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Moving forward: Reconciliation and time

There is a temporal dimension to many post-conflict and transitional justice discourses. Pankhurst (1999) outlines a possible shift from a minimalist version of the rule of law in the short term to a maximalist conception, including human rights, democracy and good governance, which may only be possible in the longer term. Galtung's (1985) framework of negative peace (the absence of violence) and positive peace (including ideas such as 'harmony', 'cooperation' and 'integration') can be placed within a similar temporal frame. The danger is that the initial phase becomes permanent, positions entrenched, and the future is defined by such minimalist, negative conceptions of wellbeing. The problem examined by this paper, in the above context, is the relationship between reconciliation and time, and specifically the following two questions:

1) How can reconciliation be framed/defined in terms of time?

Some work has been done on this topic. Where crimes remain locked in the "eternal present", there is a simultaneity of the past and/in the present which means that the past is "not past at all" (Ignatieff 1996). To come to terms with the past means superimposing serial time on simultaneous time, reactivating the movement of time.

Borneman (2002) argues that "to render no longer opposed", the "departure from violence", means sharing a present that is nonrepetitive, which in turn requires the inter-subjective creation of a "sense of ending" ("a radical break or rupture from existing relations"), and a "sense of beginning" ("a departure into new relations of affinity marked not by cyclical violence but by trust and care").

How can the movement of time, a nonrepetitive present and the temporal break as beginning and ending, be achieved and identified? This leads to a second question:

2) What processes/interventions facilitate the move from minimalist/negative conceptions of reconciliation to more maximalist/positive formulations?

This question will be answered with reference to the Australian experience. Reconciliation is a complex, multi-faceted process, not an inexorably forward-moving one. Insofar as reconciliation has been achieved in Australia, it is a partial, minimalist vision of what is needed. Moving the process forward will demand recognition of the intimate, necessary connection between reconciliation and human rights.

The 20th century saw some restoration of indigenous Australians' civil and political rights, while other rights remain grossly violated. Action for human rights has advanced reconciliation, while failure to halt ongoing violations and offer reparations impedes the process. A human rights framework recognises the equal dignity and humanity of reconciling parties, offering internationally recognised, inter-connected entitlements that are measurable and justiciable.

Attaining a 'positive' reconciliation will require a radical re-making of Australia – its social, legal and political institutions – on a just and equitable footing. Personal as well as institutional transformation is necessary. This will need the support of the wider public. Non-indigenous indifference to reconciliation can be counteracted by reconceptualising the responsibilities of bystanders and beneficiaries of past and present abuses. In this case study, respect for human rights is proposed as a means of moving forward into a nonrepetitive future characterised by 'positive' reconciliation.