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‘Walking Together’ for Reconciliation: From the Sydney Harbour Bridge Walk to the Myall Creek Massacre Commemorations

At the Australian ‘People's Walk for Reconciliation’ on 28 May 2000 (Figure 18), more than 300,000 non-Indigenous and Indigenous people crossed the Sydney Harbour Bridge together in support of Indigenous Australians and reconciliation.¹ For over six hours the tide of walkers, forming a ‘human sea of goodwill’, made their way across Sydney's most iconic bridge in what became known as the great ‘Bridge Walk’.² After almost a decade of a formal federal government reconciliation programme, beginning in 1991, the Bridge Walk was promoted by its organizers, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR), as a new beginning and a turning-point for the nation. The Council issued a general invitation through the media and in printed pamphlets, which read: ‘On Sunday May 28 [2000] you are invited to join thousands of Australians on an Historic People's Walk for Reconciliation across the Sydney Harbour Bridge.’³ The Council asked that people bring ‘bells, whistles, drums and colourful dress or other props to add to the fun’ and ‘a gold coin donation to Reconciliation Australia’.⁴ In this choreographed national mass walk the new body, ‘Reconciliation Australia’, would henceforth carry forward the work of reconciliation for the nation as a ‘people's movement’.⁵ The historicity of the occasion was also made clear to the walkers in the promotional material: the mass Bridge Walk would be a new start. It would inaugurate an affective and powerful national refounding, and participants were to be part of this crucial moment in the life of the nation.

There were people in wheelchairs, and children in prams; there were countless Aboriginal flags and banners. The vast number of people and the physical act of walking together provoked charged emotional responses. Evelyn Scott, chairwoman of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, described the day as ‘awesome’ and ‘emotional’.⁶ On
the day, Aboriginal chairwoman of the NSW State Reconciliation Committee, Linda Burney, said: ‘A week ago, I was despairing about living in this country. Today, I feel great!’ Suzanne McCourt, a non-Aboriginal participant on the Bridge Walk wrote afterwards:

Was it worth it, people have asked me? Unequivocally yes! ... long before I sighted the bridge, I was overwhelmed by the huge numbers participating ... the air of goodwill and camaraderie was palpable. ... when I saw the river of people pouring onto the bridge, the helicopters, media crews, banners and balloons, I knew I was part of an historic occasion. ... We walked in an icy breeze, Australians of every descent ... I felt, for the first time, the full breadth of our multi-cultural heritage. And I felt such pride that tears came to my eyes.

The symbolism of walking together over the monumental Sydney Harbour Bridge was striking. The bridge has powerful national associations; it is often used as a symbol of ‘Australia’. Bridges joining two pieces of land offer an easy metaphor for the joining of two cultures, suggesting a bridging between cultures, ‘bridging the gap’, bridging