

Obstacles to Reconciliation: Can Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians Be Reconciled?¹

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Abstract

Reconciliation is a current movement in Australia that seeks to improve the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, improve the living conditions of indigenous Australians, and to apologize for past wrongs done to them. This movement, breaking the tradition of prejudice and marginalization of Native Australians, is making huge strides, but it also faces disunity, fragmentation, and the Australian government's lack of commitment to the process and to indigenous concerns.

Introduction

In recent years, a movement to reconcile Native Australians and the descendants of European colonial settlers (or, indeed, all non-indigenous Australians) has gained momentum in Australia. The reasons for this movement are the current third-world living conditions and economic disadvantages of indigenous Australians, as well as the nation's sordid history of European Australian privilege, oppression of Native Australians and consequent cultural genocide.

Reconciliation by these two populations and an improvement of conditions for indigenous people is essential if Australians are to "move on together at peace with ourselves" (Gordon 2001: 135). At an indigenous level, the need for reconciliation is apparent in the cultural themes depicted in contemporary art and storytelling and during the interpretive nature walks given by guides at Aboriginal cultural centers (Van Horn 2006). Approaches to reconciliation are many, but the movement faces the critical problems of disunity, fragmentation, and the Australian government's unwillingness to make reconciliation a priority or to adequately listen to the concerns expressed by Native Australians. These obstacles must be surmounted if the Reconciliation Movement is to succeed and Australia is to move on from a legacy of marginalizing its own people, and from the "cultural and social genocide still happening in Australia today" (Heiss 2006).

History of Indigenous/ Non-Indigenous Relations

In order to understand the problems inherent in the Reconciliation Movement, and also what is at stake, it is imperative to understand

the history of relations between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Indigenous Australians are a group comprised of both Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders (the people inhabiting the Torres Strait Islands, which lie between Australia and New Guinea). When Captain James Cook (1728–1779) first stumbled upon Australia in 1770, the population numbered approximately 750,000 (Mellor and Bretherton 2003:37). Despite this, the newly discovered continent was said to be *terra nullius*, which, as a legal doctrine, stated that Aboriginal populations were not "socially advanced" enough to have any claim to the land (McIntosh 2000:17). As a result of this doctrine, Aboriginal tribes and Torres Strait Islanders were not viewed as sovereign nations and a treaty was never made with them. All land belonged to the British Crown and could be settled and taken from indigenous populations with impunity.

Due to mistreatment, disease, and massacre, the population of indigenous Australians was reduced to 25 percent of its former numbers by 1900 (McIntosh 2000:18). Beginning in 1910, a policy began of taking Aboriginal children from their families (memorialized in the film, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*), especially racially mixed children. These "stolen generations" of children were raised in institutions and in European Australian foster families with the express goal of erasing their aboriginality (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation 2005). This policy continued until 1970 (Heiss 2006), with 45,000 to 55,000 aboriginal children being removed in order to "[wipe] out indigenous families, communities, and cultures" (Mellor and Bretherton 2003:46).

Today, Indigenous Australians make up 2 percent of Australia's population and own or

control about 16 percent of the land. Living conditions of Native Australians resemble those of the world's poorest countries. Life expectancy of indigenous men and women is 20 years shorter than that of their non-indigenous counterparts, and their babies are twice as likely to be of low birth weight. Additionally, indigenous Australians are 11 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-indigenous Australians, make approximately \$221 per week less than the mean weekly income of the rest of the population, and experience higher rates of unemployment and employment in low-income and low-level jobs. Aboriginal children experience a lower rate of participation in the education system, are under-represented in higher education, and 84 percent of children (as opposed to 45 percent of non-indigenous children) read below grade-level. Many indigenous persons, especially in remote areas, have inadequate housing, water, electricity, and sewerage, which contributes to the much higher hospitalization rates of Native Australians and a rate of communicable disease that is five to ten times higher than that of the general population (Commonwealth of Australia 2004b).

