



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

SENATE

LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Reference: Progress towards national reconciliation

WEDNESDAY, 14 MAY 2003

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

INTERNET

The Proof and Official Hansard transcripts of Senate committee hearings, some House of Representatives committee hearings and some joint committee hearings are available on the Internet. Some House of Representatives committees and some joint committees make available only Official Hansard transcripts.

The Internet address is: **<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard>**

To search the parliamentary database, go to: **<http://search.aph.gov.au>**

SENATE
LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 14 May 2003

Members: Senator Bolkus (*Chair*), Senator Payne (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Greig, Kirk, Scullion and Stephens

Substitute members:

Senator Crossin to replace Senator Stephens for the committee's inquiry on progress towards national reconciliation

Senator Ridgeway to replace Senator Greig for matters relating to the Indigenous Affairs portfolio

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Brandis, Brown, Carr, Chapman, Crossin, Eggleston, Chris Evans, Faulkner, Ferguson, Ferris, Harradine, Harris, Knowles, Lees, Lightfoot, Ludwig, Mason, McGauran, Murphy, Nettle, Sherry, Stott Despoja, Tchen, Tierney and Watson

Senator Bartlett for matters relating to the Immigration and Multicultural Affairs portfolio

Senators in attendance: Senators Bolkus, Crossin, Kirk, Payne, Ridgeway and Scullion

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

1. Progress towards national reconciliation, including an examination of the adequacy and effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government's response to, and implementation of, the recommendations contained in the following documents:
 - (a) Reconciliation: Australia's Challenge: Final Report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to the Prime Minister and the Commonwealth Parliament;
 - (b) the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's Roadmap for Reconciliation and the associated National Strategies to Advance Reconciliation; and
 - (c) the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner's social justice reports in 2000 and 2001 relating to reconciliation.
2. That, in examining this matter, the committee have regard to the following:
 - (a) whether processes have been developed to enable and require government agencies to review their policies and programs against the documents referred to above;
 - (b) effective ways of implementing the recommendations of the documents referred to above, including an examination of funding arrangements;
 - (c) the adequacy and effectiveness of any targets, benchmarks, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that have been put in place to address Indigenous disadvantage and promote reconciliation, with particular reference to the consistency of these responses with the documents referred to above; and
 - (d) the consistency of the Government's responses to the recommendations contained in the documents referred to above with the needs and aspirations of Indigenous Australians as Australian citizens and First Nation Peoples.

WITNESSES

**BLACK, Mr Dan, Director, National Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics,
Australian Bureau of Statistics 72**

DODSON, Professor Mick (Private capacity) 84

**McCOLL, Mr Robert Alan, Assistant Secretary, Social Conditions Statistics Branch, Australian
Bureau of Statistics 72**

Committee met at 4.34 p.m.

CHAIR—This is the second public hearing of the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee's inquiry into progress towards national reconciliation. The terms of reference include examining the adequacy and effectiveness of the Commonwealth government's response to the recommendations of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and the social justice reports of the ATSI Social Justice Commissioner. A particular area of interest to the committee is term of reference 2(c), which concerns the adequacy and effectiveness of any targets, benchmarks, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to address Indigenous disadvantage and promote reconciliation. In that context, the committee has invited representatives of the Australian Bureau of Statistics to appear today. We have received some 80 submissions for the inquiry, all of which have been authorised for publication and are available on the committee's web site. We also intend to report on this inquiry by 11 August 2003.

Witnesses are reminded of the notes they have received relating to parliamentary privilege and the protection of official witnesses. Witnesses are also reminded that the giving of false or misleading evidence to the committee may constitute a contempt of the Senate. The committee prefers that all evidence be given in public. However, under the Senate's resolutions, witnesses do have the right to request to be heard in private session. It is important that you give us some notice if you intend to so ask.

[4.36 p.m.]

BLACK, Mr Dan, Director, National Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics, Australian Bureau of Statistics

McCOLL, Mr Robert Alan, Assistant Secretary, Social Conditions Statistics Branch, Australian Bureau of Statistics

CHAIR—I welcome the representatives of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Do you have any comment to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr McColl—I am here today to answer any questions that the committee might have about the briefing that we have supplied in relation to the ABS Indigenous statistics work program or any other matters regarding your inquiry.

Mr Black—Like Mr McColl, I am here to answer the committee's questions and advise on the work program and the role of the national centre.

CHAIR—You have provided a submission for us. Are there any amendments or alterations that you wish to make to that submission?

Mr McColl—No.

CHAIR—Please make an opening statement and then we will ask questions.

Mr McColl—Thank you for the opportunity to brief the committee about the Indigenous statistics work program at the ABS and the progress that has been made against that. In addition to the briefing we forwarded, I have also brought along today a range of the ABS Indigenous statistics publications and products that we have produced in the last couple of years, in case senators have not had a chance to look at that material before now. I have also provided for your information in that package of papers a copy of the survey form that we used in the 2002 Indigenous social survey.

To provide a slightly wider context for where the ABS Indigenous statistics works program fits, we have a large program of population and social statistics in the bureau to provide information for informed decision making on a range of social issues within broad areas of social concern. We have a program of population census and household and business surveys to provide information across a range of issues in health, housing, work, family and community, crime and justice et cetera. The population census is our largest individual data collection. It is also the centrepiece for our Indigenous statistics work program and is a key area for development improvement into the future as part of that work program. However, in the general suite of household surveys that the bureau has been running for some time on health, housing, disability et cetera, the sample sizes in those surveys and the relatively small Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in Australia mean that there can be sampling errors on results that can be produced from those general surveys. This means that very limited or no information can generally be reported on the Indigenous population.

In the past, we have had a relatively narrow range of information that we could refer to in our reports on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. As part of developing a fuller range of information, we have included in our household survey program now a specific Indigenous health survey, which we are conducting every six years and which we are developing at the moment, and an Indigenous social survey to add a range of information following on from the 1994 NATSIS. In a range of other areas of statistical development, which we have referred to in the briefing, we are focusing on improving the quality of the identification of Indigenous Australians, particularly in government administrative records, where a large amount of information about the population more generally is available, and where we are putting particular effort into identifying Indigenous Australians within those datasets.

We think that the statistics work program that we have now embarked upon for a number of years will progressively provide a richer source of information for people to analyse and on which they can make decisions. We think that in the longer term we will have a good dataset that will provide for the measurement of change in a number of areas of disadvantage facing Indigenous Australians.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. I will start with a few questions. I want to know how accurate your data might be in terms of what it seeks to do and how in the first instance it conforms with some of the international practices in this area. The UNDP report on draft guidelines provides some starting point internationally for the assessment of the adequacy of benchmarks and indicators. To what extent is that document used by the ABS as a guide or as a resource of any sort?

