

*On the significance of saying “sorry” –  
politics of memory and Aboriginal Reconciliation in Australia*

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**Abstract:** 2007 marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1967 Referendum. Back on May 27<sup>th</sup> 1967, more than 90% of Australian eligible voters said “yes” to two changes of the Australian Constitution considered discriminatory to Aboriginal people. This event is often considered as the first stage of Reconciliation in Australia. 2007 also marked the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the release of the *Bringing Them Home Report* that highlighted the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their family as part of an assimilation policy. From 1997, the issue of an apology became a *sine qua non* condition to Reconciliation. It was an important element of the recommendations the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation submitted to Parliament in 2000. But, Liberal Prime Minister John Howard, in office for more than ten years, refused to say the word “sorry” on the basis that Australians of today are not responsible for the actions of the past and that guilt is not hereditary. His focus was on what is called “practical reconciliation”. Some changes are now on the way as Labor leader, Kevin Rudd, who defeated him at the last federal election in November 24<sup>th</sup> 2007, has promised to make a formal apology to the stolen generation. Why is it important to say “sorry”? At a time of dramatic developments in Indigenous Affairs, this paper deals with the significance of an apology for Reconciliation in Australia.

**Keywords:** Indigenous peoples ---Australia; Apology; Reconciliation.

## **Introduction**

When I sent my abstract for this conference in January, I still had some doubts : will the government really say “sorry”? As an observer of Aboriginal politics over the past nine years, I have followed closely the outcome of three federal elections, wondering if a change of leadership, will really result in an apology. I feel I was privileged to be in Canberra this year and share with other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people this long awaited moment of Reconciliation.

Reconciliation, if we look at its core definition is derived from the latin word “conciliare” which means bringing together. The most basic meaning of the word is “restoring friendly relations between”. We can also summarize Reconciliation as Hamber and Kelly have in their study of Northern Ireland as a “process of addressing conflictual and fractured relationship”. But what does reconciliation imply in the Australian context?

Australia, as we all know, is the homeland of the Aboriginal people. They have lived there since time immemorial, at least 40 000 years according to some scientific evidence, since the Dreaming or Dreamtime, that is the time of creation, according to their own mythologies. When the British arrived in 1788, they were dispossessed and then became subjected to discriminatory policies of segregation and assimilation. The colonization of the country is at the origin of the conflict which oppose the Old Australians to the new ones. The 1967 Referendum is often referred to as the starting point of Reconciliation – and we will have the opportunity to hear more about it tomorrow with Frances Peters-Little- but it is not until the 1990s that a formal process of Reconciliation was established. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) had a ten-year mandate, until the Centenary of Federation to promote Reconciliation in the country.

Today, what I would like to do is to provide some background on the origin of the apology and show how it became inextricably intertwined with the reconciliation process and offer an account of what happened on February 13<sup>th</sup>, not to explain why it is significant to “say sorry” but why it was.

## **I) Some Background on the Apology**

In the words of the Australian historian who coined the term with his wife Dr Jay Arthur, and I am referring here of course to Professor Peter Read we are honored to have here among us today :

We Stolen Generations are the victims of Australia-wide policies which aimed to separate us from our parents, our family, our neighbourhood, our community, our country and our rightful inheritance as Aboriginal citizens of Australia.

We are the victims of a policy which –if it had been successful- would have put an end to Aboriginality forever. Not just ours – everyone’s. And we are still hurting. (xi)

This issue of forcible removal was not much talked about in the 1980s when the pamphlet the Stolen Generations was released and when its authors Peter Read and Coral Edwards set up Link-Up an association to help reunite families. But a growing awareness of it emerged. In presenting the policy of the Hawke government in 1983, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Clyde Holding referred to this deliberate policy of governments to separate children from their families in view of assimilation and promised to “restore the rights of Aboriginal families to raise and protect their own children” (3486). In 1991, The Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths In Custody showed that among the 98 cases studied, 43 persons had been separated from their families. In 1995, the Keating government finally set up an inquiry because an “increasing concern that the general public’s ignorance of the history of forcible removal was hindering the recognition of the needs of its victims and their families and provision of services ” (HREOC intro).

The inquiry was conducted by Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission President Sir Ronald Wilson and by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice

Commissioner Mick Dodson whose mission was to trace the history of separation past and present, but also to examine principles for compensation. As the inquirers stated, it is “no ordinary report” (intro). It goes to the heart of personal stories, testimonies of separation, institutionalisation, abuses and denigration. 585 Aboriginal persons courageously came forward to talk about their painful experience, a violation of their human rights that the inquirers compared to an act of genocide. It was not only established that this practice of forcible removal began with colonisation but that it was still happening in the 1970s. No Indigenous family seems to have escaped from its effects.