Reform and Reconciliation

Indigenous fortunes began to change in the 1960s, and although civil rights movements based on non-violent protests had been present earlier (Heiss 2006), the Reconciliation Movement began in earnest in the early 1990s. An important change in legislation relating to Indigenous Australians occurred in 1967, when a national referendum finally gave Australian citizenship to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Before the passing of the referendum, which gained the support of almost 90 percent of Australia's population, Native Australians were under the jurisdiction of state and local governments (Gordon 2001:24–25). Aboriginal affairs now came under federal legislature (Merlan 2005:482), but in spite of this, little changed for indigenous populations, as the federal government “responded as if the vote had been overwhelmingly ‘no’” (Gordon 2001:24–5). Three years later, in 1970, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam proposed a land reform scheme in which Native Australian populations would have the power to determine their own futures on their own lands and would not

be expected to give that land up for the so-called common good. Unfortunately, conservative European Australians opposed the idea and nothing became of it (McIntosh 2002:5). The next big change in indigenous fortunes did not occur until the beginning of the Reconciliation Movement in 1991. In this year, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was formed by the Australian government in order to research and propose ways to best reconcile the Native Australian and European Australian communities, and was given a ten-year lifespan (Commonwealth of Australia 2004a).

It was not until 1993 that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders were finally able to petition the government for title to their native lands (Commonwealth of Australia 2005). The landmark Mabo court case of 1992 was largely responsible for this. In response to a challenge of crown ownership of his homeland by Torres Strait Islander Eddie Mabo, the high court of Australia

establishe[d] that pre-existing land rights ('native title') survived the extension of British sovereignty over Australia and may still survive today, provided (a) that the relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group still maintain sufficient traditional ties to the land in question, and (b) that the title has not been extinguished as a consequence of valid governmental action (Nettheim 1994:8).

As a result, the Native Title Act of 1993 was written, overturning the traditional doctrine of *terra nullius* (Howitt 1998:2). This act gives First Australians the right to claim native title to their lands as long as a traditional connection to the land has been maintained and government acts have not removed it, through sale or grants of the land (Commonwealth of Australia 2005: *Australian National Native Title Tribunal*). This new right to the land was expanded in 1996 with the significant Wik court case, in which it was shown that native title could co-exist with pastoral leases granted by the crown. This court decision opened up 70 percent of Australia to native title claims (McIntosh 2000:20). It did not, however, prove to be as influential as hoped, as the government of Prime Minister John Howard severely limited the Wik decision by amendments passed

in 1998 (McIntosh 2000:133). The 1998 amendments so limited and subverted Native Australian title legislation that they were found by the United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to be a breach of Australia's international human rights obligations (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation 2005).

Criticism of Removal Policy and Howard's Response

The response by the Howard government to Reconciliation efforts betrays an unfortunate lack of commitment to the issue. The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families was created in May of 1995, and the Inquiry's final report, entitled *Bringing Them Home*, recommended to the Howard government that a national apology be made to individuals and families affected by the government's policy of removing children from their homes. The non-governmental organization, Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, states that

members of the Stolen Generations have indicated that recognition by the Government that the policies were wrong would help in addressing the trauma and suffering that they have experienced (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation 2005).

The Howard government responded, however, first by asserting that there never had been stolen generations and that any removal of Aboriginal children from their homes was done so "for good reason" (Gordon 2001:72). Later, John Howard flatly opposed the idea of apology, calling it a "black arm-band view of history" and expressing the view that people today should not be made to accept blame for events of the past (Gordon 2001:103-104; Merlan 2005:486). Another recommendation to the Howard government, stated in the final report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, was that legislation be put into place to unite Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the form of a treaty (Gordon 2001:132). The government did not accept the final report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and Prime Minister Howard refused to discuss the idea of a treaty, saying that

it would be divisive to do so (Altman 2004: 307; Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation 2005). Clearly, as Gordon states, "the question of formal apology and treaty will not be resolved until there is another prime minister" (Gordon 2001:131), and some would even argue that this issue cannot be resolved until there is a fundamental change in both the values of Australian government and in the Australian constitution (Behrendt 2006). Currently, the Howard government is pursuing a policy of "Practical Reconciliation," which is focused on improving economic disadvantages and poor living conditions without addressing the past or broader issues of social justice and Indigenous rights (Altman 2004:307).