Mr McColl—In this area we have not been focusing on those guidelines specifically for the measurement of the adequacy or quality of the information that we are producing. We have a range of quality dimensions that we use in assessing the fitness for purpose of the data that we produce. That includes ensuring that we understand what the information needs are before we collect information so that we can actually target the appropriate information and then developing them professionally and scientifically so that we can actually measure what that need is when we go out. We have a range of quality assessment techniques for determining the quality of what we have collected before we publish it.

One of the documents we have provided for you is a publication from the Indigenous component of our 2001 Indigenous health survey. We deal quite explicitly there with what the information can be used for and the range of quality constraints there are around its interpretation, which relate to sample size, the way the information was developed and the capacity for people to answer questions in the context of household surveys. We have a similar quality assurance framework around our census and the way we analyse and interpret administrative datasets as well.

CHAIR—In that context, to what extent do you, for instance, rely on data collected by states, territories or local government?

Mr McColl—We rely heavily on that data in a number of areas for the vital statistics, such as births and deaths. We collect the information from the state registrars. We process that information. We provide some quality assurance around that information. We analyse the

outcomes for coherence and fitness for purpose. Again, we do not just report the information; we report on what the qualifications are around the interpretation of that information.

One of the aspects of our work program is to work with the registrars, to work with funeral directors and to work with doctors and to try to improve the quality of that sort of information that we are collecting. It is one of the particular work programs that we have been developing and expanding for the last few years to actually improve the dataset for that sort of purpose. We do the same sort of analysis with hospital statistics, working with the quality of the Indigenous identification in hospital separation statistics. We work directly with the state and territory departments in that endeavour. We work directly with the hospitals. We also analyse the resultant statistics to measure progress and improvement in that area as well. Similarly, we are working in the education and crime and justice areas to improve administrative statistics there as well, not just Indigenous identification but other aspects of that reporting as well.

CHAIR—I will go to health. It has been put to the HREOC workshop on benchmarking by ATSIIC that they have trouble getting adequate Aboriginal health statistics. Do you find any gaps in the system? How do you, for instance, ensure that the data you collect is full and comprehensive and can identify either the level of the problem or trends in the problem? ATSIIC have a problem getting comprehensive stats. Do you have the same problem?

Mr McColl—There is a problem in the provision of time series information around a range of health characteristics in the Indigenous population. The publication I referred to from the 2001 health survey had an Indigenous sample in it of about 3½ thousand Indigenous people. Reporting from that size sample limits the amount of analysis that can be done. Drilling down to very, very fine components of information that affect only a small proportion of the Indigenous population results in relatively high sampling error on the estimates. The size of the sample in the previous Indigenous health supplement to that national health survey in 1995 means that we have compounding issues of trying to measure change from 1995 to 2001 on essentially two small samples.

Our 2004-05 Indigenous health survey will have a sample that is more than twice the size of the 2001 sample. We believe that will provide us with significantly more accurate information in terms of sampling. It will also extend into areas which have not been captured in the Indigenous supplements to the health survey in the past. We are looking at developing components that are particularly relevant for the Indigenous population that we have not measured in the previous two health surveys, and we are consulting on the content of that survey at the moment.

With some of the analytic techniques that we can develop from the results of the larger sample survey, we think we will actually be able to draw some inferences about the health status of the Indigenous population from the 2001 results using the power of that larger sample. That survey will be conducted every six years from then on. So every six years we will have a large sample providing far more accurate and, in some cases, more relevant and timely information about Indigenous health.

CHAIR—That time aspect is a critical one. Would it be better to have it every three years? How much would it cost you? You may wish to take the second question on notice. How much would it cost to do a triennial survey rather than every six years?

Mr McColl—It would cost nearly twice as much. A large proportion of the costs of conducting the survey are the field costs of going out and gathering the information. The balance that we have struck in this program, we think, provides a reasonable balance regarding the information needs. Some aspects of Indigenous health will also be picked up in the Indigenous social survey that we are conducting, the second NATSIS.

CHAIR—Take, for instance, petrol sniffing. It is pretty rampant in, I suppose, most parts of the outback. Have you got statistics that identify the level of that problem in a broad national sense, in a regional sense as well, or is that too much to expect at this stage?

Mr McColl—In the 2002 Indigenous social survey, we have asked questions about substance misuse. There are issues around the quality of the information that is being reported in response to those questions. We are still analysing the results of that at the moment. We will be publishing the results from that survey in November this year. We will be able to report either on the information or on quality concerns about it. But we have attempted to try to measure that specifically in that survey.

CHAIR—In both a regional and national sense or just a national sense?

Mr McColl—We will be reporting nationally. We will be reporting by state and territory. We expect to be able to report for some ATSI regions directly from the survey results. We have a separate analytic program to look at the production of synthetic estimates for some items from that survey for other ATSI regions. But it is not the only source of information on health. As I said, we have hospital separations data collected through the state and territory governments, which we also analyse in terms of the sorts of reasons why Indigenous people are hospitalised and the treatments that they provide. We published a report on that in December last year. That is an ongoing dataset that can be analysed on a more regular basis as well.

Senator SCULLION—I want to follow on a little from the chairman's question. As a user of this information, I can recall in 1994 when we had the first comprehensive set of statistics produced. Then in 2001 we had a similar set of statistics produced. I say 'similar' because they are clearly not identical. There are clearly some challenges with the usefulness of that to someone like myself, who can say, 'Well, there are some clear benchmarks there. I've measured them.' Some of them are not there and some of them are certainly in a different format, which is probably the second issue. The first is in terms of the six-year period of time. Certainly these are some of my concerns as a parliamentarian and a representative of many Indigenous people. It is important to have a very close look at some of these issues. These issues can change. The dynamics of the communities which I am talking about are not in a six-year cycle. I understand about the capacity and cost. If you leave cost aside for a moment, would you actually have the capacity to reduce the frequency to perhaps even four years? In terms of your actual human capacity and the capacity of the department to be able to collect statistics much more frequently, is that possible?

Mr McColl—There are issues around the capacity of the organisation to add additional large-scale surveys into our work program. When this work program was framed, that capacity issue was part of the consideration. It is not financial; if people want to fund a particular survey because priorities have changed, whether we can squeeze something else out of the work program is a separate issue. But from a capacity perspective, for the Indigenous social survey we

have recruited some additional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders into our ongoing permanent household interview panel. These people are now being employed not just on the Indigenous health and Indigenous social survey but on the monthly population survey that we conduct and other surveys as they arise in the program.

