

## **The road to “sorry”: Kevin Rudd’s apology to the Stolen Generations**

Up until the mid-1970s in Australia, thousands of children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent were removed from their families, often without explanation or parental consent, as mandated by state and federal law. Estimates suggested that somewhere between 10 and 33 percent of Aboriginal children had been taken from their homes between 1910 and 1970, most ending up in state or church-run institutions. Governments and administrators offered various justifications for the removals over the years, ranging from welfare concerns to an explicit desire to expunge the Aboriginal race and culture from Australia. The experiences of the Stolen Generations (as they came to be known) began to be more widely documented in the 1980s. Calls for an official apology gained momentum in the late 1990s – particularly after a national inquiry which recommended formal recognition of, and compensation for, survivors.

However, the term “Stolen Generations” was highly contentious in certain quarters. Some questioned the accuracy of witness declarations and/or argued that many of these children had actually benefitted from relocation. As the millennium approached, the then Prime Minister John Howard resisted growing pressure to “say sorry”, insisting that modern-day Australians should not be held to account for past mistakes and that an apology would do little to improve the plight of contemporary Aborigines. While he did eventually issue a “statement of regret”, the calls for “sorry” continued. They were eventually answered in February 2008 when, three months after winning Government, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made his historic formal apology to the Stolen Generations, as well as their families and descendants.

### **The “Aboriginal Problem”**

European settlement had a devastating effect on Australia’s indigenous population. As the colonists encroached ever further into tribal lands, the guns, germs and ploughs they brought with them saw many communities decimated or compelled to eke out a marginal existence on

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This case was written by Marinella Padula, Australia and New Zealand School of Government for Stephen Mills, Graduate School of Government, University of Sydney. It has been prepared as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation.

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stations<sup>1</sup> and in government reserves. As the decades passed, the numbers of “full-blood” Aboriginals dwindled considerably, but where black and white Australia intersected, the “half-caste” or mixed race population was burgeoning and of growing concern to officials.

In 1869, Victoria passed the *Aboriginal Protection Act* and established the Board for the Protection of Aborigines which regulated how and where Aboriginal people lived and worked – even who they married. It also permitted authorities to make orders with regard to the care and custody of their children. Although the Act also applied to mixed-race Aboriginals, further legislation was passed in 1886 which would see “half-caste” children expelled from stations and reserves and resettled or institutionalised. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, most states and territories enacted similar legislation. The *South Australian Aborigines Act* (1911) for example, made the Chief Protector legal guardian of every Aboriginal and “half-caste” child under 21 years old and had complete authority to determine where each child lived. The situation was similar in Queensland, New South Wales and the Northern Territory. The rationale for the legislation varied over time and between jurisdictions but some of the reasons underpinning child removal policies were believed to include:

- Concern that “half-caste” children, in particular, were being or would be abandoned, maltreated or neglected;
- A belief that Aboriginal people would be more easily controlled if separated from their families and communities at an early age;
- The potential to create and capitalise on a cheap labour force by providing Aboriginal children with basic vocational training;
- A belief that the Aboriginal race was in terminal decline, a decline which could be hastened by the assimilation of mixed race children in white society.

In relation to the latter point, Dr Cecil Cook, a Northern Territory Chief Protector, claimed that: “Generally by the fifth and invariably by the sixth generation, all native characteristics of the Australian aborigine are eradicated. The problem of our half-castes will quickly be eliminated by the complete disappearance of the black race, and the swift submergence of their progeny in the white. The Australian native is the most easily assimilated race on earth, physically and mentally.”<sup>2</sup> A.O Neville, Western Australia’s Chief Protector from 1910-1940, expressed similar ideas:

“Mr Neville [the Chief Protector of WA] holds the view that within one hundred years the pure black will be extinct. But the half-caste problem was increasing every year. Therefore their idea was to keep the pure blacks segregated and absorb the half-castes into the white population. Sixty years ago, he said, there were over 60,000 full-blooded natives in Western Australia. Today there are only 20,000. In time there would be none. Perhaps it would take one hundred years, perhaps longer, but the race was dying. The pure blooded Aboriginal was not a quick breeder. On the other hand the half-caste was. In Western Australia there were half-caste families of twenty and upwards. That showed the magnitude of the problem.”<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, Neville simultaneously believed that forced removal was also in the children’s best interests: “I say emphatically there are scores of children in the bush camps who should be taken away from whoever is looking after them and placed in a settlement ... If we are

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<sup>1</sup> Large sheep or cattle farms.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Bringing them home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families’ Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission 1997, p.118.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p.24.

going to fit and train such children for the future they cannot be left as they are ... I want to give these children a chance ... Unless those children are removed, social conditions in those places will go from bad to worse ... I want to teach them right from wrong. How are the children to fight against these conditions?"<sup>4</sup> Remarkd one local Aboriginal protector:

"The half-caste is intellectually above the Aborigine, and it is the duty of the State that they be given a chance to lead a better life than their mothers. I would not hesitate for one moment to separate any half-caste from its Aboriginal mother, no matter how frantic her momentary grief might be at the time. They soon forget their offspring."<sup>5</sup>

Children could be taken at any age by police or welfare authorities. Some children were forcibly removed without parental knowledge or consent. Others were removed via subterfuge or duress – wrongly told that a child in hospital had died, for example. Recorded reasons for removing Aboriginal children ranged from "neglect" and "poor living conditions" to "moral protection" and 'being Aboriginal'. In Victoria, one of the most commonly stated reasons for removing Aboriginal girls was so they could be sent into domestic service, but some were taken simply for being female on an Aboriginal reserve.<sup>6</sup> Girls were thought to be a particular target for removal to facilitate population control. Sometimes no reasons were proffered whatsoever. Under the *Aborigines Protection Amending Act (NSW) 1915*, for example, authorities could remove Aboriginal children without having to establish mistreatment or neglect beforehand. Most Aboriginal parents had no form of recourse.

Young, lighter-skinned children were often fostered out to white families, some having no idea of their Aboriginal heritage. The rest were raised in state institutions or church run missions where girls were trained to be domestic servants and boys were taught to be farmhands or labourers. Boys and girls were segregated and siblings were frequently separated. Children were often placed some distance from their home communities and were frequently prevented from having contact with family members. They were also prevented from speaking their local languages or engaging in Aboriginal cultural practices. When released from state care, many had considerable difficulties in tracking down lost relatives due to a lack of co-operation and/or adequate record-keeping. By the 1940s Aboriginal children were being removed under general child welfare legislation provisions. Although there was a greater onus on authorities to justify removal, there was also increased surveillance of indigenous families, especially those who would not conform to European lifestyles. Reduced funding and a growing sense that assimilation was failing saw the removal of Aboriginal children wind down during the 1960s but the practice continued in some areas well into the next decade.

At the same time, the quest for civil rights was gathering pace. The 1960s saw Aboriginal voting rights extend to all state and federal elections, while the 1967 referendum enabled the Commonwealth government to overrule discriminatory legislation, devise laws specifically to benefit Aboriginals, and count indigenous people in population statistics. As Aboriginals and most white Australians looked towards a more equitable future, members of the Stolen Generations and their families were still grappling with the not-so-distant past. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the forced removal of Aboriginal children was largely endorsed by the general community. This was despite a few notable critics and some early attempts to highlight the injustices endured by indigenous people (*Exhibit A*). By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Australia's now

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p.95.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p 91.