The entire government's approach to indigenous affairs was changed as of March 16, 2005 with the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the government department under which Indigenous affairs previously fell. The new approach of "Practical Reconciliation", as documented in the August 2004 government document *New Arrangements in Indigenous Affairs*, places Aboriginal affairs under the supervision of mainstream federal and state programs, rather than under the direction of ATSIC, which "combin[ed] political representation and advocacy with program administration" (Altman 2004: 306). The government, according to this document, aims to attain

a whole of government approach which can inspire innovative national approaches to the delivery of services to Indigenous Australians, but which are responsive to the distinctive needs of particular communities (Commonwealth of Australia 2004c).

One of the good things about this new approach is that it includes the creation of a National Indigenous Council that will advise the Government of Australia on indigenous issues and strategies. However, this council is not a representative body and is comprised of Aboriginal chief executive officers (CEOs), business people, and sporting heroes, rather than elders or members of rural communities most disadvantaged by the continued delay of reconciliation (Commonwealth of Australia 2005). In addition,

there is concern that indigenous matters will get lost in mainstream government departments and that this will mean a loss of indigenous self-determination as non-indigenous heads of government departments make decisions for indigenous persons (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation 2005). As the Howard government advocates "Practical Reconciliation" and takes concrete steps toward improving the livelihoods of indigenous persons, reconciliation is not a top priority on the national agenda, and the ideas of reconciling history and past injustices are rejected outright.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the People's Movements

While the Howard government focuses on practical means to reconcile indigenous and non-indigenous Australians and on means to improve Native Australian livelihoods, a myriad of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots movements are bent on reconciling with the past. Ways are by improving relations between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, and addressing emotional wounds of indigenous people. Due to the Howard government's failure to address these issues seriously, a vast people's movement has emerged, promoting reconciliation and justice for indigenous persons. The deputy chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation states that reconciliation is "quintessentially a people's movement" and the council estimated in 2000 that there were 396 reconciliation groups and over 1500 local groups meeting to study reconciliation (Merlan 2005: 485, 487). One of these groups is ANTaR, Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation. An outpouring of support for ANTaR is demonstrated by the "Sea of Hands" project. This is a chance for non-indigenous Australians to say, "I put a hand up for reconciliation," or "I support reconciliation," by signing their names on hands in the color of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags. These hands are then set up in parks throughout the country, creating Aboriginal shapes and designs that can be seen from above (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation). Other groups promoting reconciliation include Ambassadors for Reconciliation, a group encouraging prominent Australians to

speak for reconciliation and related awareness campaigns (Merlan 2005:487).

Public support for reconciliation is also evident through the multiple marches for reconciliation that have taken place and during the Sydney 2002 Olympics, which have been labeled the "Reconciliation Games." In 2000, an estimated 250,000 people took part in a walk across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in support of the Reconciliation Movement while around one million people were involved in similar marches across Australia, and in December of that year, approximately 400,000 people marched in Melbourne (Gordon 2001:viii, 120; Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation 2005). Two years later, reconciliation became the central issue at both the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympics in Sydney. The beginning sequence of the opening ceremony featured hundreds of Aborigines dancing together—the largest number of groups ever to dance as one on the national or international stage. Later in the ceremony, Cathy Freeman lit the Olympic cauldron. A famous Aboriginal runner, coming from a family legacy of stolen children and police brutality, she later went on to win the gold medal in the 400-meter race and ran her victory lap carrying both the Aboriginal and Australian flags (Gordon 2001:23–24, 111–113). Popular endorsement of reconciliation showed in the audience as non-indigenous Australians waved Aboriginal flags (Gordon 2001:117). The closing ceremony of the games featured several Australian bands, including Midnight Oil, Savage Garden, and Yothu Yindi, singing about and advocating reconciliation and indigenous justice (Gordon 2001:118–199).