We have on our work program an intention to recruit Indigenous liaison officers in each of our regional offices to assist with the way we collect the information. It is not an easy task. Where we have recruited people in the past, and others have had a similar experience, keeping and retaining good quality staff that are Indigenous in this work program is not easy. Our capacity to do that on a much larger scale more frequently would be one of the issues.

The other issue of concern to us is the extent to which the Indigenous community would support a large-scale collection more frequently than we have proposed. Because of the relatively small population size, the sample fractions of that population we take in the survey are very much larger than for a general population survey.

Going back to the communities time and again with our information needs, along with the information needs that have been gathered for a range of other purposes, we think would be an issue that would need to be addressed before we would want to actually collect the additional information. We think that developing the information content of a lot of the administrative collections that are in place already will add over time a large array of quality information that will add to what we can produce out of our surveys. Some of the major issues that people want to address, such as changes in mortality and general morbidity, are not as quick and might require measurement more frequently than what we have proposed.

Senator SCULLION—The other aspect was the type of information. I recall that in the 1994 survey it was laid out very clearly. For example, the statistics on violence against Aboriginal women showed very clearly Aboriginal women have a 27 per cent greater chance of getting murdered than any other Australian. It is pretty clear and unequivocal. On page 116 of the 2001 book, which goes to mortality, I have to search for it. It is just not really there in that format. That is not a criticism; it is just a comment. If that had been a benchmark, I could say, 'Perhaps that is an indicator that I can look at—how we were doing then and how we're doing now.' It is very simple. Do you think there is some benefit in looking at a set of questions that are consistent in what we are looking at in terms of reconciliation, for example? We could be provided with a set of questions that are asked in the same way, and the answers would be provided in the same format. It could be a common thread. Do you think that would be a positive addition, I suppose, to the presentation of the statistics?

Mr McColl—Certainly. For our survey program in particular, that has been a driving factor in the way that we have constructed the Indigenous health survey and the Indigenous social survey. From now on, these surveys are designed to have an overlap of about 80 per cent with the previous cycle. From our consultation with a range of stakeholders, we have recognised that there will be the need for change. Issues will emerge and people will want information. A priority need is to actually observe change over time. We are looking in our surveys to keep that content relatively constant over time. We will change it at the margins. Between each of these surveys we will be looking to have about an 80 per cent overlap so that we can report on progress in those areas.

As for the format of reporting on the data, we can also look at ways of making sure that we report in a similar way. I think with developments in electronic dissemination, we will be able to provide more information and in a variety of ways. That will mean that people can get the information in the format they want to look at it in as well.

Senator SCULLION—Some of the issues certainly involve the Northern Territory; I am sure my colleague Trish Crossin will agree. Statistics like these are about the Aboriginal population. A number of Northern Territorians live in urban areas, such as in and around Darwin and other regional centres. There are some who live in quite large remote communities. They are quite different populations. From our observations, there are quite different impacts on their lives. The statistics will be quite different in a macro sense. Certainly I would see some sort of value in collecting statistics on a more macro level. There could be three communities of a certain type that we could look at. We could look at how health delivery is in those areas. It would be a certain type of community. I know it sounds a bit more complicated. It would be to use these statistics in a generic sense. I could say, ‘Right Australia-wide; what does that really mean for Ramingining?’ In what context is that? Where are we really not going right with education delivery? These are the sorts of questions that would be far more useful to me in a macro sense. Do you have the capacity to give me some advice on whether or not that could be addressed?

Mr McColl—We are using a somewhat different instrument in what we describe as discrete Indigenous communities than we use in urban areas for surveying. We will be reporting separately on the results for communities and for urban Indigenous Australians. We will also try and do that at a state or territory level. But we will start to run into some sample size constraints in terms of the conclusions you can draw from some of that data. So we will be able to report on what Indigenous discrete communities in the NT look like in terms of the profile of the information we are collecting. We may have to support some of that with synthetic estimates.

When we get down to the very, very detailed information that is available from the census, we can do that down to the collection district—the Indigenous location and the Indigenous area. So we can build up a picture. We can actually look at those demographics and other attributes that we can collect in the census and relate them to our survey data and say, ‘Well, the communities look generally like this, and this is a particular community that does look like that. The sorts of results we have that fit that profile then look like this.’ We can provide the additional survey information. We may not have even collected in that community, but we can report back in terms of the sorts of information that would largely relate to that particular circumstance.

Part of that return of information is a new work program that Dan’s people are going to start developing shortly. We will be looking to build on some ideas that we have seen used for the return of information to make it more appropriate, not just for your purposes but for the communities themselves. Part of the role of the Indigenous liaison officers we are proposing to recruit will be to take that information back to communities. The efforts that we are taking to collect information from them will be linked to the sorts of information and outcomes that they can see for themselves. So that is part of our more detailed work program that we are trying to pursue.

Senator RIDGEWAY—I note from your submission that most of the initiatives that the ABS is undertaking at the moment seem to have occurred in the last decade. I want to get some impression or comment from you about whether you feel that in that time you have collected

sufficient data to be able to form some very concrete opinions about not just the demography but the socioeconomic circumstances of Indigenous communities or individuals, the Indigenous people? As you would be aware, the ABS has been around for a while. Most of the issues included in the census began back in 1967. So you have had a gap of 23 years. I am wondering what happened in that time and why things were not being done.

Mr McColl—We have been reporting on the Indigenous population for a number of years. I agree with you that we have ramped up our work program far more significantly over the last decade. I think part of the impetus for that was the move towards reconciliation. The royal commission and the subsequent NATSIS survey galvanised our efforts in this area. Some of the challenges that we have faced in trying to do this sort of work I think have lessened somewhat over time. The capacity to conduct the surveys and the preparedness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to identify as such in our surveys mean that the climate for all of that has changed to make reasonably robust statistical measurement an easier task than it might have been in the past. I fully recognise that we are doing a lot more now than we were in the past, but I think the climate and the capacity to do that have improved significantly over time as well.

Senator RIDGEWAY—You would be aware that Indigenous people certainly see themselves as being the most over-consulted and over-researched of any group in the Australian population. Do you have any views about the extent to which the information you gather is applied in a way that is meaningful to policy development by the government of the day? Do you have any role in relation to that, not so much in terms of the development of policy but more about identifying crucial areas and drawing it to the attention of the government, with some sort of presumption that there might be an appropriate response? It is partly an issue of what I call applied statistics—that they are being done for a particular purpose, not just for the sake of counting numbers. Does the ABS also look at forecasting or modelling into the future? If you have sufficient information, as part of a raw database, are you able to project that unless something is dealt with in a particular way, the problem is likely to get worse? Is it really a snapshot at the time things are being done as opposed to a remedy that deals with potential problems in the future?

