

## Monitoring 'Practical' Reconciliation: Evidence from the Reconciliation Decade, 1991-2001

"In conclusion we note that while practical reconciliation forms the rhetorical basis for Indigenous policy development since 1996, there is no evidence that the Howard governments have delivered better outcomes for Indigenous Australians than their predecessors. Indigenous socio-economic problems are deeply entrenched and do not seem to be abating even during a period of rapid economic growth at the national level. It is of particular concern that some of the relative gains made between 1991 and 1996 appear to have been offset by the relatively poor performance of Indigenous outcomes between 1996 and 2001."

Altman and Hunter used information from censuses conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1991, 1996 and 2001 to assess the well being of Aboriginal people in absolute terms, and relative to non-Indigenous Australians. They examined data on employment, education, income, housing and health.

The period the research covers is roughly equivalent to the decade of Reconciliation, and the second 5-year period coincides closely with a change of policy following the election of the first Howard government. In the earlier part of the decade the Keating governments' policies focussed on both indigenous rights (the 'symbolic agenda') and practical improvements in socio-economic conditions of Aboriginal people. In the period since 1996 the emphasis has been entirely on 'practical' reconciliation.

The research shows that in terms of absolute improvement in well-being of Indigenous Australians, there is little to distinguish the two periods of the decade. However, when outcomes for Indigenous Australians are compared with those for other Australians there is a significant difference. The earlier period saw Indigenous people making relatively greater gains when compared to other Australians.

### The Research Approach

Using data available from the three censuses, the researchers chose a range of indicators for each of the five socio-economic areas:

#### Employment

Labour force participation\*, unemployment rate, employment rate, proportion employed in the private sector, and proportion employed full-time\*.

#### Income

Median income per week for adults\*, median income per week for families\*

#### Housing

Proportion who were home-owners or purchasing a home\*, household size\*.

#### Education

Proportions of adults who did not go to school, left school at under 15 years, had post-school qualifications\*, and youth (15-24yrs) now attending university\*

#### Health

Male\* and female life expectancy at birth, and population over 55 yrs\*.

They then developed a 'scorecard' using two key indicators for each area (to avoid weighting one area more than any other) to assess progress in absolute terms (eg has Indigenous unemployment reduced?) and in relative terms (eg how have indigenous employment levels fared compared to non-indigenous over the same period?). The key indicators used for the scorecard are starred\*.

### Comparison of all Indicators over the two Periods: Absolute and Relative

Socio-economic area	1991-1996	1996-2001
Employment	Absolute improvement in 3/5 indicators; No relative change.	Little absolute change. Relative labour force status declined on 4/5 indicators
Income	Median income of indigenous adults and families declined; relative income for individuals worsened, for families, improved.	Median income for individuals increased, but by far less than for other Australians. Median family income increased relative to others.
Housing	Indigenous home owners/purchasers increased, household size reduced. Positive relative gains.	Home ownership increased in absolute and relative terms, albeit marginally.
Education	Indicators all positive both absolutely and relatively.	Whilst there were some absolute improvements, on most indicators, the relative situation worsened.
Health	Some absolute improvement, but relative to other Australians life expectancy and aged population worsened.	Little change in indigenous health – and relative life expectancy worsened compared to other Australians.

The score card then gave a positive change (1), negative change (-1) or no change (0) score for each of the ten starred indicators\* above, for absolute and relative gains.

#### The Results of the Scorecard

1991-1996: 3 /10 for absolute change  
and 3/10 for relative change

1996-2001: 5/10 for absolute change  
but -2/10 for relative change (relative well-being improved for 4 but declined for 6 indicators: a negative score).

#### Practical Reconciliation is Failing

Practical reconciliation gives emphasis to indigenous Australians having the same life chances as other Australians. Prime Minister Howard has claimed that practical reconciliation is closing the gaps, but in fact Indigenous Australians have not shared in the benefits of national economic growth from 1996-2001 as much as other Australians.

Of greatest concern is that over the whole decade 1991-2001 there has been a relative decline in the education and health status of Aboriginal Australians compared to other Australians.

Altman and Hunter discuss some of the reasons that practical reconciliation policies may not be working, among them: indigenous disadvantage is complex and grounded in a history of alienation, hence the 'symbolic' issues have intensely 'practical' expression; it fails to recognise rights of first peoples as first peoples; and it neglects the large number of indigenous youth entering the workforce, as well as the importance of educating girls to improve health outcomes for children and reduce family size.

For further information see [www.antar.org.au](http://www.antar.org.au)

Summary of Discussion Paper No 254 (2003), by J.C Altman and B.H. Hunter,  
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