations, there has been growing momentum across Australia for reconciliation—a desire to gain a better understanding of the past and how this has affected the lives of indigenous peoples and all Australians.

Here within our department there have been wounds to heal. To this end I acknowledge again the tragic loss of life which occurred in 2005 with the sinking of the *Malu Sara*. We have since worked closely with those affected families and communities to reconcile these events and now move forward together with a spirit of renewed beginning.

In his speech to Parliament, the former Prime Minister emphasised the necessity for a new beginning. He urged us to see reconciliation in practical terms. This RAP is our practical step towards closing the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The department's focus is on employment and building respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities.

On 9 February, Prime Minister Julia Gillard reported to Parliament on the government's *Closing the Gap* initiatives. There have been improvements in literacy, education and employment. However, more work needs to be done to improve the life expectancy comparisons between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

A key initiative within the department's Reconciliation Action Plan is to make available increased employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This is in line with the Council of Australian Government's employment target of 2.7 per cent Indigenous employee representation across the APS in Commonwealth agencies by 2015.

Achieving this goal represents a challenge. For this department alone, it means we must recruit an additional 220 Indigenous people, while retaining our current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. I am absolutely committed to meeting these targets and will closely monitor our progress towards them.

We need to build our capability to draw Indigenous people to the organisation, through generic recruitment rounds or through increased places in the department available under targeted Australian Public Service Commission pathways programs for Indigenous student cadets and graduates. I urge all managers across the department to find out about these programs and consider what you can do to encourage potential job-seekers from remote communities.

An excellent model for facilitating employment for Indigenous people was initiated by one of our regional managers, Alan Davis, working in collaboration with SERCO, our contracted detention service provider, in far north Queensland.

Following extensive community consultation and relationship building with the Napranum community on the Cape York Peninsula, 24 community members gained a Certificate II in Security Operations and 13 were employed by SERCO as client service officers. These nationally recognised qualifications will enable Napranum client service officers to be deployed to other SERCO sites across Australia. Further, of the six administrative staff at Weipa, four are now indigenous employees.

This illustrates the value of building stronger partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and supporting community development through employment. Valuing our own Indigenous staff and recognising the unique perspectives they offer to the organisation is an important part of reconciliation. In our department, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees have made significant and positive contributions to our work over many years in areas such as compliance, visa processing, border security and through movement monitoring activities in the Torres Strait.

Within the department's Reconciliation Action Plan, we focus on the key areas of relationships, respect and opportunities. Many of the initiatives are already underway.

The department's Reconciliation Champion, Deputy Secretary Bob Correll PSM, can provide more detail on these initiatives, and will share the positive experiences and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in the department over the years.

Colleagues, I want to acknowledge the committed efforts of many members of the reconciliation working group and other staff who have undertaken reconciliation celebratory events and awareness raising activities to date. They provide great examples for other offices seeking to participate in similar events to support reconciliation.

Outside of the imperative for employment opportunities and awareness-raising, I would also like to share with you a key departmental initiative for promoting respect for Indigenous peoples, history and culture—that is, the inclusion of *welcome to country* ceremonies and *acknowledgement of country* statements.

Welcome to country and *acknowledgement of country* recognise the traditional owners of the land. This is important; for although not all Indigenous people live in a traditional way on that land, they are still connected to it through their stories and enduring cultural traditions. In acknowledging country, we promote an awareness of the past and the ongoing connection to a place by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Many thousands of people are currently exposed to Indigenous culture during their citizenship ceremonies across Australia. The addition of a welcome to country offers an opportunity for more education, not only regarding Indigenous culture, but for recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as first Australians.

On Australia Day this year, a welcome to country was an integral part of citizenship ceremonies around the nation. We will encourage citizenship ceremony organisers to work with Reconciliation Australia to further embed this practice.

Colleagues, the actions introduced in our reconciliation action plan bring change. The success of the measures will be evident through gradual cultural change within the department and in the formal reporting against agreed measures.

Taken together, these initiatives will continue to build a workplace environment that effectively supports Indigenous employees and integrates awareness of the importance of reconciliation.

I urge you all to discuss the plan with your teams and identify ways in which you can all continue to support the work of reconciliation.

Thank you.