Mr McColl—With respect to the first part of the question, we do try and report our information in ways that make it accessible not just to policy departments but to the community and analysts more widely. The information in things like our health and welfare biennial report is put together in a way that we think is readily accessible for a lot of people. It is constructed to provide guidance on where things may need to be looked at more closely. Other organisations like the National Advisory Group for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Information and Data have a role in then progressing this sort of information to the policy developers and saying, ‘This identifies where we think there is priority action required.’

We try to make sure that all our collection and reporting is targeted on key social issues, either current policy or where we think the policy might need to develop over time where there will be an information need in the future that we can start building on. So it is an intention that we will produce information that will be used. If we cannot identify how and why and who will be using the information, we will not use it in the first place. We are trying to make it relevant, but it is not always just relevant to the policy makers; it will be relevant to Indigenous communities that we consult about the content of the surveys as well. It may be information to paint a richer picture of their circumstances. It may not necessarily lead to particular policy change but

provides a more detailed explanation of what is going on. By collecting that information in, if you like, an omnibus survey like the Indigenous social survey, we hope to be able to do additional analysis on the circumstances of multiple disadvantage rather than just having a health survey or having a survey of employment or unemployment. By collecting all the information together about people, we can look at the relationships between them. That is an area of additional analysis that we will provide so that people can look at those issues in more detail from our surveys.

In terms of forecasting, we provide some aspects of that, particularly in regard to population and mortality analysis in the way that we will do our estimated resident population estimates for the Indigenous population and in the way we build our life tables. We are undertaking analysis and research at the moment to try to improve the quality of the projections for life expectancy in the way we build those life tables. That is an ongoing work program in part based upon the quality of the data that we have to use there, but we are looking to improve that as well.

We do not provide direct forecasts of other aspects of health or other circumstances on Indigenous Australians. We can provide consultancy advice, but by and large most of that sort of forecasting beyond the basic population forecasts requires the development and ownership of particular assumptions. So that sort of work we would not do off our own bat. We would look at supporting that sort of analysis with our methodological capacity.

CHAIR—We are running out of time. There may be a need to put some questions on notice at the end of this process. I thought I would alert you to that at this stage.

Senator RIDGEWAY—This is a question you might want to take on notice. I do not know whether you are familiar with the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples conducted in Canada and certainly the approach they took in relation to the gathering of statistics and how that led to policy development. Do you want to make some comment at some stage about the significance or relevance of that report to the Australian example?

Mr McColl—Yes. Can we write back to you on that one?

Senator RIDGEWAY—Yes.

Senator CROSSIN—Our time is very limited. I was going to ask you for the record to explain to us how you conduct your post-enumeration surveys following the census. Given that we probably do not have time to hear your explanation, can you tell me who in the Northern Territory may have been a recipient of your post-enumeration survey following the 2001 census?

Mr Black—Yes. The post-enumeration survey after the census is conducted in mainly urban areas, not remote areas. Remote communities would not have been included in the actual post-enumeration survey itself. The results from the post-enumeration survey, though, are applied across the board to the Northern Territory so that we do have an adjustment factor for the rest of the population apart from the urban population that was surveyed.

Senator CROSSIN—So people who live in Darwin and Alice Springs mainly would be selected to fill in that survey?

Mr Black—That is correct.

Senator CROSSIN—Why are remote communities omitted from that?

Mr Black—It is partly a logistical problem and a methodological problem. Because of the mobility in the discrete communities in particular, which is very high, it is quite difficult to do that kind of survey accurately. Currently we are looking at some alternative methodology for the 2006 census. That might rely on looking at, say, independent lists of people who are known to have been at the community at census time and comparing that with the census results to come up with an adjustment factor, if in fact such a methodology works. But we have a very open mind about the approach that we might take next time, given that there is quite a bit of demand emerging for us to do something specifically for the remote areas. In the meantime, the adjustment factor that we apply to the remote areas is about, on average, 6.5 per cent, which is quite a generous factor, although some critics might say that the supposed under-enumeration rate in remote areas might be higher.

Senator CROSSIN—Exactly. Your adjustment is only around one per cent in, say, New South Wales or Sydney areas, isn't it?

Mr Black—Yes. We would not attempt to apply such a low rate for the remote areas.

Senator CROSSIN—Has there been any analysis done by ABS of the disadvantage to Indigenous people by not including people in remote communities in post-enumeration surveys?

Mr Black—Not specifically. As I said, we do bump up the figures for the remote areas by 6.5 per cent, which is much higher than any other adjustment done for any other Australians. Whether or not it is sufficient, I guess, is a moot point. We are putting more work into that for the 2006 census.

Senator CROSSIN—I do note that a number of evaluations have been done, if not under way, following the 2001 census. You would be more aware, I am assuming, of the controversy surrounding the collection of your statistics in remote communities during the 2001 census. You will need to take this on notice. I do not in my wildest dreams believe you have brought them here. I have been to a number of remote communities in the last month. I am wondering if you could supply to this committee the dates on which census forms were dropped off and collected on Elcho Island, including all of their 28 outstations. None of the six outstations I went to and none of the 50 Indigenous people I spoke to had filled out a census form in 2001. I am wondering if you can do the same for me in relation to Borroloola, Maningrida and all of their outstations and Whitton, which is a small community to the north of Tennant Creek. I do not think there are any others that particularly spring to mind at this point in time. I am particularly interested in knowing about this. Ali Curung would be another one that I would like to know about. When were census forms dropped off in those communities? How many were there? On what days were they picked up? How many were picked up, particularly in the 28 outstations at Elcho Island?

Mr Black—Yes. We have records of the way we did the enumeration in all the communities. We certainly do not in the main drop off forms and pick them up. We use an interview technique so it is done in one hit. There are some outstations that of necessity or because of logistical

problems could not be visited. But it does not mean they were not counted. The information may have been gathered elsewhere. As a consequence, some people would not necessarily be aware that they were in the census because it was completed on their behalf at the main community.

Senator CROSSIN—I will just go to that. Where in fact you guesstimate or complete a census form on behalf of people, what is the population you would include in the imputation of remote counts to urban rates? Let us say you go to a household and it is empty. You might impute that it has three residents in it. What is the number in a remote community or an outstation in the Northern Territory that you estimate is in that household?

Mr Black—We actually do not do that in the remote areas because of the local knowledge technique we use in doing the interviews. Because we go to a community, except for some of the exceptions I mentioned such as outstations we cannot get to, in the main we use local people to do the interviewing, to do the enumeration. In the course of doing that, they identify every dwelling that should be occupied. There is no such thing in that technique as an unoccupied dwelling because the local knowledge on the spot gives us what we would otherwise have to impute in urban areas where we do not have that knowledge.