It is from the disturbing findings of this particular inquiry that a call for an apology emerged. An acknowledgement of the wrongs separation caused from the perpetrators and an apology to the victims and their families were seen central to a healing process. The Commission received many submissions along that line. For the Commission, “the first step in any compensation and healing for victims of gross violations of human rights must be an acknowledgement of the truth and the delivery of an apology”. This apology was also seen as an elementary condition and a first step to reconciliation (chapt 14).

The *Bringing Them Home Report* was released in May 1997 while the Council for Aboriginal for Reconciliation was holding a major Convention in Melbourne. The Convention as Sir Ronald Wilson stated had the effect of merging the two issues of reconciliation and the stolen generation into one. And from then the issue of an apology became inextricably linked to the Reconciliation process.

Putting to light this hidden aspect of Australia’s history caused dismay and there was a massive positive response from State Parliaments, Churches, community groups, ethnic organisations, local governments, that took the stance of apologising (Dodson n.p.). And since the first Sorry Day in 1998, thousands of persons have signed sorry books across the country to express their grievances (National Sorry Day Committee). In contrast, the Howard government refused to formally apologise. It ignored the recommendations of excuses and compensation when it responded to the *Bringing Them Home Report* in December 1997 (Herron n.p.). Before the federal election of 1998, Howard explained that his motives were not a fear of compensation but a belief that you express regrets for things “you are collectively and in a direct sense responsible” and he did not think “that applies to the current generation of Australians” (qted in Read ix). In that sense, he was faithful to a position he had taken on Indigenous issues since he was leader of the opposition in the 1980s : “guilt is not hereditary”. In August 1999, he did move a motion in which he expressed his deep and sincere regret “that Indigenous Australians suffered injustices under the practices of past generations”. But his motion and his speech did not even mention the Stolen Generations and it was not the awaited formal apology. In December 2000 when he received the final report of CAR, Prime Minister Howard stated that he would consider the recommendations of the Council but that his position on some points were unchanged. He did not have to be more precise and he was not.

Throughout his mandate, he had repeated at numerous occasion his commitment to genuine Reconciliation. Nevertheless, his government and the Liberal Party had a different vision of Reconciliation from CAR. They made a distinction between the

practical and what they referred to as the symbolic. The practical is about overcoming disadvantage and true reconciliation for them was limited to a socio-economic issue. The symbolic embraced anything to do with the recognition of the Aboriginal as the Indigenous component of Australia –their unique status, their cultural identity, the necessity to sign a treaty, a recognition of past mistreatment, the right to self-determination within the life of the nation, in brief much of what the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation called for in its documents of Reconciliation but not all as for the Council the practical and the symbolic were not separable. As a result, the reply of the government to the recommendations made by CAR was not surprising, even though it took two years to come.

In the *Commonwealth Response*, all the recommendations dealing with special rights were not considered by the government. There is actually a sentence which is quite significant :

The Prime Minister indicated at the time of release of the Declaration, there were significant areas of agreement the government could not give its full support. Consequently, on May 11<sup>th</sup> 2000, the Government presented a revised Declaration to which it offered its full support. (Recommendation 2)

In other words, they were in favour of Reconciliation but in their own terms and that did not imply an apology. The Howard government never said sorry, leaving *Reconciliation Off Track* to use the title of Senate Legal and Constitutional Reference Committee Inquiry, at least until February 13<sup>th</sup> 2008.

## II) The “Sorry Day” - 13th Feb. 2008

ALP candidate Kevin Rudd promised, like his predecessors, to apologise to the Stolen Generations if elected. On November 24<sup>th</sup> 2007, he defeated John Howard who not only lost the federal election after four successive mandates but also his Parliamentary seat of Bennelong he had held since the 1970s. Right after the election, the new Prime Minister announced that an apology would be delivered at the next sitting of Parliament. The official date was known at the end of January as well as the absence of compensation. On February 12<sup>th</sup>, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Parliament was sworn in, after a magistral Aboriginal ceremony. It was the first time in Australian History that Aboriginal people had taken part in the opening of Parliament. The following day, the long-awaited sorry resonated throughout the country.

Thousands of people (1.3 million according to the ABC), Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, Australians and non-Australians had gathered in the main square of capital cities, in the outback, or on the lawns of Parliament, others followed the event on television or on the radio. Some even woke up in the middle of the night in Europe to watch the Apology on the internet. It was a really emotional moment. Many had travelled as far away as the Northern Territory by bus to be in the capital city for the first time. Many Aboriginal persons thought this will never happen in their lifetime. Some brought with them pictures of family members who did not have that chance.