<sup>6</sup> 'A guide to the Stolen Generations' [www.creativespirits.info](http://www.creativespirits.info). Accessed May 2009.

predominantly urbanised population broadly supported equal rights for Aboriginals but the collective memory had faded when it came to the Stolen Generations. Few Australians (except those within advocacy or academic circles) were aware of forced removal policies or realised the extent of suffering caused. That was set to change.

In 1981, historian Peter Read published a landmark paper for the New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs entitled: *The Stolen Generations: The Removal of Aboriginal children in New South Wales 1883 to 1969*. It was one of the first attempts to document the damage inflicted upon removed children and brought the term “Stolen Generations” to public attention. Said Read: “When I wrote ‘The Stolen Generations’ in 1981, child separation was scarcely talked about. Non-Aborigines said it couldn’t have happened. The victims of separation thought it shameful to talk about their removal. They believed that maybe their parents hadn’t been able to care for them properly, or worse still, didn’t want them.”<sup>7</sup> Read also branded the child removal policies as genocide:

“Genocide does not simply mean the extermination of people by violence but may include any means at all. At the height of the policy of separating Aboriginal people from their parents the Aborigines Welfare Board meant to do just that. The 1921 Report of the Board stated that ‘the continuation of this policy of dissociating the children from camp life must eventually solve the Aboriginal problem’.”<sup>8</sup>

### “Bringing them home”

Aboriginal groups and historians continued to raise awareness of the Stolen Generations. As time went on, addressing current and past treatment of Australia’s indigenous people was increasingly on the government agenda. In 1991, the Keating Labor government established the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to start a formal process of reconciliation in time for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of federation in 2001. The early 1990s saw a number of other significant events including a Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody and the historic Mabo High Court decision which led to the *Native Title Act 1993*.<sup>9</sup> In 1995 the *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* was established and released its findings in a report entitled *Bringing them home* in 1997. The Inquiry heard from more than 500 witnesses and received hundreds of submissions from across Australia. Many harrowing stories of separation were told including one from an Aboriginal woman sent to a NSW girls’ home in the 1960s:

“Because [my mother] wasn’t educated, the white people were allowed to come in and do whatever they wanted to do – all she did was sign papers. Quite possibly, she didn’t even know what she signed ... The biggest hurt, I think, was having my mum chase the welfare car – I’ll always remember it – we were looking out the window and mum was running behind us and singing out for us. They locked us in the police cell up here and mum was walking up and down outside the police station and crying and screaming out for us. There was 10 of us.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Read, P. ‘The Stolen Generations: the removal of Aboriginal children in New South Wales 1883 to 1969’ NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 2006 (reprint) p.2.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p.3.

<sup>9</sup> Native Title recognises the rights and interests of indigenous peoples with regard to traditionally held lands and waters.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Bringing them home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families’ Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission 1997, p 40.

While many, though not all, stolen children lived in impoverished circumstances, conditions did not necessarily improve markedly for them after being taken from their communities. The Inquiry heard numerous accounts of abuse, neglect and deprivation. A significant proportion of stolen children had been subject to some form of physical or sexual abuse whilst in state care. Children fostered out to Caucasian parents didn't always fare better. Many also experienced considerable racial discrimination whilst growing up in white communities. Even children placed with loving families still reported a profound sense of dislocation and identity confusion. Years later, those able to trace relatives often discovered that they were too late to reunite with lost siblings and parents, compounding their grief. Re-establishing family ties to surviving relatives wasn't always easy either. Connection to the land and the community was of immense spiritual and social significance in Aboriginal culture – many stolen children had to face the reality that they could never go home.

The report found that the effects of forced separation were deep, pervasive and ongoing. Stolen children were more likely to have substance abuse problems, criminal records and general health issues than other indigenous people. They were also less likely to have stable living arrangements or relationships. In terms of education, income and employment levels, there was little difference between the groups, although stolen children were more likely to be urbanised and have greater access to welfare benefits.<sup>11</sup> The forced removal of indigenous children not only affected them and their families but also had a flow-on effect to subsequent generations. Some still suffered post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety disorders decades later which negatively impacted their parenting. Chaotic lives and unresolved psychological problems increased the probability that their own children would be placed in state care.

Although experts could not put an exact figure on the numbers of stolen children, estimates suggested that between one in ten and one in three indigenous children had been removed from their families between 1910 and 1970.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the inquiry concluded that every indigenous family had been affected to some extent by forced removal. In terms of assisting stolen children and their families, survivors and their supporters noted that nothing could undo the damage already done but many believed that official acknowledgement would help. Said one Victorian witness:

“The Government has to explain why it happened. What was the intention? I have to know why I was taken. I have to know why I was given the life I was given and why I'm scarred today. Why was my Mum meant to suffer? Why was I made to suffer with no Aboriginality and no identity, no culture? Why did they think that the life they gave me was better than the one my Mum would give me? And an apology is important because I've never been apologised to. My mother's never been apologised to, not once, and I would like to be apologised to.”<sup>13</sup>

Dr Jane McKendrick, a psychiatrist with the Victorian Aboriginal Mental Health Network also believed an apology was important but that governments needed to go further: “[Stolen Children] feel that this has been done to them and no-one cares because there has been no official recognition. And people say, well, nothing is going to compensate me for what I have lost and it can never be completely replaced. But I think some acknowledgement and some form of compensation would assist people to feel that their pain and their suffering has been recognised...I think it is a central part of the healing process because you have to have the

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<sup>11</sup> opcit, pp.12-14.

<sup>12</sup> ibid, p.31.

<sup>13</sup> ibid, p.241.

recognition and to have proper recognition you have to have some form of compensation, because a wrong has been done to these people.”<sup>14</sup> The Inquiry concurred, recommending that the Commonwealth and state governments make reparations (including compensation) to surviving children, their descendants and communities. However, the first step for “victims of gross violations of human rights” was to make an acknowledgment and apology.<sup>15</sup>

It also recommended that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), in consultation with the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, arrange for an annual national “Sorry Day” to commemorate the history of forcible removals and its effects. But before the report had even been released, the reconciliation journey was set to take a different turn, with the election of Prime Minister John Howard in 1996.

### **Howard under pressure**

Just as the Inquiry report was being released in 1997, Howard gave a speech to the Australian Reconciliation Convention, attended by more than 1800 people. Earlier, the Chairman of the Australian Reconciliation Council (ARC) Patrick Dodson also addressed the convention:

“The Stolen Generation report challenges this nation’s capacity to face the truth of its past and deal with it in an open and compassionate way. We always knew that Aboriginal children were taken from their families, many in the most cruel and heartless way, whatever the motivations and intentions of those who designed and carried out the policies. This report provides the detailed evidence of what happened. When that report becomes public, it should be discussed so that the nation can understand what happened, not as an abstract piece of knowledge, but so that people might comprehend the hurt and pain of many Aboriginal people today. Are Indigenous people asking for too much? This is not only a matter of an apology but an acceptance of our right to be Indigenous Australians. Reconciliation requires responsibility, yet governments appear to fear this because it might make them liable for compensation. Yet governments pay compensation to many people affected by their policies and actions. When the nation’s leaders rightly accepted responsibility and took a stand on the guns issue, gun owners were compensated from our taxes. We can compensate for forcing people to hand in their guns; apparently we can’t for taking away their kids.”<sup>16</sup>

Dr Alex Boraine, Vice Chairperson of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was a guest of the Convention and remarked: “Since being in your country, I have learnt many things, but one of the most distressing for me is the recounting of a stolen generation. It echoes so much of what happened in my own country. It seems to me from the outside, that either there should be an absolute sacred silence, because you can’t find the words, or a deep expression of sorrow and apology. Instead what I have heard in the last week, is in many instances an attempt to discredit the very report, to insult those who authored it, a sense of denial, of justification, of explanation - and it seems that this approach is obscene. In the end, perhaps it’s all about heart, all about soul. I cannot understand why in the face of this kind of an account, which represents untold suffering, not only in the past, but visiting the children of the children of the children today, how people can discuss technicalities and offer explanations instead of, as I say, either shutting up or saying sorry.”<sup>17</sup> He added: “To be sorry

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p.242.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, pp.246-247.