Senator CROSSIN—But what they be suggesting to you is the number who may live in a house in a community? Do people say every house in the community is occupied by 25 people? That would be a more realistic number, wouldn't it?

Mr Black—Yes.

Senator CROSSIN—You are talking about a remote community in the Territory.

Mr Black—But in fact in the remote communities we get the local knowledge of who is at that household. If it is 25, then it is 25 we put in. It is not a later imputation process, as applies to the urban areas.

Senator CROSSIN—You would have to do it over more than one day, because it is not possible to do it in a similar fashion to the census night. How much can you rely on that, given that it will vary from place to place?

Mr Black—You can never be 100 per cent accurate. We rely on local knowledge to ensure that whatever we get is the best knowledge that is available to us in the community at the time. The mobility factor that you are alluding to is a real difficulty for us. Notwithstanding that, we think we overcome most of that with local knowledge and by employing local facilitators.

Senator CROSSIN—Is most of the collection in remote communities done during the day when the English-literate people might well be at work? Do your people work at night?

Mr Black—They work at whatever times the community finds most appropriate for them. In the sense that in many communities we use local community people, yes, they will work during hours when they know they can get access to the householders. But there is no hard and fast rule about that.

Senator CROSSIN—There have been quite a number of discrepancies brought to our attention over the last couple of months, particularly in relation to administrative data, such as your health survey, for example. The Katherine West Health Board, for example, at any one time registers their clients with the Health Insurance Commission and have close to 3,300 clients. Your statistics only show 2,800 residents in those communities. Do you have a reason for that discrepancy?

Mr Black—Yes, we do. We have looked at some of those things. In the course of the current debate in the NT, we have been looking at a number of administrative datasets brought to our attention to see why they differ. Invariably, when we look at them, as we have done and are continuing to do, we are actually looking at a difference between what might be called a service population, which is a necessary population for service delivery, but it is not necessarily the resident population. We also find other problems with those administrative lists. The Medicare type records often have duplicates, often have people who have a record in one place and a record in another. When you take those flaws out, you start getting the numbers back closer to ours.

We have not actually found any administrative sets that significantly contradict the census. They do on the surface when you first look at them. You can get in and analyse them, as we are doing—we are doing a major study on this later this year for about 40 communities—to try to explain why other sets of data are different from ours. Where we find that we are wrong, we will be very upfront about that and say, ‘Yes, this evidence does suggest we got it wrong in this community.’ So far, a lot of the criticism levelled has been either anecdotal or based on administrative sets that have their own difficulties. They are not comparable to the census.

Senator CROSSIN—That is true. I have another example here with the Pintubi Homelands Health Service in the Kintore council register. In 1991—we are talking about a fair while ago—it showed around 600 residents. Your population numbers were 295. When both of them were cross-checked with the local government register, the number came out to 550. So the Pintubi and Kintore numbers were far closer to the actual resident numbers than yours.

Mr Black—That kind of information, if we can get it for 2001, we will certainly use and make statements about whether we think that is in fact correct. I suspect that the case you are quoting is one where we may well have got it wrong. However, some of the people that may have been associated with one count could have been counted by us somewhere else. We have to look at the whole thing somewhat holistically too.

Senator CROSSIN—Are you aware that in the 2001 census year some Indigenous communities in fact were asked to fill out no less than seven forms? There was the national health survey, the national Indigenous health survey, the community housing infrastructure survey, the census, the Indigenous social survey, a Northern Territory government housing survey and a Northern Territory government health survey. About once a month, people who are by and large illiterate and nomadic are being asked to fill out a huge amount of detail. I must say they are getting pretty cynical out there when we come and meet them. Is there anything at all that is being done to actually try to condense them, shorten them or make the collection period longer to stop this incredible overuse? By the time you get your fifth, sixth or seventh survey, I tend to believe there is no way it is going to be filled in as thoroughly and as accurately as the first and the second. The quality of data being collected is diminished.

Mr McColl—Part of the issue of the amount of information and the number of times you have to go back was part of my response to Senator Scullion earlier. In the circumstances you are quoting, we actually went to some lengths to ensure that we integrated some of the approaches to the communities. In particular, we conducted the community housing and infrastructure needs surveys as part of our pre-census approaches to the communities. The collectors we were using for the census were also the same collectors we used for that CHIN survey. They were not surveying the householders in the community; they were surveying administrative employees of the community to report about the community infrastructure, not householders. So they were not the same people approached for the census or the Indigenous health survey.

We did actually stop our enumeration of the Indigenous health survey over the period of the census so that people would not be dealing with that. We stopped it and then started it again to complete it. So we try to make sure that we minimise the impact. Again, we are only going to a sample of households for the Indigenous health survey in those remote communities. So for some of them there was a double-up. But we are looking seriously at that provider load issue and trying to manage it and keep it down to what we think is the minimum for what people have identified to us as priority information needs. We are trying to add our community engagement strategy to that so that they see the return of that information, which helps understand and support why we are collecting it as well. So we think we have an integrated structure there to make it easier and more meaningful for the communities that are helping us with this.

CHAIR—Senator Crossin, could you put any more questions on notice. Senator Ridgeway has one he would like to put on notice.

Senator RIDGEWAY—This is a very quick one that you could take on notice. You are probably aware that in last night's budget the government announced that it would be releasing a report on benchmarking later in the year. I wonder whether you could provide a response later as to the relationship you would have with the steering committee of the Productivity Commission. What sort of information would you be providing to assist that new initiative? Are there any impediments in relation to the collection of data, particularly with states and territories? What is the nature of any formal arrangements that might exist so that the collection of data can be improved, including the harmonisation of what you do through the ABS and what might happen at the state and territory levels.

Mr McColl—Certainly.

CHAIR—Thanks very much for your submission, your showbag, and for your evidence.

[5.23 p.m.]

DODSON, Professor Mick (Private capacity)

CHAIR—I now welcome Professor Mick Dodson. Do you have any comment to make on the capacity in which you appear today?

Prof. Dodson—I am here in a private capacity, as a citizen of the nation.

CHAIR—Would you like to start by making a short opening statement?

Prof. Dodson—I had not prepared one. Perhaps I can say a few things up front that might promote discussion. When I spent some time looking back at the reconciliation process, looking at some of the documents and knowing that I have not been as involved in it as in recent years, it struck me that, from the government's point of view, it seems they are unconcerned about reconciliation and, in fact, it is off the agenda as far as they are concerned. They have substituted something that is ill-defined, at least to me. I cannot nail it. Perhaps I am missing something; I do not know. It is an ill-defined concept for practical reconciliation. I must confess that my refresher to date has been brief. I have reread the government's response to CAR's report. I have flicked through the report. I have looked at the Social Justice Commissioner's reports and a number of other things. I cannot find any evidence of new directions, new initiatives or new money to support this notion of practical reconciliation.