Support for the Reconciliation Movement is nowhere more emphatically shown than in the observance of National Sorry Day, May 26, which is unrecognized by the Australian government (McIntosh 2000:132). A National Sorry Day Committee was formed, and the first Sorry Day was held in 1998, with over half a million Australians signing Sorry Books to express their regret for past injustices and commemorate the *Bringing Them Home* report (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation 2005; Merlan 2005: 487). These outpourings of popular sentiment clearly show the Australian people's commitment to

reconciliation. The formation of grassroots movements and NGOs has allowed non-indigenous Australians to express their feelings of regret and support to the indigenous community. Unfortunately, however, these movements have done little to improve the lives of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, and like the response of the Howard government, address only one facet of the issue—emotional and historical reconciliation.

Indigenous Responses to Reconciliation

It is extremely important to understand Indigenous feelings about their own history, the pain that they have endured, and the current movement toward reconciliation if it is ever to be achieved. Recognition is one of the main things desired by Native Australians: "A lot of white people go about their business and they don't even realize that they are standing on people's freedom, that they are hurting people" (Mellor and Bretherton 2003:44)³. They would like "non-Aboriginal people to put themselves in the Aboriginal position, 'to be a blackfella for a day, and to feel the hurt and the emotion and the stuff we know goes on. We don't want them to love us or whatever, just to understand what it's like'" (Gordon 2001:11)³.

An Aboriginal interviewee of Mellor and Bretherton says, "You only have to read through there, and anything about Land Rights ... you know, 'they shouldn't get that'. The children have been taken away—'they shouldn't worry about that'. But they don't go back and know the effects of what happened" (Mellor and Bretherton 2003: 47). Another interviewee is upset that "The schools aren't ... teaching children about the true history and just, you know, our worth as a people. It's not there in the history books. I mean the curriculum doesn't say this is part of your learning or part of the teaching. They're electives. They can elect to know about us if they feel inclined" (Mellor and Bretherton 2003:52). Apology and acknowledgment of the past are essential to a reconciled relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons because, although white Australians do not feel an individual connection to the past, the Indigenous perspective of history "is experienced *as if* autobiographically" (Mellor and Bretherton 2003:52). Additionally, the way in which white Australians,

as colonizers, remember and record history is very different from the way in which the colonized (Indigenous Australians) remember it (Heiss 2006). As a result of these differences of perspective, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are still waiting for an apology for hurts that they feel they have experienced individually, but European Australians express the opinion that "It wasn't my fault, I wasn't there, I don't need to apologize for something I didn't do."

Native Australians are also upset by the government's lack of understanding and their inconsistency. One Aborigine expresses frustration at the government's policies and priorities in reconciliation, saying, "I mean the government today, they just don't understand that we, as indigenous people, really, all we want is to be recognized that we are true Australians! They should give us, you know, that dignity that we are the true, well they say, the true dinkie-die Aussies" (Mellor and Bretherton 2003:44–45). Indigenous Australians also feel that the government is inconsistent, making promises that they fail to keep (McIntosh 2000:30). Eighty-three year-old Peter Fischer of the Kuku Yalanji people sums it up well: "Reconciliation? We don't understand this thing. They keep changing it. We don't change it" (Gordon 2001:42).

Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have their own ideas of what reconciliation means and what they want it to achieve. Many Native Australians feel that what is most needed is a return to traditional values and morals (Gordon 2001:16, 47). Others feel that the emotional well-being of the people must be addressed first, or that a new economic deal is necessary, or that the best way to break the cycle of poverty and hopelessness in Aboriginal and Island communities is to empower and encourage the young (Gordon 2001:11, 33, 47). On a more practical note, indigenous Australians seek the ability to manage their own lands and to have the final say in development of their lands. Native Australians also desire a voice within national and international politics. Schooling for their children is important, so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children can grow up speaking their own languages (McIntosh 2000:23, 29, 49–50, 133).