<sup>16</sup> Dodson, P. ‘Opening ceremony speech: Reconciliation in the Community’ Australian Reconciliation Convention, Melbourne, May 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Boraine, A. ‘Opening ceremony speech’ Australian Reconciliation Convention, Melbourne, May 1997.

can unlock goodwill and trust which you so desperately need. It's the only human compassionate response to a great evil, an awful hurt, for healing truth telling is the first step. As my mother would say; 'tell the truth and shame the devil'.”<sup>18</sup>

Boraine was referring to the controversy the Inquiry report had caused amongst a number of conservative commentators and historians who denied the need for an apology. Amongst those who shared their views was the Prime Minister: “I had a very strong view about the formal apology,” recalled Howard, “I was always against it and I retain that view because I don't think the current generation can accept responsibility for the deeds of earlier generations.”<sup>19</sup> In his speech to the assembled crowd at the reconciliation convention he said:

“Personally, I feel deep sorrow for those of my fellow Australians who suffered injustices under the practices of past generations towards indigenous people. Equally, I am sorry for the hurt and trauma many people here today may continue to feel as a consequence of those practices. In facing the realities of the past, however, we must not join those who would portray Australia's history since 1788 as little more than a disgraceful record of imperialism, exploitation and racism. Such a portrayal is a gross distortion and deliberately neglects the overall story of great Australian achievement that is there in our history to be told, and such an approach will be repudiated by the overwhelming majority of Australians who are proud of what this country has achieved although inevitably acknowledging the blemishes in its past history. Australians of this generation should not be required to accept guilt and blame for past actions and policies over which they had no control.”<sup>20</sup>

Though initially receptive, the audience response soon soured. Indigenous audience members stood and turned their backs on the Prime Minister, who was becoming visibly flustered and increasingly angry as he raised his voice and thumped the lectern. Mick Dodson, Social Justice Commissioner of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission criticised Howard's “personal sorry”, claiming that it was “simply not enough” and that, as leader of this nation, he must speak for this nation.<sup>21</sup> Noel Pearson, another indigenous leader and legal advisor to ATSIC was similarly unimpressed: “...I am not so concerned with words, you can come down to my office to pay me by the hour if you are concerned about words. I am more concerned about the spirit of the undertakings... the expression of sorrow at the taking of children by the Prime Minister yesterday was another example of the words possible being right, but I don't think anyone is particularly persuaded by the spirit moving those words.”<sup>22</sup> He continued:

“..I think we have made a whole heap of progress, and it is just tragic that the present government can't seem to come to terms with this concept of guilt. It is a pretty simple thing to say there are truths about the past, we can feel some pride as we urge young people to feel pride about Kokoda and Gallipoli and the other side of that coin is perhaps some regret and shame about some aspects of our past. Just this kind of inability on the part of the nation's present leadership to come to terms with that simple notion that as a community we can regret some things about our history. Unless we can get a change in the thinking of the man at the helm, unfortunately we will regress a bit in relation to dealing with our history.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> ‘The Howard Years: Episode Two’ ABC Television, Broadcast: November 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Howard, J. ‘Opening ceremony speech’ Australian Reconciliation Convention, Melbourne, May 1997.

<sup>21</sup> Cerexhe, C. ‘Historic Reconciliation Convention’ *Indigenous Law Bulletin*, Vol.60, 1997.

<sup>22</sup> Pearson, N. ‘A National Document of Reconciliation’ Australian Reconciliation Convention, Melbourne, May 1997.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

During 1997, all state and territory parliaments, with the exception of the Northern Territory<sup>24</sup>, proffered formal apologies to the Stolen Generations. By contrast, the Commonwealth was not forthcoming. Patrick Dodson resigned from the Australian Reconciliation Council in late 1997, feeling that he was no longer able to work with the Government. In May 1998, the inaugural Sorry Day was held which incorporated events around the nation. Hundreds and thousands of people signed petitions or submitted apologies. The approaching Sydney Olympics in 2000 focussed additional attention on the apology issue with boycotts and protests mooted. On 26<sup>th</sup> of August 1999, John Howard presented a Motion of Reconciliation to parliament expressing “deep and sincere regret that indigenous Australians suffered injustices under the practices of past generations, and for the hurt and trauma that many indigenous people continue to feel as a consequence of those practices.”(*Exhibit B*). However, the “statement of regret”, as it came to be known, did not mute the calls for an apology. The statement was also undermined somewhat when, in 2000, Aboriginal Affairs Minister Senator John Herron submitted a contentious report to parliament which questioned the existence of the stolen generations.

## Debating the past

Herron’s report stated: “The government is concerned that there is no reliable basis for what appears to be a generally accepted conclusion as to the supposed dimensions of the ‘stolen generation’....At most, it might be inferred that up to 10% of children were separated for a variety of reasons, both protective and otherwise, some forcibly and some not. This does not constitute a ‘generation’ of ‘stolen’ children. The phrase ‘stolen generation’ is rhetorical.”<sup>25</sup> Critics contended that most figures came from surveys of Aboriginal people rather than official sources which suggested that the practice was not systematic or anywhere near as widespread as suggested. In addition, stolen generation evidence was frequently anecdotal and often did not correspond with the archival information that did exist.

Critics of the apology push also questioned the veracity of stolen children accounts given that the events in question had occurred decades earlier and involved situations where key participants were long deceased. They pointed out that, for example, witnesses at the National Inquiry were not cross-examined nor required to identify themselves or produce any evidence to support their testimony. Moreover, stolen children were often very young when taken and some suggested that their memories may well have been distorted by distress or a limited understanding of the circumstances. Others were more cynical, contending that some Aboriginal people were claiming to be “stolen” to suit their political agendas, excuse their own personal failings and/or access potential compensation payouts. A government budget strategy document suggested that compensation costs could total hundreds of millions of dollars; according to Senator Herron’s estimates, compensation payouts could exceed \$3.9 billion<sup>26</sup> if government liability was established – an issue of great concern to Howard.

High-profile *Herald-Sun* columnist Andrew Bolt, along with likeminded commentators, argued that the vast majority of removed Aboriginal children had not been stolen but rescued. Many indigenous children lived in poverty and squalor, therefore removing them was a legitimate and genuine (if sometimes unsuccessful) attempt to help them. Critics asserted that many parents

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<sup>24</sup> The NT parliament issued an apology in 2001.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Stolen Generations Timeline’ [www.creativespirits.info](http://www.creativespirits.info). Accessed May 2009.

