

THE PRIME MINISTER, MR KEVIN RUDD'S APOLOGY TO AUSTRALIA'S ABORIGINES AND THE STOLEN GENERATIONS

Parliament House, Wednesday, 13 February, 2008

Senior School Assembly, Tuesday, 12 February, 2008
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Good afternoon

As a small boy I was taken by country relatives one Sunday afternoon to see the "Blacks camp". This was on the river bank, a few miles downstream from a large and prosperous country town a few hours' drive from Canberra.

We drove into a dusty square and around us were corrugated iron sheds and shanties. Near the middle of the square was a tap. This was my first encounter with Aboriginal Australia. It was also the first time in my life that I had been surrounded by obvious squalor and dysfunction, and a palpable sense of despair.

As a small boy I was taken to the cinema one Saturday evening in this same country town. Just before the lights dimmed, doors at the front of the cinema were opened and I watched from the Dress Circle seats upstairs while Aborigines were herded into the first three or four rows at the very front. These rows were roped off and as soon as the seats were full the doors were closed, even though it was obvious more Aborigines wanted to see the film.

Without really being aware of it, I had glimpsed part of the scabrous underbelly of my own country's history.

In the first 100 years after European settlement began in 1788, the Aborigines experienced little fairness or advance. Traditional homelands were lost in a competition for land, and with them culture, identity and dignity. The end result was that, within the first century of European settlement, a resourceful and adaptive people whose forebears were the first humans ever to migrate across water, and who had made a home in *all* this vast country's environments quite suddenly ceased to have control of their lives.

Guns, disease, alcohol, misunderstanding, fear, intolerance, indifference, assumptions of racial and cultural superiority all played active and often brutal roles in this destruction. The world's most advanced materialistic society was competing with an ancient people whose understanding of life and lore was stored in the Dreaming, a spiritual legacy that defied time and did not know about the Industrial Revolution and its insatiable appetites. The Aboriginal occupation of Australia remains at least 250 times longer than that of non-Indigenous Australians. It is little wonder that a later generation of Aborigines would rename Australia Day Invasion Day.

By the time of Federation in 1901, the plight of Australia's Aborigines was such that White Australians expected them to die out - the extinction begun with the loss of land was thought to be reaching its conclusion. Aborigines for most Australians had become irrelevant and invisible. Our new Constitution, the document that provides the legal framework for our nation, did not mention them. They were not even included in the census, although cattle numbers were recorded.

But there was an enduring problem. Miscegenation, breeding between races, had created a population of lighter-skinned children. Late in the 19th Century a practice began of forcibly removing these children in the hope that they could be assimilated in White, European society. This was the beginning of the Stolen Generations.

By the early 1970s about 100,000 mostly mixed-blood Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders had been removed from their families and relocated to homes and missions. This meant that, in NSW in 2000, one Aboriginal in ten had been stolen as a child.

The policies formulated by colonial and state governments were paternalistic but also well intentioned. They were often implemented ruthlessly and with a great deal of violence and intimidation. The victims - the families, the mothers, the children - were very largely powerless, but at the same time dependent on the governments that were intent on removing their children.

Few foresaw that the result would come to be seen by many as a crime, that the policies of removal would often lead to terrible crimes of violence and sexual abuse, and create a vast and irreparable suffering. Far from liberating, the forcible removal produced permanent psychological, emotional and physical shackles that would enslave and cripple successive generations of Aborigines. At its core were callous

assumptions that Aborigines would not feel loss or suffer, as others might. The core assumptions were racist and inhumane.

We are increasingly aware of Aboriginal art, even if the spiritual and moral symbolism it represents eludes us. We are less familiar with Aboriginal poets. Many have written about their experiences after removal, after having been stolen. Some are angry, some are filled with aching loss and grief that will never be extinguished.

This is the first verse of a poem called *A Letter To My Mother*, by Eva Johnson.

"I not see you long time now, I not see you long time now
White fella bin take me from you, I don't know why
Give me to Missionary, to be god's child.
Give me new language, give me new name
All time I cry, they say - "that shame"
I go to city down south, real cold
I forget all them stories, My mother you told
Gone is my spirit, my dreaming, my name
Gone to these people, our country they claim
They gave me white mother, she gave me new name
All time I cry, she say - "that shame"
I not see you long time now, I not see you long time now."

On the 29th May, 1997, former High Court judge, Sir Ronald Wilson, presented to parliament his report on the Stolen Generations titled *Bringing Them Home*. The report had a huge impact and one year later National Sorry Day was launched on the same date. Other recent reports and court decisions on Land Rights and Aboriginal Deaths in Custody had caused a great deal of discussion and debate, but after 1997 there was a persistent demand for a formal apology by the Australian government to the Aboriginal people.

The then prime minister, Mr Howard, declined to do this, but the new awareness of Aboriginal issues meant that the issues became highly politicised. Statistics fuelled these debates: imprisonment rates, life expectancy, infant mortality figures, youth mortality - all such statistics reinforced a growing awareness of enduring and unacceptable disadvantage, and a growing community determination to do something about them.

In 1991, the federal government had voted unanimously to establish a Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. In 2000 an extraordinary climax was reached. After nearly a decade's consultation and negotiation, on Saturday, 27th May, the Council's Chair, Evelyn Scott, presented its findings and recommendations to the prime minister, Mr Howard, at the Opera House. A huge crowd had gathered in Sydney, rather like the convergence on Canberra that is happening at the moment.

On the following day, there was A Walk for Reconciliation across the Harbour Bridge. The symbolism is obvious, and the more powerful for its simplicity. Bridge walks were planned in towns and cities throughout the country, and in a wet and very cold Canberra, some 4000 attended.

My wife and I travelled to Sydney to be part of the Reconciliation weekend and to join the walk across the Bridge. Like many others we believed that the weekend represented a moment when Australia was going to change direction, and by addressing the issues of Reconciliation would redefine the principles and values that underpin our society and demonstrate that there was a common understanding of what our society wanted to be, and of how it wanted to be judged.

Well over 300,000 people walked across the Bridge, from all political parties, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, from all parts of the country.

Regrettably, the widespread community goodwill, enthusiasm and determination to work for Reconciliation that had taken a decade to generate were allowed to wither. The government squandered the opportunity to engage all Australians in the complex issues associated with Reconciliation. The government's much-publicised Intervention at the eleventh hour of the eleventh year, and on the eve of the federal election, was a rediscovery that came too late.

And what of that word ... Sorry? And what of Mr Rudd's historic words tomorrow?

They were always going to happen. In May, 2000, "Sorry" was written in the sky above Sydney to a roar of approval from hundreds of thousands of people. It didn't last long, a wind tugged at it and then it was gone. But words that are necessary don't go away, they persist. Another wind has blown, and now there is, again, a real possibility for change.