Currently, there are Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders working to promote reconcilia-

tion and bring positive change to their communities. Kerry Arabena wants to see more focus on communities' current assets, Noel Pearson advocates economic self-sufficiency and traditional subsistence economies, and Delena Foster runs a women's center that services more than 1000 on Palm Island (Gordon 2001:32, 35-37, 45-49). The arts also provide a political voice for Australia's Indigenous peoples, offering both a platform for political issues and a source of employment. Over 50% of the revenue generated from the visual arts in Australia come from Indigenous art (Heiss 2006). There are also programs such as the Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre, a non-profit organization whose aim is to "focus on supporting leaders and potential leaders [within the Indigenous community] and providing opportunities for skill and knowledge development" (Aboriginal Leadership Centre 2005). It is true, however, that "the responsibilities that Aboriginal people must assume for their own communities are heavy and complicated ones that cannot and will not be mastered soon" (Austin-Broos 2004:310-311). In light of this, many more indigenous leaders are needed within communities (Aboriginal Leadership Centre 2005) in order to bring about a Reconciliation Movement from within that is not merely another scheme conceived and imposed by European Australians.

Can Reconciliation Be Reached?

If reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous communities is ever to be reached in Australia, there are several obstacles that must first be surmounted. First, there is no clear consensus as to what reconciliation actually means. As stated earlier, Indigenous persons find the idea confusing and inconsistent. Within the Indigenous community also, there is marked fragmentation and rivalry (Beckett 2004: 305). The government describes reconciliation as "a long-term process of social and economic realignment" (Commonwealth of Australia 2004a), while one non-governmental organization (NGO) states that it is "a process whereby Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, non-indigenous Australians, and the nation of Australia can forge a new relationship" (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation 2005).

Ian McIntosh, an anthropologist who is a reconciliation scholar, argues that there are at least seven definitions of reconciliation, any one to which a person or organization may be referring when the term is mentioned (McIntosh 2000:8). As it is, the government sees reconciliation as a practical goal focused on statistical results in Aboriginal communities, while non-governmental organizations promote an understanding of and respect for indigenous culture and history. Native Australians see reconciliation as a means by which they can reclaim self-determination, control over their lands, and, more importantly, their dignity and status as Australia's original people.

Unfortunately, these very different views have led to a second hurdle on the road to reconciliation. Each group pursues its own goals with little or no inter-group consultation. NGOs promote national movements to increase awareness of indigenous issues and to develop goodwill flowing from European Australian toward Native Australian communities, but they are less focused on concrete issues of indigenous livelihoods. The government, on the other hand, seeks to ameliorate conditions of poverty and economic dependence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities, but has made its negative position on the issues of a treaty and apology painfully clear. It is "skeptical about supporting social practices and cultural concepts divergent from, or in opposition to, the mainstream" (Merlan 2005:488). Indigenous communities themselves seek management of their lands and their lives, but are easily caught up in a cycle of hopelessness and powerlessness, as "maintaining local Aboriginal well-being requires local practice *and* national policy" (Austin-Broos 2004:311). In regards to inter-group consultation, NGOs do consult with indigenous groups (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation 2005) and the government presumably listens to the appointees on its new National Indigenous Council, but there is next to no dialogue between the government and NGOs. This situation, of course, leads to two very divergent and incomplete approaches to reconciliation—working for a purely emotional reconciliation, or working only for "statistical equality" (Altman 2004:307).