<sup>26</sup> ‘No stolen generation: Australian Government’ 7.30 Report, ABC TV, Broadcast: 3 April 2000.



had voluntarily relinquished their children in the hope of better prospects. The rest were either so mired in their problems or so indifferent to their children's wellbeing that forced removal was the only humane response. This was not easy for children to accept and for some, maintaining the belief that they were "stolen" was preferable. That some children's lives did not improve substantially post-removal was unfortunate but the policies and practices were overall well intentioned, even if poorly executed. Moreover, the approach was consistent with welfare policies applied to white Australians.

Bolt was highly critical of historians such as Robert Manne who had written extensively on the stolen generations. He claimed that Manne and his cohorts were wilfully misrepresenting information to re-position Australian history as little more than a catalogue of abuses against its indigenous population – dubbed the "black armband" view of history. The opposing position (labelled the "white blindfold" view by detractors) instead held that transgressions against Aboriginal people were largely sporadic aberrations. Conservative pundits worried that educational institutions in particular were promoting the former view and eroding national pride by glossing over Australia's many achievements. Furthermore, Bolt claimed that perpetuating the stolen generations "myth" was not only misleading but was actually killing contemporary Aboriginal children because authorities were too reluctant to remove them from abusive homes fearing charges of racial discrimination.<sup>27</sup>

The stolen generation debate was part of the broader "history wars" which saw conservative historians and commentators clash with left-wing intellectuals and academics over many aspects of Australia's past. But not all apology opponents considered the "stolen generation" to be an invention. There were those who accepted that at least some children had been removed unfairly but believed that judging previous generations by modern standards was inappropriate and unproductive. Doing so failed to recognise the climate of the times, particularly in colonial-era Australia. Apology critics also rejected the notion that policies of assimilation were tantamount to genocide.

## **Practical reconciliation**

Howard too rejected the "black armband" view of Australian history. For him, dealing with the very pressing needs of contemporary Aborigines was more important than "symbolic" gestures like a formal apology. Howard's close colleagues observed that the prime minister was deeply affected by the plight of indigenous people and dismayed by the lack of progress, especially in remote communities. Problems such as substance abuse and domestic violence were endemic and had been for quite some time. Howard sought to remedy those issues by focusing on "practical reconciliation" such as developing government programs which would specifically address deficits in education, housing, employment and health. It would also emphasise personal responsibility rather than indigenous rights. Howard considered that an apology could actually frustrate reconciliation efforts by setting off an avalanche of compensation claims and widening the rift between black and white Australia. He also expressed concern that issuing a formal apology would make the broader community feel the work of reconciliation was done when there still much more to do.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bolt, A. 'Stolen generations: My Melbourne Writers' Festival speech' *Herald-Sun*, 5 September 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Howard, J. 'A new reconciliation' speech to The Sydney Institute, *The Sydney Papers*, Spring 2007, p.107.

But not everyone in government shared Howard's views on the apology. Federal Treasurer Peter Costello recalled lobbying the Prime Minister to permit Cabinet members to participate in the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's Corroboree 2000 Bridge Walk. Costello was denied the opportunity but 250,000 other participants walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in support of indigenous concerns. "I think reconciliation was just an issue that dogged us throughout the whole Government," Costello later reflected, "...we were bogged down... in this linguistic argument, you know. You could be sorry for something but you don't say sorry for it. And really what people were hearing when they heard all that was you're not willing to reach out; you're not willing to cross the divide."<sup>29</sup>

Later that same year Australian band Midnight Oil performed at the closing ceremony of the Olympic Games wearing outfits emblazoned with the word "sorry". In 2001, Pope John Paul II issued a formal apology on behalf of the Vatican to the affected Aboriginal families for the actions of any and all Catholic authorities or organisations in connection with the Stolen Generations. And in 2002, Valerie Linow became the first member of the Stolen Generation to be awarded compensation (\$35,000) from the Victims Compensation Tribunal in NSW. That year the film *Rabbit Proof Fence*, which depicted the story of three Aboriginal girls running from authorities, scooped the Australian Film Institute Awards and won overseas accolades. During the years to follow, indigenous groups continued to press for a formal apology. In 2006, the Tasmanian Government launched a \$5 million compensation fund. And a year later in 2007, Stolen Generation member Bruce Trevorrow was awarded a payout of \$525,000 by the South Australian Supreme Court for his wrongful removal – the first successful case of its kind.<sup>30</sup>

Also in 2007, the final year of the Howard Government, indigenous issues were again high on the national agenda, this time the result of the *Little Children are Sacred* report which highlighted epidemic levels of child sexual abuse in remote Northern Territory communities. The report prompted the government to launch the Northern Territory Intervention which included measures such as compulsory health checks and income sequestration. For critics, it was uncomfortably reminiscent of past government interventions. Reflecting on reconciliation in a speech to The Sydney Institute in October 2007, just before calling the election, Howard said that:

"I'm the first to admit that this whole area is one I have struggled with during the entire time that I have been Prime Minister. My instinct has been to try and improve the conditions for Indigenous people within the framework of a united nation and unified Australian citizenship. I have never felt comfortable with the dominant paradigm for Indigenous policy – one based on the shame and guilt of non-Indigenous Australians, on a repudiation of the Australia I grew up in, on a rights agenda that led ultimately and inexorably towards welfare dependency and on a philosophy of separateness rather than shared destiny. This nation spent (and wasted) a lot of time in the last 30 years toying with the idea of a treaty implying that in some way we are dealing with two separate nations. To me, this goal was always fundamentally flawed and something I could never support. We are not a federation of tribes. We are one great tribe; one Australia. I still believe that a collective national apology for past injustice fails to provide the necessary basis to move forward. Just as the responsibility agenda is gaining ground it would, I believe, only reinforce a culture of victimhood and take us backwards."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> 'The Howard Years: Episode Two' ABC Television, Broadcast: November 2008.

<sup>30</sup> DeBelle, P. 'Stolen Generation payout' *The Age*, 2 August 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Howard, J. 'A new reconciliation' speech to The Sydney Institute, *The Sydney Papers*, Spring 2007, p.107.

## Rudd's apology

In November 2007, as the Northern Territory Intervention was being implemented, the Labor Party led by Kevin Rudd won the federal election with a platform which included an apology to the Stolen Generations. And on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 2008, the first day of the new parliament, the speech was delivered (*Exhibit C*) after a “Welcome to Country” ceremony – the first of its kind at Parliament house – which acknowledged the traditional custodians of Canberra. In it, he said:

“To the Stolen Generations, I say the following: as Prime Minister of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the Government of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the Parliament of Australia, I am sorry. And I offer you this apology without qualification. We apologise for the hurt, the pain and suffering we, the parliament, have caused you by the laws that previous parliaments have enacted. We apologise for the indignity, the degradation and the humiliation these laws embodied. We offer this apology to the mothers, the fathers, the brothers, the sisters, the families and the communities whose lives were ripped apart by the actions of successive governments under successive parliaments.”