I think it is a washing of hands of the issue from the government's point of view, if we are going to be frank about it. There is this minimalist and myopic approach to reconciliation that concentrates on what I think most other Australians regard as basic rights and entitlements as citizens of this country. But it seems to me, at least in terms of money—and I have not examined last night's budget—certainly in previous budgets there has been no extra commitment of financial resources to pursue practical reconciliation, whatever that may mean. I think it is about delivering the rights and entitlements that everybody else has, anyway, or is entitled to—or expects, which might be a better way of putting it. There is nothing to persuade me that there is a commitment to broader issues of reconciliation, particularly outstanding issues that are identified by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation report.

I think that there is still a lot happening out there at all sorts of levels, particularly at a local community level. I have been involved in many of these things. No week goes past without at least one request to be involved in a community reconciliation group of one sort or another. I am going to one in Melbourne this weekend. I have been involved in others. People are pursuing this dream of ours that the nation ought to come to some sort of reconciliation, that they ought to address outstanding issues that are of particular concern to Indigenous Australians but which are of concern to many other Australians as well. But what is missing is any direction or leadership at the federal government level.

The federal government's response to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation report, which I understand is your primary focus—your primary terms of reference are to look at the response—is aggravating to the brink of annoyance. It is like a harping on disadvantage as being

the sole and only purpose of reconciliation. Incidentally, we ought to look at community attitudes and understanding as an aside, it seems, to that. There is absolutely no reference to the substance of the report, apart from rejection, of the council. In fact, the government's response is devoid, really, of any substance when you analyse it. I do not know who dares to say that we have made progress on practical reconciliation—again, whatever that term means, because it eludes me. I cannot nail it. Perhaps that is because I am a bit thick.

Can someone point out to me where the government's commitment to and direction regarding reconciliation is? I cannot identify it, apart from delivering welfare as some magical way of achieving reconciliation. It is an absolute nonsense. It is not going to be achieved through welfare. I might stop there.

CHAIR—Is it a lost dream? Can it be regenerated? In that context, how important is the symbolism of government leadership and the infrastructure of government in terms of making some of the practical side work? Can you actually get practical progress without the national leadership and the national infrastructure?

Prof. Dodson—You are not going to get practical progress on reconciliation if the government has washed its hands of it. You need the national government to give it leadership and direction. There was a time when that was happening under the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. That is not there. It is as if it has nothing to do with the government; it is the people's movement. The people are not going to move if the government does not. There is nothing to compel anybody to do anything, really. We are the victims waiting for government goodwill that does not seem forthcoming in the near future.

CHAIR—I suppose the government would point to some resources in some of the critical areas and say that that is their way of doing it. Can that practical side actually work?

Prof. Dodson—It is the same problem with mere symbolism. You cannot address half the problem or a third of the problem or a quarter of the problem and expect to solve the whole problem. The fact of the matter is that, regardless of what the federal government's agenda is, there are outstanding issues. Unless they are addressed in some form or shape, there is no hope for reconciliation. Perhaps that is the government's objective; I do not know. But if we are talking about symbolism or throwing some extra money at social welfare problems, we are never going to get there. There is a fundamental psychological position here that has to be addressed from our point of view. There has to be some acceptance that our agenda is just as legitimate in this debate. The things that concern us have to be on the table. You cannot just say, 'We are not talking about rights or native title or self-determination or governance of any sort except to fix your corporations up and their governance. We are not talking about other things that concern you, like the removal of children or the history of that. We are not concerned about your symbolic place within this nation. We are only concerned about your health, your education, your housing.' That is to deny the reality of the history and how we have got to the position where reconciliation is required. It is to push one agenda, the government's agenda. It is not going to be achieved if you do that. You do not have to be particularly sharp to work that out, surely.

Senator RIDGEWAY—When did you finish up as Social Justice Commissioner? In what year was that? Were you Social Justice Commissioner in the year 2000?

Prof. Dodson—No. Dr Jonas had taken over by then. I finished in March 1998, I think. It might have been earlier than that. I think it was 1998.

Senator RIDGEWAY—I was going to ask you whether you wanted to make a comment in relation to the Social Justice Commissioner's most recent report, where he made the statement that he regarded reconciliation as being much more than overcoming social disadvantage. One of the principles that he adopted in his report was what he called incremental realisation. Do you have a view about that in relation to how you deal with disadvantage within communities, the agenda you referred to in terms of the Indigenous community and leadership and how those things might be taken on board? Is that a fair approach to take to the many issues that are there?

Prof. Dodson—What is it? Incremental realisation?

Senator RIDGEWAY—Incremental realisation.

Prof. Dodson—If I take that to mean it is going to take some time, I agree. I am pretty much an incrementalist myself. These things have been 215 years in the making. We are not going to make them in the life of the parliament. It is going to take time. As I have said before, back in 1991 when the reconciliation council was established and the legislation was passed to underpin it with cross-party support, I do not think any of us at that time really thought we were going to achieve reconciliation within 10 years, by the turn of the century. But we set ourselves a goal. We did not achieve it. That does not mean to say we should abandon it.

I do not remember seeing Dr Jonas's reference to incremental realisation. As I said, I did some brief research today when time permitted. I did read parts of chapter 3 of his report this year that deals with the state of reconciliation. But I would agree with him that it is going to take time, if that is what he means by incremental realisation. It is no good expecting to achieve reconciliation by only addressing those practical things. These other things have to be addressed as well, and at the same time. Of course we cannot put them all to bed in one hit. However, we can put some of them to bed as we go along—I am pretty sure of that—if we get commitment, direction and leadership from the top, which we do not have at the moment.

Senator RIDGEWAY—Another issue that flows on from that is certainly the requirement under the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act for a report to be prepared and tabled annually in parliament. Certainly the recommendations and what has been said have been excellent. The difficulty has been how you make some sort of comparison from one year to the next. Given the announcement last night in the budget for national benchmarks to be established and a report to come out at the end of the year, is there a role for the Social Justice Commissioner in terms of how the benchmarks are looked at and assessed? Who prepares a report card, for example, on the federal government or the states and territories in achieving the goals that have been set? That is one thing. Secondly, do you think that—

Prof. Dodson—Could you repeat the last bit of your question.

Senator RIDGEWAY—In relation to the benchmarks and the role of the Social Justice Commissioner in reporting to parliament, you may or may not be aware that this is a separate issue, but the government have moved to abolish all of what they call specialist commissioners' positions under the HREOC legislation. My question is: once you get benchmarks, who actually

does the monitoring and evaluation? Is it an appropriate role, for example, for the Social Justice Commissioner perhaps, given our international obligations to report on the achievements in relation to Indigenous circumstances?

