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## **Not Even the Right Word**

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Noongar

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Words have power and can be forged into weapons. Words can harm and can heal, attack and defend, in equal measure. Words can do violence and words can stop a war. Unfortunately, sometimes they are not enough. Sometimes the wrong word can mean nothing, and by achieving nothing do harm.

‘Reconciliation’ is one of those words: it can be powerful and yet so meaningless. Or to put it another way, that word – the way it is usually used in Australia in race relations, particularly with dealings between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia – might not be doing what you think it is. You think that word is healing the nation, when at best it does no good and at worst it does harm.

‘Reconciliation’ in its common usage in the English language, signifies the restoration of good relations between two people or two groups of people. When reconciling, the fight is ended, peace is restored and people regain the friendship that was lost. But that is not how the word is used in Australia.

Australia, the nation draped across the continent like an unwelcome shroud, has never been peaceful or friendly with the Indigenous people of the continent. In reality, the British arrived here in 1788, unwelcome and facing resistance, and started a genocide that is, despite what you might have heard, still going. In reality, relations between Indigenous Australia and the colony, from Cook shooting the first person he encountered on the continent and onwards to deaths in custody just last week (at the time of writing), remain violent. There are no good relations to restore; no friendship to recover.

The use of the word ‘reconciliation’ by non-Indigenous Australia is actually considered a form of passive-aggressive abuse.



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It is dangled before us like a carrot on a stick – this *word* which is constantly being misused – and when we don't take it (this thing we don't want because it is nothing) we are accused of not really being hungry. In reality, I know more non-Indigenous people who reject reconciliation than are asking for 'reconciliation', or who think Reconciliation Week achieves something other than allowing non-Indigenous people the opportunity to pay lip service, and therefore believe they are doing something for my people.

The only thing the word 'reconciliation' really achieves in Australia is gaslighting.

It makes the country think there is a peace table that we are not interested in sitting at; that mainstream Australia wants to reconcile but we can't. There is nothing to reconcile. There were no good relations to restore, no friendship to recover. Reconciliation is another thin, dry bone thrown by the colonisers: an aim they will never achieve, an offer that cannot really be delivered.

We cannot have reconciliation because we were never friends. We cannot have reconciliation because there was no conciliation. They are like schoolyard bullies offering to make up with their terrified, traumatised victims. We need more than words. Australians need to take action.

Instead of thinking about reconciliation, you might want to think about what many Indigenous people are actually asking for; what we want, what we need.

Consider that Indigenous people almost never get what they actually want. Stop killing Indigenous people in police custody (or at least prosecute the police murdering our people), we beg, yet nothing changes. Stop the over-policing that imprisons Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at rates the rest of the nation would not accept for minor crimes that get anybody else a reprimand and a warning. Offer us a treaty, or treaties. Stop blowing up our sacred and archaeological sites like Juukan gorge in Western Australia, for example, and stop chopping down the sacred Djap Wurrung trees for a highway you don't actually need to build.

If I listed all the cases of destruction of Aboriginal heritage in recent times it alone would be longer than the word count of this piece.

Actually close the gap in Indigenous life expectancy rather than spruiking a ten year "closing the gap" target that after ten years has done precisely nothing.

Stop celebrating your white nationalist day on our day of mourning.



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Give us our land back.

We cry out constantly for what we want yet we never get it. You offer what you want to offer, which is only lip service, and we have the right if we want to reject your hollow words.

I don't want to hear your words anymore. They are hollow and empty and meaningless. All they achieve is the pretence of care.

Words are weapons and you aim them at our rights to gaslight Aboriginal people, to pretend you care when you never did, to pretend you want to stick a Band-Aid over a crack in a relationship when that relationship never existed. You don't fix things; you give us words that make mainstream Australia think you want to do something. The citizens of the colony can use your words. They can pay lip service to 'reconciliation' for a week, a year, and pretend they are doing something for Indigenous people.

And ... reconciliation is not even the right word.

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Claire is a Noongar woman whose family have belonged to the south coast of Western Australia since long before history started being recorded. Born in Perth, Claire has lived most of her life in Victoria, and most of that in and around Melbourne. Claire writes fiction, essays and poetry. Claire has won a Black&Write! Indigenous Writing Fellowship for her novel Terra Nullius.