The speech was broadcast live and watched by thousands of people at events across the country. Members of the stolen generations witnessed the speech inside Parliament House and on the lawns outside. Drafted in consultation with indigenous representatives, the apology was met with a standing ovation and bipartisan support. Television cameras captured emotional scenes as stolen children and their supporters comforted one another. Overall, the reaction from Aboriginal groups was positive, Patrick Dodson calling it a “seminal moment in the nation’s history” and a statement that exceeded his expectations.<sup>32</sup> Though welcomed, some members of the Stolen Generations felt that the apology didn’t adequately address the genocidal aspects of the policies or worried that claims might be jeopardised. On the matter of compensation, Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard was emphatic that it was not part of the package. Speaking on television after the apology, she said:

“The Government has made its position perfectly clear here, and that is that there will be no compensation fund. We do want to move forward with Indigenous Australia, and we are prepared to invest, to increasingly invest in link-up services for the Stolen Generation, to put people back in contact with their families, if that’s possible. Then of course we want to invest in a better future in education, in health, in the things that are going to close the life expectancy gap and the educational attainment gap for Indigenous Australians. The Prime Minister made it very clear in the saying of sorry that that was the Government’s focus, and our job now is to get on and deliver those policies...The Government did obtain legal advice [on compensation] and what we know of course is that State parliaments around the country have apologised without it making a difference to the legal circumstances in relation to compensation claims.”<sup>33</sup>

In the end, few compensation claims were launched and those that were, were not affected by the apology. Rudd’s address was followed by an apology from Opposition Leader Dr Brendan Nelson which included the following passage:

“Our responsibility, every one of us, is to understand what happened here, why it happened, the impact it had not only on those who were removed, but also those who did the removing

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<sup>32</sup> Rintoul, S. ‘Praise for Rudd on choice of wording’ *The Australian*, 13 February 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Interview: *Insiders* ABC TV, Broadcast 17 February 2008

and supported it. Our generation does not own these actions, nor should it feel guilt for what was done in many, but not all cases, with the best of intentions. But in saying we are sorry - and deeply so - we remind ourselves that each generation lives in ignorance of the long term consequences of its decisions and actions. Even when motivated by inherent humanity and decency to reach out to the dispossessed in extreme adversity, our actions can have unintended outcomes. As such, many decent Australians are hurt by accusations of theft in relation to their good intentions.”

The crowd reaction was markedly different but familiar to those who had witnessed Howard’s speech at the Reconciliation Convention in 1997. Some shouted “shame”, others turned their back on him, including people watching the speech in Melbourne’s Federation Square. Nelson was also prompted to make another apology after his speech for using the story of Faye Lyman, a Stolen Generations member, without her consent.<sup>34</sup>

## Epilogue

On the first anniversary of the apology, the Commonwealth announced plans to establish the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation in order to fund healing work, educate communities and social workers and evaluate healing programs with a special focus on the Stolen Generations. But there was still a great deal of work ahead. In 2009, two years after the Northern Territory Intervention was rolled out, the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report showed that conditions for Aboriginals were either not improving or actually worsening in significant areas such education and imprisonment, Rudd describing the situation as “unacceptable” and requiring “decisive action”.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Cowan, J. ‘Nelson apologises over sorry speech’ ABC News, [www.abc.net.au](http://www.abc.net.au) 16 February 2008, Accessed June 2009.

<sup>35</sup> AAP ‘Declining Aboriginal conditions 'unacceptable': Rudd’ *The Age*, 2 July 2009.

## Exhibit A: Day of Mourning Newspaper Advertisement 1938

**AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES CONFERENCE**  
**Sesqui-Centenary**

**DAY OF MOURNING & PROTEST**

to be held in

**THE AUSTRALIAN HALL, SYDNEY**  
(No. 148 Elizabeth Street)

on

**WEDNESDAY, 26th JANUARY, 1938**  
(*Australia Day*)

from

10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

THE FOLLOWING RESOLUTION WILL BE MOVED:

"WE, representing THE ABORIGINES OF AUSTRALIA, assembled in Conference at the Australian Hall, Sydney, on the 26th day of January, 1938, this being the 150th Anniversary of the whitemen's seizure of our country, HEREBY MAKE PROTEST against the callous treatment of our people by the whitemen during the past 150 years, AND WE APPEAL to the Australian Nation of today to make new laws for the education and care of Aborigines, and we ask for a new policy which will raise our people to FULL CITIZEN STATUS and EQUALITY WITHIN THE COMMUNITY."

*Aborigines and Persons of Aboriginal Blood only are invited to attend. Please come if you can!*

Signed for and on behalf of

**THE ABORIGINES PROGRESSIVE ASSOCIATION**

J. T. Patten, President.  
W. Ferguson, Organising Secretary

Address: c/o Box 1924 KK  
General Post Office, Sydney

## Exhibit B: Motion of Reconciliation (excerpt)

Mr HOWARD: I move that this House:

- (a) reaffirms its wholehearted commitment to the cause of reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians as an important national priority for Australians;
- (b) recognising the achievements of the Australian nation, commits to work together to strengthen the bonds that unite us, to respect and appreciate our differences and to build a fair and prosperous future in which we can all share;
- (c) reaffirms the central importance of practical measures leading to practical results that address the profound economic and social disadvantage which continues to be experienced by many indigenous Australians;
- (d) recognises the importance of understanding the shared history of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians and the need to acknowledge openly the wrongs and injustices of Australia's past;
- (e) acknowledges that the mistreatment of many indigenous Australians over a significant period represents the most blemished chapter in our international history;
- (f) expresses its deep and sincere regret that indigenous Australians suffered injustices under the practices of past generations, and for the hurt and trauma that many indigenous people continue to feel as a consequence of those practices; and
- (g) believes that we, having achieved so much as a nation, can now move forward together for the benefit of all Australians.

It will be no secret to the House or, indeed, to many Australians that over the past few days—indeed, over the past few weeks—I and a number of my colleagues and others have been giving thought to the issues that are the subject of this motion. It is a historic resolution. It is a very important resolution because it goes to the issues of the spirit and the heart and the character of our country in a way that many of the issues we debate in this chamber, important though they are, do not.

As all members know, we are approaching that momentous event in Australia's history when we will celebrate 100 years of Federation—100 years of the Australian nation. That will be an occasion when all of us will want quite legitimately to focus on what this nation has achieved. We will quite legitimately in the year 2001 celebrate with pride in an unqualified way the immensity and the scale of the Australian achievement. And that has been a great achievement. It has been an achievement that has delivered to our country a reputation for achievement, for tolerance, for understanding, for compassion, for independence of spirit, and an ability to work together to overcome adversity. I would imagine that, whatever our views are on political issues, whatever our ethnic or national origin might be, whether we practise this or that religion, or whether we profess no religion at all, we would want in the year 2001 to focus overwhelmingly on those things that unite us as Australians and not those things that divide or set us apart as Australians.

I have come to the view that an important element of that celebration of the unity of the Australian nation is undoubtedly achieving an effective and lasting reconciliation between indigenous Australians and other members of the Australian community. I know that is a desire that everybody in this chamber shares because, in reality, there is an extent to which the sense of the unity of the Australian nation is qualified and diminished so far as indigenous Australians are concerned unless, in their hearts and in their understanding, there is a proper basis for achievement of reconciliation.