Prof. Dodson—And you had a second question.

Senator RIDGEWAY—I was going to give you a chance to answer that one first.

Prof. Dodson—If you want to commit to practical reconciliation and measure your capacity to fulfil that commitment, it is vitally important that you have something like the Social Justice Commissioner to aid you in that pursuit. A desire to turn around Indigenous disadvantage necessitates that you have someone like the Social Justice Commissioner to keep you on your toes. It makes the position even more necessary if you are going to set benchmarks. It is not without notice that the Social Justice Commissioner has already been asked to deal with this issue of benchmarking. I spent two days at one of his workshops last year on this very issue. It is pointless having benchmarks or objectives, say, in practical reconciliation if there is nobody there to measure them or to keep you on your toes or to keep you honest to your commitment. I am aware of the proposals to amend the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act and I have put a separate submission in to some other committee in that regard.

Senator RIDGEWAY—Finally, in relation to the benchmarks, to what level do you think they should be applied? If government agencies have primary responsibility for service delivery, should those standards somehow be replicated in the employment contracts of the senior executive service? Should they also be annually reviewed in relation to those types of performances and taken into account if achievement is not being made?

Prof. Dodson—Well, they do it for other things. Why should this be the exception? Chief executives have to perform in other areas. Why should they not have to perform in their delivery of whatever they are delivering to the Indigenous constituency? Why should they not be tested against their achievements or lack of achievement there when they are so tested elsewhere?

Senator SCULLION—Obviously, you have had a unique role to play in reconciliation through the huge number of hats you have worn over your journey through that process. I have heard you speak about people who champion causes. You have just reflected briefly that if you do not have leadership on particular issues, often those issues fall by the wayside. Could you comment briefly on the potential for other organisations or parts of government to perhaps pick up the leadership in this role? One would think ATSIC, being the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, would be ideally suited to the role of championing reconciliation. Whilst I am not across whether directives or discussions have been had in this regard, do you think there would be someone who could once again take up the cudgel in terms of being a champion? Perhaps you could explore briefly going back to restoring the Australian Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and what sort of impact you think it would have on the future progress of reconciliation.

Prof. Dodson—I will answer your last question first. I am not advocating the restoration of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. I must declare my interest here, I guess, because I am a member of the board of Reconciliation Australia. I certainly think that Reconciliation Australia ought to be given more support. I understand that the co-chairs are talking to the committee on

Monday. I am not here in my capacity as a member of that board. I am not saying, 'Let's go back to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.' I am saying, 'Let's implement the recommendations of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, which will underpin and give a framework to Reconciliation Australia, as it was intended to after 10 years of deliberation.'

In terms of your question about ATSIC, of course all agencies, and we would hope all Australians, would diligently work towards reconciliation. The fact is that if the big guy at the top, the elected leader of the country, has not got his heart in it, it is going to go nowhere. It has to be led from the very top of politics. The very top of politics in this country is the office of Prime Minister. If it is not being led from there and given direction and support from there but is, as I suspect, being pushed off the table and substituted for some wishy-washy, nebulous jelly called practical reconciliation, it is going to go nowhere. You have to have the boss behind it or it will fall off the table. Perhaps that is intended. I do not know. You need to talk to him.

Senator SCULLION—I was interested in your comments on reconciliation. We have focused on practical reconciliation recently. I see very clearly that you are associating whatever practical reconciliation is with the issues about welfare and disadvantage. You speak about the remainder of the issues, particularly community awareness. I noticed in the national reconciliation inquiry some of the benchmarking. The majority of the benchmarks still relate to Indigenous people and their position in the community. Some, but very few, of them relate to how non-Indigenous Australians feel about a whole range of issues associated with Indigenous Australia. For example, I think there was one benchmark that dealt with how much curriculum in Indigenous content and those types of things is delivered in primary schools. I am sure that we still do not have in the curriculum, certainly in my experience, publications like *Why weren't we told?* A whole range of publications could be part of the mainstream curriculum about the way Australians see their history. When you are speaking about community awareness and community attitudes and changing those attitudes, do you think education is going to play a large role in that? Could you suggest perhaps other areas that we could be working on quite specifically to ensure that wider community awareness increases with regard to reconciliation?

Prof. Dodson—My understanding of the benchmarking initiative, really, is that it had nothing to do with the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. It came out of COAG. They decided what they were going to benchmark and measure. I do not recall being asked. I have been involved, as I said, in a process of how you might methodologically go about this. The question of what has been identified has not been identified by me. These issues of practical reconciliation are matters identified by the government. They say, 'These are the important things.' We say, 'Yes, these things are important, but they are not the only important things.' The government says that, at least as far as I can ascertain, these are the only important things. That is why I have truck with their approach. They are not the only issues for reconciliation.

In relation to education and awareness raising, I do not think anybody can honestly say that we are much more educated and much more aware as a nation of Indigenous issues in this country than we were 12 years ago when the reconciliation council started. We have done an enormous amount of work that we ought to be proud of. There is no resiling from that. But now we seem to have stopped. We say, 'Hooray, pat, pat, that's it; let's get on with education, health and housing,' when half the job is done and we have dropped the ball. That is my problem with it. We started to, in the space of nine or 10 years, get this as part of the school lexicon. Do reconciliation things happen? They still do, but perhaps not with the frequency with which they

ought to. There was a capacity because government at the very top put resources into it. There were the materials going into schools. There was information going into schools. There were school projects and school prizes for reconciliation. A whole range of things was happening in schools.

In terms of a balanced view or perhaps an Indigenous view of our history being imparted to our school kids, that is a longer term process of curriculum development et cetera. Although the Commonwealth can give a lead in that and the Commonwealth can certainly provide resources, that sort of development stuff is really at the state level. They have the council of ministers in relation to education. They can probably work those things out. We do not have any trouble with commerce and industry in doing these things. But when it comes to hard things like reconciliation, we try to take the easy path and say, 'Let's do some more education or do some more housing or do some more health.'

CHAIR—I think Senator Kirk has a follow-up question.

Senator KIRK—Not a follow-up question, but just a question. Thank you for your words today. Could you elaborate for us on your role as the Indigenous chair at the ANU. I have to say that I was not aware there was such a position. I wonder whether or not there is an Indigenous law centre at the ANU. If not, what kind of research projects are you working on at the moment?

