

The Apology: One Year On

This Friday 13th marks the first year anniversary of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's national apology to the Stolen Generations, and as good a time as any to reflect on its historical significance.

'Stolen Generations' is generally understood to mean the estimated 100 000 people forcibly removed under special government laws targeting Indigenous children. These laws allowed the official removal of Indigenous children without a court finding of neglect nor parental consent, as was required for all other children.

Couched as 'Protection', these policies were carried out by all state governments, and the Commonwealth in the Northern Territory, beginning from the 1880s. Removed children were put into special 'training' institutions and then sent out to work. In the south-east of Australia, child removal was accompanied by the revocation of gazetted Aboriginal land. Where white settlement was sparser, child removal accompanied the expansion and consolidation of white settlement, and tended to target children of non-Indigenous fathers, to prevent the growth of a mixed-descent Aboriginal population.

Aboriginal organizations protested, attempting to raise wider awareness of what was going on. They had some success. My great-grandmother Joan Strack wrote an article strongly criticising the policy for a Sydney newspaper in 1940. 'It may not generally be known that their babies and small girls are taken from their parents', she wrote, 'this racket has gone on for thirty or more years ... these children are taken away under any pretext whatever.' She headlined her article, 'Bitter Lot of Aborigines: Robbed of Children'.

In the post-war period there was a new emphasis, to force Indigenous people to 'assimilate' to an 'Australian way of life'. Although Australia ratified an international treaty defining the forcible removal of children as a crime in international law in 1949, Indigenous child removal continued, and even intensified, as adoption into white families became the favoured strategy of assimilation.

The repeal of these discriminatory child removal laws only started in 1964, continuing slowly until the last legislation was removed in 1984 – three years after historian Peter Read coined the term 'Stolen Generations', and just four years before Australia's Bicentenary of British colonisation. That year, 1988, our representative to the United Nations Human Rights Committee acknowledged that 'public policy regarding the care of Aboriginal children ... had been a serious mistake'.

Confronting the harsh realities of this history was one of the key platforms of the Reconciliation process, set in motion by the federal government under Prime Minister Bob Hawke in 1991. Mounting pressure led to a national inquiry, and then the *Bringing Them Home* report in 1997. This report concluded that the forcible separation of Indigenous children from their families was a gross violation of human rights, a breach of Australian legal standards, and an act of genocide.

It recommended a series of reparations that included, at the very top of the list, official acknowledgment by all Australian parliaments, of the historical responsibility of their predecessors for Indigenous child removal, and an appropriate apology to all those affected – not only the individuals who were removed, but their families, descendants, and the wider Indigenous communities.

The report caused a stir. Its findings, and especially the call for an apology, were strenuously and very publicly resisted for ten years by the then federal government, led by Prime Minister John Howard. For many Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the apology finally offered by the incoming Rudd government in May 2008 – supported, albeit grudgingly, by the Opposition – was a welcome but long overdue gesture of reconciliation.

In his address to the federal parliament Prime Minister Rudd called for ‘the nation to turn a new page in Australia’s history’. Time will tell what effect the apology will have on future Indigenous policy – the contentious Northern Territory Intervention, introduced under Howard and continued by Rudd, bears quite a few hallmarks of our history of discriminatory interventions.

But like the 1967 Referendum, the significance of the apology for Australians is not what it says about political parties on either side of parliament, but rather how it symbolises a deeper cultural shift in society. The real turning point was probably the ‘Sorry Day’ walk of May 2000, when hundreds of thousands of Australians walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in support of reconciliation. This huge, unprecedented turnout of ‘ordinary Australians’ dispelled much of the negativity surrounding Aboriginal issues, and the feeling on the day was powerfully expressed when a skywriter aeroplane spelled out the word “Sorry” across a clear blue sky.

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