It is that context and that background, the desire on the part of the government to make the maximum contribution towards achieving the conditions of reconciliation, which will enable all of us—whatever our views are on constitutional forms, whatever our views are on taxation, whatever our views are on foreign policy, health policy or all the other things that we debate so passionately in this chamber—to pause in the year 2001 and reflect unqualifiedly and without any sense that one sector is diminished or

restrained because of unfinished business and to celebrate the scale and the immensity of the Australian achievement.

We need to do that as a people. We want to do that as a people. I want all of the Australian people to feel an equal measure of pride and satisfaction in the Australian achievement. We in this chamber must recognise that that cannot be done in quite that unqualified way by indigenous Australians without a sense of reconciliation. In approaching this motion today, people are entitled to reflect on what I have said in the past. People are entitled to say that I said this on one occasion. Some will criticise me. Some will say that I have changed my position on some aspects of this. I do not mind if they do. I do not think changing your position on something really matters, unless you are changing to a less worthy position. I have sought to bring to an understanding and a comprehension of this issue what I can to make, as Prime Minister, a practical contribution and a genuine contribution to the cause of reconciliation.

When my government was returned in the election last October, I spoke on election night and said I wanted to commit the government to achieving reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. I believe that the motion that I am putting to the House today, if carried, will make a very significant contribution towards that cause. I do not pretend that this is a perfect motion. I know there will be some in this House who would want it expressed in a different way. There will be some who will say it does not go far enough, and there will be others who will say that perhaps it goes too far.

But it is an honest and sincere attempt on the part of the government to make a genuine contribution to the reconciliation process and to genuinely empathise with the sense of alienation that many indigenous Australians continue to feel within our society. It is also a recognition of the magnanimous way in which many leaders of the indigenous community have sought to approach this issue over the last couple of years. Of course I have to some degree moved my position, and I do not deny that, but so have significant figures in the indigenous community. I respect them for that, and we should respect them for that. That they have done it is a measure of their commitment to the essential unity of the Australian nation. It would be a strange government and a strange Prime Minister who did not reciprocate that act of generosity on their part.

The Australian achievement, as I said, is of a scale that should make all of us proud. This country has achieved enormous things. This country has won itself great repute and great credit around the world. Just as we as a nation are entitled to draw pride from the triumphs and the achievements of Australians, so we must in a completely unvarnished fashion confront both dimensions of our national story. We must not only confront and embrace the dimensions which give us pleasure and pride and a sense of achievement and a sense of satisfaction but also confront the uglier parts of our national history.

Like all nations' histories, ours is a history that has not been without blemish. Without any doubt, the greatest blemish and stain on the Australian national story is our treatment of the indigenous people. I do not think that can be seriously argued against, and that is not the first time I have said that, and it will not be the last. I am not the first Australian political leader or the first Australian Prime Minister to have said that, and I will not be the last.

It is important in this motion that we recognise, confront and acknowledge that and in the process express, as the motion does, that the mistreatment of many indigenous Australians over a significant period represents the most blemished chapter in our international history; Then we go on in this motion to express deep and sincere regret that indigenous Australians suffered injustices under the practices of past generations, and for the hurt and trauma that many indigenous people continue to feel as a consequence of those practices. We can debate the detail of this or that practice. We can argue about the detail of particular reports and particular propositions, but the purpose of this motion is to generically express in relation to a number of issues the regret that the people of Australia feel for those past practices and the continuing consequences of them.

I have frequently said, and I will say it again today, that present generations of Australians cannot be held accountable, and we should not seek to hold them accountable, for the errors and misdeeds of earlier generations. Nor should we ever forget that many people who were involved in some of the practices which caused hurt and trauma felt at the time that those practices were properly based. To apply retrospectively the standards of today in relation to their behaviour does some of those people who were sincere an immense injustice, and I think that is understood by most people within the Australian community.

But that does not mean that we ought not to address the issue. That does not mean that we ought not to, on reflection and in generosity and with good heart, express a regret, and a sincere regret, for what has occurred in the past. Part of the process of bringing about an effective reconciliation, and part of the process through that effective reconciliation of making a contribution to the unity of the Australian people, is to do what this motion seeks to do.

Mr Speaker, all of us know as practising politicians that we argue, debate and differ on issues and we feel passionately and strongly about them. I know that those who sit opposite will have a different emphasis and a different view in relation to some aspects of this motion—and that is their right. The opposition are perfectly entitled in the context of this debate to criticise me, to say that this does not go far enough, to say that I should have done it a couple of years ago. They can say all of that, and I frankly do not mind and I do not think the Australian people will take much notice of it, either. I think what the Australian people will do is that they would make an assessment of the sincerity of the Australian government, they would recognise that this government has been able to meet the aspirations of many people within the Australian community and they will recognise that this motion more effectively expresses what they want to say about this issue than any alternative.

The Australian people do not want to embroil themselves in an exercise of shame and guilt. The Australian people know that mistakes were made in the past. The Australian people know that injustices occurred. The Australian people know that wrongs were committed. But for the overwhelming majority of the current generations of Australians, there was no personal involvement of them or of their parents. To say to them that they are personally responsible and that they should feel a sense of shame about those events is to visit upon them an unreasonable penalty and an injustice, and that is why this motion does not seek to do that. Indeed, I am not alone in saying that; it has been recognised by a number of representatives of other parties who have spoken to this issue.

I hope that this motion is, in the end, carried unanimously by this House and also by the Senate. I hope, if that occurs, that it will be seen by the Australian community as a genuine, generous and sincere attempt to recognise past errors, to make a contribution to the cause of reconciliation and to bring about a better understanding. Importantly, I hope that it lays the foundation for a future focus on those things that will really affect the quality of life of the indigenous people of Australia—the quality of their health care services, the quality of their educational services, the quality of their employment opportunities and the extent to which they are to participate fully in all other aspects of Australian life.

Perhaps, having been able to find the right words to express the collective view of the Australian people on this issue rather than a narrow view of the Australian people on this issue—having done that—we can then move forward more effectively as a community to achieve those objectives...

...by passing this motion I think we all understand that we have a watershed in the process towards reconciliation. By passing this motion we give reconciliation its best chance. By passing this motion we display a generosity, an understanding and a capacity to compromise between two genuinely held but different views. In passing this motion we express to the Australian people once again that those things that bind us together are stronger and more important than those things that might push us apart. In passing this motion we say to the indigenous people of our community that we want you in every way to be totally part of our community. We want to understand you. We want to care for you



where appropriate. We want you to be in every way part of the Australian achievement and part of the Australian story. I think we owe that to them as the first people of this nation. I think all the Australian people will support the passage of this motion.

## **Exhibit C: Kevin Rudd's Apology to the Stolen Generations**

—I move:

That today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

We reflect on their past mistreatment.

We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations—this blemished chapter in our nation's history.

The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia's history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.

We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians.

We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country.

For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.

To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry.

And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.

We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation.

For the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written.

We today take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians.

A future where this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again. A future where we harness the determination of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity.

A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed.

A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility.

A future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country, Australia.

There comes a time in the history of nations when their peoples must become fully reconciled to their past if they are to go forward with confidence to embrace their future. Our nation, Australia, has

reached such a time. And that is why the parliament is today here assembled: to deal with this unfinished business of the nation, to remove a great stain from the nation's soul and, in a true spirit of reconciliation, to open a new chapter in the history of this great land, Australia.