A third obstacle to reconciliation is the

government's unwillingness to really listen to indigenous Australians. Native Australians want the government to recognize that "White Australia has a black history" and to "cherish the oldest surviving culture in the world" (Mellor and Bretherton 2003:45; Heiss 2006). They are impatient with government-conceived plans that are culturally insensitive and leaders who put their own prosperity above the needs of indigenous people. Historically, "the accountability of both government and higher tiers of ATSIC to Aboriginal people at the 'grass roots'" has been lacking (MacDonald 2004:322). As Noel Pearson said, "Aboriginal affairs is littered with scenes of horses without saddles, of cows with bridles" (Gordon 2001:4). The government is unwilling to respond to the needs that Native Australians see as most pressing and implement appropriate solutions. Finally, there is a continuing and ongoing need to address the cycle of powerlessness and hopelessness exhibited in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities. As in all poverty-stricken communities, the people must be empowered, be convinced that they are worth something and that they can effect change in their communities. Leaders like Noel Pearson and Kerry Arabena are leading the way in this area, but more community leadership and initiatives, along with programs that promote self-sufficiency and pride in traditional cultures, are necessary. Also, non-indigenous Australians have to be at the forefront of combating their own beliefs, held for so many generations, in the inferiority and powerlessness of the culture of their indigenous counterparts.

Recommendations and the Role of Applied Anthropologists

These obstacles can be overcome; however, it will take a real commitment on behalf of all three groups. A clear definition of reconciliation, definable goals, and inter-group consultation will be imperative. A possible solution is the creation of an advisory council comprised of Aboriginal representatives from each major region in Australia, government representatives, and representatives from each of the major reconciliation NGOs. In addition to consultation among the three groups, this council must also be in close contact with individual Indigenous

communities at the local level, as "there is no such thing as pan-aboriginality" (Heiss 2006). The council would be an open forum for all involved in the reconciliation process—discussions would create a clear consensus of what reconciliation is, what its goals are, and how to achieve these goals. Once reconciliation and its goals are defined, the movement, and all involved, will be able to move forward in bringing about the changes in government policy and in the lives of indigenous individuals.

Applied anthropology has an important role to play in the area of reconciliation, both in facilitating inter-group dialogue, and in the current climate of practical reconciliation created by the Howard government. Applied Anthropologists can serve as advocates of Indigenous Australians, promoting Indigenous interests and understandings of reconciliation. They also, as outside observers, can hold each group accountable to the goals they have set and provide unbiased feedback on the progress of the movement. While anthropologists "continue to be viewed as unquestioning advocates of Indigenous positions," in the past they have also had a hand in influencing policy development and implementation (Finlayson 2004:316). Both of these roles should be continued under the new policy of practical reconciliation. Although practical reconciliation leaves less room for social justice and Indigenous rights, it does open doors to concerned anthropologists, as "Anthropology has an opportunity to contribute because bureaucracies are increasingly interested in evidence-based policy making to achieve objectives" (Finlayson 2004: 318). Thus, applied anthropologists can use their expertise both to influence government policy in this new era of practical reconciliation and to promote Indigenous interests, inter-group cooperation, and unity within the Reconciliation Movement.

Conclusion

As Australia moves into the twenty-first century, reconciliation should be a top national priority. Only by addressing both the social and practical aspects of Indigenous disadvantage can reconciliation hope to be achieved. Practical aspects cannot be divorced from more idealistic goals. The Reconciliation Movement cannot

move forward without addressing the emotional needs of Indigenous Australians, and that means apology and a treaty. Non-governmental organizations, Indigenous leaders and the Australian government need to come together to agree on a definition of reconciliation that incorporates both social and economic aspects, acting upon this definition to establish and work toward attainable goals. The government must lead the way in pursuing a well-rounded approach to reconciliation, based upon the desires of Native Australians, as nation-wide institutional and social change is impossible without government support. Above all other obstacles facing reconciliation as a movement then, looms the question: is the government willing to make reconciliation a top national priority or is it content to pursue its own goals of statistical equality, leaving Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the margins of society? ○

Notes

1. A version of this paper was prepared for the Spring 2005 course of Deward E. Walker, Jr., titled *Applied Cultural Anthropology* that the author took at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Cara Paddle presented an oral version on April 23, 2005, at the 25th Annual Meeting of the High Plains Society for Applied Anthropology, Estes Park, Colorado.

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3. Names of the speakers quoted here were not given in either Gordon (2001) or in Mellor and Bretherton (2003), referenced below.

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