Prof. Dodson—The position was established after an inquiry initiated by the vice-chancellor two years ago, which recommended the establishment of an Indigenous chair to give leadership and direction to research and scholarship across the campus. The position answers to the vice-chancellor. I am physically located in the law faculty because they had space. The dean of law at the law faculty is my landlord, not my boss. The law faculty has a special entrance program for Indigenous students. They have a support program within the faculty to support Indigenous undergraduates in law. My responsibility is across the entire campus in all disciplines, not just with the law faculty. I am a tenant in the law faculty.

Senator KIRK—We had a submission from the Gilbert and Tobin Centre a few weeks ago. They are working on various projects there. I wondered whether there was any cooperation between yourself and that centre at the University of New South Wales and if there is any collaborative research with them.

Prof. Dodson—I have only been in the job for three months.

Senator PAYNE—When you were making your introductory remarks, I was thinking to myself that probably inevitably in this process there will be some points we agree on and some points we disagree on. I was surprised when you went on, in response to Senator Scullion, to say you were a board member of Reconciliation Australia. That is exactly what I was going to ask you about. I know you are not here in that capacity. Nevertheless, they have a job to do. They are doing a job. You are part of that. In not referring to it, what does it mean your perspective on that is?

Prof. Dodson—Read absolutely nothing into it. I am here in my private capacity.

Senator PAYNE—What do you think Reconciliation Australia is achieving? What more do you think it could or should do?

Prof. Dodson—I do not want to pre-empt what they are going to say on Monday. I counsel you to wait until our chair attends. I will support what they have to say on Monday.

Senator PAYNE—Except you are counselling, and I respect the point you made. Nevertheless, it is hard for me to balance what you have said, as someone who is listening to you, and very seriously this evening, without getting some idea of what you think Reconciliation Australia has done. I take the point you have made. In answer to another question from Senator Scullion, I wrote a note to myself to seek from you what you think the solution is. Where does the balance lie? The government thinks the matters you point to as practical reconciliation, such as health, housing, education and so on, are very important. They are for all Australians, but for Indigenous Australians in this context in particular. I happen to agree that they are important. Is there an imbalance problem? Is that what you want addressed? Is the solution this nebulous word that you describe as leadership or is there something more practical, for want of a better word, that you think is the solution?

Prof. Dodson—You said that there were things we might agree on and things we might disagree on. Part of the Prime Minister's response—I am not sure whether it was the actual response—upon receipt of the report from the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was that we should concentrate on the things that unify us, not the things that might divide us. In other words, we should concentrate on the things we agree on and not the things we disagree on, to put it another way. That is all very well, but when are we ever going to deal with the things we disagree on? By saying, 'We will not deal with the things we disagree on,' you take us out of the agenda entirely. The key things outside practical reconciliation that we want addressed are the things we disagree on. Where is the timetable to deal with that? That is my problem with the government's approach.

I do not know if we will find a solution to these things. But we are never going to know if we do not try. The agenda at the moment is that the government, it seems to me, is saying, 'Let's not try because we disagree. Let's not try.' That is just totally inadequate as far as I am concerned. It is a cop-out. In a sense, it is cowardly that we refuse to deal with things that we do not agree on. We have to try to deal with those things. We have to try to reconcile those disagreements. After all, that is what fundamentally underpins the whole reconciliation process.

From our point of view, it may not be a solution that achieves the reconciliation. What might achieve the reconciliation is having together gone through the process. That is what is important to us in many of these things. It is actually engaging in the process—the process of education awareness raising, the process of jumping into each other's shoes from time to time, the process of seeing each other's point of view. It would be pretty miraculous if we agreed on everything. But unless we try and reach agreement, we are going to be lesser people for it. We cannot just say, 'Let's do the practical things that we are going to get a solution to.'

We are not progressing on life expectancy for Indigenous people in this country. I think it is going to be another 200 years before we get any parity of outcome there, before we get any solution to the life expectancy issue. We have not shifted that. In fact, it has got worse. With the recent figures, we were talking about 18 or 20 years five, six or 10 years ago. The present

figures, the 2001 figures, show it is now 24 years. We are not moving anywhere, but the rest of the population is living longer. How do we deal with that practically without going through some process, without dealing with the outstanding issues that caused it? Chucking further resources at it is always going to be inadequate; it does not seem to get us there. The like jurisdictions—Canada, New Zealand and the United States—have a rough parity of outcome on life expectancy. Why can't we do it?

CHAIR—We have to move on to Senator Crossin.

Senator CROSSIN—Thank you. I have one question for you. In formulating benchmarks for reconciliation, or whatever the government may mean by that—how they are going to achieve it, we will wait and see—can we have such a process if you do not include benchmarking for symbolism?

Prof. Dodson—I am not sure what you mean by benchmarking symbolism. Take a small practical thing that is highly symbolic and costs bugger all. With regard to most places you go to now, there is an acknowledgement of the traditional owners, or the people whose country it is, and a welcome. They cost nothing. You might give a gratuity to someone who comes along and says, 'I own the country.' I do not know. The practice varies across the country. But that happens now more often than it does not. Just about everywhere you go that happens. Even five years ago it was not happening. But that has been a positive impact. It has been perhaps a good thing for communities. But so is flying the Aboriginal flag off the shire building or the police station or whatever. I go to Kununurra from time to time. The cop shop has the Aboriginal flag flying there. It has Aboriginal murals all over it. It has Aboriginal people working there as police aides.

Senator CROSSIN—But that happens because the people's movement has taken it up as opposed to the issue you raised before of the leadership in some way providing direction. For example, I am not aware of any state, territory or even the Commonwealth government that might have protocols about dealing with recognition of country or Indigenous people. Even the opening of parliament failed to actually symbolically include a recognition of first Australians. Should that sort of symbolism be benchmarked as well as this practical reconciliation?

Prof. Dodson—I do not see why not. I am just wondering how you do it in practical terms.

Senator CROSSIN—I am not suggesting everyone has the answers there. I think the common theme we are hearing from most people in this inquiry is that practical reconciliation might be one arm towards progress, towards reconciliation, but there is also the symbolism and the movement towards other aspects, such as the preamble and the saying sorry treaty et cetera. What I am suggesting is that you cannot benchmark one aspect without the other. If you want a total picture of how progress is being made, you have to look at all of the aspects of that progress, I think.

Prof. Dodson—Well, I cannot argue with that. Again, it is what we mean by practical reconciliation. I think it has nothing to do with reconciliation in one sense. It is about citizens' rights and entitlements, not about reconciliation. But we cannot have reconciliation without all Australians, in particular Indigenous Australians, enjoying those rights and entitlements as citizens.

CHAIR—I must wind up now. In doing so, I thank you for some quite compelling evidence. I am sure it will be influential in our deliberations.

Prof. Dodson—Thank you.

Committee adjourned at 6.08 p.m.