Last year I made a commitment to the Australian people that if we formed the next government of the Commonwealth we would in parliament say sorry to the Stolen Generations. Today I honour that commitment. I said we would do so early in the life of the new parliament. Again, today I honour that commitment by doing so at the commencement of this the 42nd parliament of the Commonwealth. Because the time has come, well and truly come, for all peoples of our great country, for all citizens of our great Commonwealth, for all Australians—those who are Indigenous and those who are not—to come together to reconcile and together build a new future for our nation.

Some have asked, 'Why apologise?' Let me begin to answer by telling the parliament just a little of one person's story—an elegant, eloquent and wonderful woman in her 80s, full of life, full of funny stories, despite what has happened in her life's journey. A woman who has travelled a long way to be with us today, a member of the Stolen Generation who shared some of her story with me when I called around to see her just a few days ago. Nungala Fejo, as she prefers to be called, was born in the late 1920s. She remembers her earliest childhood days living with her family and her community in a bush camp just outside Tennant Creek. She remembers the love and the warmth and the kinship of those days long ago, including traditional dancing around the camp fire at night. She loved the dancing. She remembers once getting into strife when, as a four-year-old girl, she insisted on dancing with the male tribal elders rather than just sitting and watching the men, as the girls were supposed to do.

But then, sometime around 1932, when she was about four, she remembers the coming of the welfare men. Her family had feared that day and had dug holes in the creek bank where the children could run and hide. What they had not expected was that the white welfare men did not come alone. They brought a truck, they brought two white men and an Aboriginal stockman on horseback cracking his stockwhip. The kids were found; they ran for their mothers, screaming, but they could not get away. They were herded and piled onto the back of the truck. Tears flowing, her mum tried clinging to the sides of the truck as her children were taken away to the Bungalow in Alice, all in the name of protection.

A few years later, government policy changed. Now the children would be handed over to the missions to be cared for by the churches. But which church would care for them? The kids were simply told to line up in three lines. Nanna Fejo and her sister stood in the middle line, her older brother and cousin on her left. Those on the left were told that they had become Catholics, those in the middle Methodists and those on the right Church of England. That is how the complex questions of post-reformation theology were resolved in the Australian outback in the 1930s. It was as crude as that. She and her sister were sent to a Methodist mission on Goulburn Island and then Croker Island. Her Catholic brother was sent to work at a cattle station and her cousin to a Catholic mission. Nanna Fejo's family had been broken up for a second time. She stayed at the mission until after the war, when she was allowed to leave for a prearranged job as a domestic in Darwin. She was 16. Nanna Fejo never saw her mum again. After she left the mission, her brother let her know that her mum had died years before, a broken woman fretting for the children that had literally been ripped away from her.

I asked Nanna Fejo what she would have me say today about her story. She thought for a few moments then said that what I should say today was that all mothers are important. And she added: 'Families—keeping them together is very important. It's a good thing that you are surrounded by love and that love is passed down the generations. That's what gives you happiness.' As I left, later on, Nanna Fejo took one of my staff aside, wanting to make sure that I was not too hard on the Aboriginal stockman who had hunted those kids down all those years ago. The stockman had found her again

decades later, this time himself to say, 'Sorry.' And remarkably, extraordinarily, she had forgiven him.

Nanna Fejo's is just one story. There are thousands, tens of thousands of them: stories of forced separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their mums and dads over the better part of a century. Some of these stories are graphically told in *Bringing Them Home*, the report commissioned in 1995 by Prime Minister Keating and received in 1997 by Prime Minister Howard. There is something terribly primal about these firsthand accounts. The pain is searing; it screams from the pages. The hurt, the humiliation, the degradation and the sheer brutality of the act of physically separating a mother from her children is a deep assault on our senses and on our most elemental humanity.

These stories cry out to be heard; they cry out for an apology. Instead, from the nation's parliament there has been a stony and stubborn and deafening silence for more than a decade. A view that somehow we, the parliament, should suspend our most basic instincts of what is right and what is wrong. A view that, instead, we should look for any pretext to push this great wrong to one side, to leave it languishing with the historians, the academics and the cultural warriors, as if the Stolen Generations are little more than an interesting sociological phenomenon. But the Stolen Generations are not intellectual curiosities. They are human beings, human beings who have been damaged deeply by the decisions of parliaments and governments. But, as of today, the time for denial, the time for delay, has at last come to an end.

The nation is demanding of its political leadership to take us forward. Decency, human decency, universal human decency, demands that the nation now steps forward to right a historical wrong. That is what we are doing in this place today. But should there still be doubts as to why we must now act. Let the parliament reflect for a moment on the following facts: that, between 1910 and 1970, between 10 and 30 per cent of Indigenous children were forcibly taken from their mothers and fathers. That, as a result, up to 50,000 children were forcibly taken from their families. That this was the product of the deliberate, calculated policies of the state as reflected in the explicit powers given to them under statute. That this policy was taken to such extremes by some in administrative authority that the forced extractions of children of so-called 'mixed lineage' were seen as part of a broader policy of dealing with 'the problem of the Aboriginal population'.

One of the most notorious examples of this approach was from the Northern Territory Protector of Natives, who stated, and I quote: 'Generally by the fifth and invariably by the sixth generation, all native characteristics of the Australian aborigine are eradicated. The problem of our half-castes—to quote the protector— will quickly be eliminated by the complete disappearance of the black race, and the swift submergence of their progeny in the white ...'

The Western Australian Protector of Natives expressed not dissimilar views, expounding them at length in Canberra in 1937 at the first national conference on Indigenous affairs that brought together the Commonwealth and state protectors of natives. These are uncomfortable things to be brought out into the light. They are not pleasant. They are profoundly disturbing. But we must acknowledge these facts if we are to deal once and for all with the argument that the policy of generic forced separation was somehow well motivated, justified by its historical context and, as a result, unworthy of any apology today.

Then we come to the argument of intergenerational responsibility, also used by some to argue against giving an apology today. But let us remember the fact that the forced removal of Aboriginal children was happening as late as the early 1970s. The 1970s is not exactly a point in remote antiquity. There are still serving members of this parliament who were first elected to this place in the early 1970s. It is well within the adult memory span of many of us. The uncomfortable truth for us all is that the parliaments of the nation, individually and collectively, enacted statutes and delegated authority under those statutes that made the forced removal of children on racial grounds fully lawful.

There is a further reason for an apology as well: it is that reconciliation is in fact an expression of a core value of our nation—and that value is a fair go for all. There is a deep and abiding belief in the Australian community that, for the Stolen Generations, there was no fair go at all. And there is a pretty basic Aussie belief that says it is time to put right this most outrageous of wrongs. It is for these reasons, quite apart from concerns of fundamental human decency, that the governments and parliaments of this nation must make this apology. Because, put simply, the laws that our parliaments enacted made the Stolen Generations possible. We, the parliaments of the nation, are ultimately responsible, not those who gave effect to our laws, the problem lay with the laws themselves. As has been said of settler societies elsewhere, we are the bearers of many blessings from our ancestors and therefore we must also be the bearer of their burdens as well. Therefore, for our nation, the course of action is clear. Therefore for our people, the course of action is clear. And that is, to deal now with what has become one of the darkest chapters in Australia's history. In doing so, we are doing more than contending with the facts, the evidence and the often rancorous public debate. In doing so, we are also wrestling with our own soul. This is not, as some would argue, a black-armband view of history; it is just the truth: the cold, confronting, uncomfortable truth. Facing with it, dealing with it, moving on from it. And until we fully confront that truth, there will always be a shadow hanging over us and our future as a fully united and fully reconciled people. It is time to reconcile. It is time to recognise the injustices of the past. It is time to say sorry. It is time to move forward together.

To the Stolen Generations, I say the following: as Prime Minister of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the Government of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the Parliament of Australia, I am sorry. And I offer you this apology without qualification. We apologise for the hurt, the pain and suffering we, the parliament, have caused you by the laws that previous parliaments have enacted. We apologise for the indignity, the degradation and the humiliation these laws embodied. We offer this apology to the mothers, the fathers, the brothers, the sisters, the families and the communities whose lives were ripped apart by the actions of successive governments under successive parliaments. In making this apology, I would also like to speak personally to the members of the Stolen Generation and their families: to those here today, so many of you; to those listening across the nation—from Yuendumu, in the central west of the Northern Territory, to Yabara, in North Queensland, and to Pitjantjatjara in South Australia.

I know that, in offering this apology on behalf of the government and the parliament, there is nothing I can say today that can take away the pain you have suffered personally. Whatever words I speak today, I cannot undo that. Words alone are not that powerful. Grief is a very personal thing. I say to non-Indigenous Australians listening today who may not fully understand why what we are doing is so important, I ask those non-Indigenous Australians to imagine for a moment if this had happened to you. I say to honourable members here present: imagine if this had happened to us. Imagine the crippling effect. Imagine how hard it would be to forgive. But my proposal is this: if the apology we extend today is accepted in the spirit of reconciliation, in which it is offered, we can today resolve together that there be a new beginning for Australia. And it is to such a new beginning that I believe the nation is now calling us.

Australians are a passionate lot. We are also a very practical lot. For us, symbolism is important but, unless the great symbolism of reconciliation is accompanied by an even greater substance, it is little more than a clanging gong. It is not sentiment that makes history; it is our actions that make history. Today's apology, however inadequate, is aimed at righting past wrongs. It is also aimed at building a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians—a bridge based on a real respect rather than a thinly veiled contempt. Our challenge for the future is now to cross that bridge and, in so doing, embrace a new partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Embracing, as part of that partnership, expanded link-up and other critical services to help the Stolen Generations to trace their families, if at all possible, and to provide dignity to their lives. But the core of this partnership for the future is closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians on life expectancy, educational achievement and employment opportunities. This new partnership on closing

the gap will set concrete targets for the future: within a decade to halve the widening gap in literacy, numeracy and employment outcomes and opportunities for Indigenous children, within a decade to halve the appalling gap in infant mortality rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children and, within a generation, to close the equally appalling 17-year life gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous when it comes when it comes to overall life expectancy.

The truth is: a business as usual approach towards Indigenous Australians is not working. Most old approaches are not working. We need a new beginning. A new beginning which contains real measures of policy success or policy failure. A new beginning, a new partnership, on closing the gap with sufficient flexibility not to insist on a one-size-fits-all approach for each of the hundreds of remote and regional Indigenous communities across the country but instead allows flexible, tailored, local approaches to achieve commonly-agreed national objectives that lie at the core of our proposed new partnership. And a new beginning that draws intelligently on the experiences of new policy settings across the nation. However, unless we as a parliament set a destination for the nation, we have no clear point to guide our policy, our programs or our purpose; no centralised organising principle.

So let us resolve today to begin with the little children—a fitting place to start on this day of apology for the Stolen Generations. Let us resolve over the next five years to have every Indigenous four-year-old in a remote Aboriginal community enrolled and attending a proper early childhood education centre or opportunity and engaged in proper preliteracy and prenumeracy programs. Let us resolve to build new educational opportunities for these little ones, year by year, step by step, following the completion of their crucial preschool year. Let us resolve to use this systematic approach to building future educational opportunities for Indigenous children to provide proper primary and preventive health care for the same children, to begin the task of rolling back the obscenity that we find today in infant mortality rates in remote Indigenous communities—up to four times higher than in other communities.

None of this will be easy. Most of it will be hard—very hard. But none of it, none of it, is impossible, and all of it is achievable with clear goals, clear thinking, and by placing an absolute premium on respect, cooperation and mutual responsibility as the guiding principles of this new partnership on closing the gap. The mood of the nation is for reconciliation now, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The mood of the nation on Indigenous policy and politics is now very simple. The nation is calling on us, the politicians, to move beyond our infantile bickering, our point-scoring and our mindlessly partisan politics and elevate at least this one core area of national responsibility to a rare position beyond the partisan divide. Surely this is the spirit, the unfulfilled spirit, of the 1967 referendum. Surely, at least from this day forward, we should give it a go.

So let me take this one step further to take what some may see as a piece of political posturing and make a practical proposal to the opposition on this day, the first full sitting day of the new parliament. I said before the election the nation needed a kind of war cabinet on parts of Indigenous policy, because the challenges are too great and the consequences too great to just allow it all to become a political football, as it has been so often in the past. I therefore propose a joint policy commission, to be led by the Leader of the Opposition and myself and, with a mandate to develop and implement—to begin with—an effective housing strategy for remote communities over the next five years. It will be consistent with the government's policy framework, a new partnership for closing the gap. If this commission operates well, I then propose that it work on the further task of constitutional recognition of the first Australians, consistent with the longstanding platform commitments of my party and the pre-election position of the opposition. This would probably be desirable in any event because, unless such a proposition were absolutely bipartisan, it would fail at a referendum. As I have said before, the time has come for new approaches to enduring problems. And working constructively together on such defined projects, I believe, would meet with the support of the nation. It is time for fresh ideas to fashion the nation's future.

Today the parliament has come together to right a great wrong. We have come together to deal with the past so that we might fully embrace the future. And we have had sufficient audacity of faith to advance a pathway to that future, with arms extended rather than with fists still clenched. So let us seize the day. Let it not become a moment of mere sentimental reflection. Let us take it with both hands and allow this day, this day of national reconciliation, to become one of those rare moments in which we might just be able to transform the way in which the nation thinks about itself, whereby the injustice administered to these Stolen Generations in the name of these, our parliaments, causes all of us to reappraise, at the deepest level of our beliefs, the real possibility of reconciliation writ large. Reconciliation across all Indigenous Australia. Reconciliation across the entire history of the often bloody encounter between those who emerged from the Dreamtime a thousand generations ago and those who, like me, came across the seas only yesterday. Reconciliation which opens up whole new possibilities for the future.

For the nation to bring the first two centuries of our settled history to a close, as we begin a new chapter and which we embrace with pride, admiration and awe these great and ancient cultures we are blessed, truly blessed, to have among us. Cultures that provide a unique, uninterrupted human thread linking our Australian continent to the most ancient prehistory of our planet. And growing from this new respect, to see our Indigenous brothers and sisters with fresh eyes, with new eyes, and with our minds wide open as to how we might tackle, together, the great practical challenges that Indigenous Australia faces in the future.

So let us turn this page together: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, Government and Opposition, Commonwealth and State, and write this new chapter in our nation's story together. First Australians, First Fleeters, and those who first took the Oath of Allegiance just a few weeks ago. Let's grasp this opportunity to craft a new future for this great land: Australia. I commend the motion to the House.