According to Aaron Lazare, American Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Massachusset Medical School, the success or failure of an apology depends on four major components : the acknowledgement of the offence, the explanation, the expression of shame and remorse and reparation. Kevin Rudd's speech contains the ingredients of a good apology.

Rudd began his speech by a personal story, that of Nana Fejo, a member of the Stolen Generation. It was a way for him to put his words into context and explain that he was not talking about "intellectual curiosities" but human beings, human lives. He then explained the significance of the moment, why the Parliament of Australia had to apologise to the Aboriginal people, for those who were still in doubts, for his opponents, for everyone. He acknowledged the responsibility of the governments, of the Parliament of the Nation in what had become one of the "darkest chapter of Australia's history : the forced removal of Aboriginal children on racial grounds". But he specified that those who implemented the laws were not responsible. In summary, here are the reasons why they apologised :

Therefore, for our nation, the course of action is clear, and therefore, for our people, the course of action is clear : 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 it, dealing with it, moving on from it. Until we fully confront that truth, there will always be a shadow hanging over us and our futures 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.

A jubilant crowd applauded to the first sorry. It was amplified when in a powerful manner, the Prime Minister addressed his direct apologies to the Stolen Generations :

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. I offer you this apology without qualification. We apologise for the hurt, the pain and suffering that 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 generations 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.

Rudd recognised the difficulty of forgiveness but called for reconciliation and a new beginning, putting forward a number of proposals for the future, even taking the leader of the opposition by surprise in calling for a joint-policy commission.

The sky which brightened up at Rudd's speech darkened when Nelson intervened. The leader of the opposition was of course in an uncomfortable position if we consider the line taken by his party the past ten years. He himself expressed his opposition to the apology at the time he was elected. Nevertheless, despite some obvious dissensions, the coalition offered its in-principle support at the beginning of February and on February 13<sup>th</sup>, Brendan Nelson stood up to "speak strongly in favor of the motion". It was a good start. But his speech did not match his opponent's. Nelson, while trying to recognise the hurt suffered by the Aboriginal people tried to justify the policies of the time. His choice of repeating numerous times "good intentions", or "rescued," as well as quoting a person not only without her consent but also out of context, was certainly inappropriate. It added to the pain of those who were listening to him. Tears of joy were replaced by tears of sadness. In the crowd I was in I saw many aunties bursting into tears. Anger also arose. Talking to people afterwards, I realise that many who watched the event on television thought that the crowd turned their back to the opposition leader right from the start without even listening, and the news report left the doubt. Everyone was interested in hearing what he had to say but after a while his speech became so unbearable for many that they turned their back to the screens like in Canberra, others just left. In Perth, they switched off the TV.

Nevertheless, on that historic day what is to be remembered as Tom Calma, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, said :

- It's the day our leaders – across the political spectrum- have chosen dignity, hope and respect as the guiding principles for the relationship with our first nations' peoples
- Through one direct act, Parliament has acknowledged the existence and the impacts of the past policies and practices of forcibly removing Indigenous children from the families
- And by doing so, has paid respect to the Stolen Generations. For their suffering and their loss. For their resilience. And ultimately for their dignity.
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The image of the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition walking hand in hand towards the members of the Stolen Generations is the image which will remain. On one side, the Parliament with bipartisan support apologised. On the other, the "thanks" and apology accepted that could be read on the shirts some members of the Stolen Generations were wearing.

## **Conclusion**

Eleven years after the *Bringing Them Home Report*, eight years after the abolition of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, the Australian Government has apologised to its indigenous population.

“This example of Reconciliation offers hope to peoples all over the world who long see their rights affirmed and their contributions to society acknowledged and promoted” said Pope Benedict who praised the Australian apology ten days ago in Sydney (Maden). The Australian apology has already paved the way for other significant gestures worldwide. Those of you who were at the Indigenous Biography Conference last year in Canberra certainly remember the moving testimony of this young Indigenous woman from Japan, Mina Sakai. On June 6<sup>th</sup>, the Japanese Parliament, in a bipartisan motion, recognised the Ainou people as the Indigenous peoples of Japan and promised to improve their living conditions. A few days later, on June 11<sup>th</sup>, in another part of the world, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized to the Aboriginal people of the country for Canada’s role in the Indian residential school system and the harm, the disastrous effects it created.

In Australia, the apology is not ofcourse the panacea. Sorry is meant to be the first step and we still have to see what will happen next. The ALP has promised to consider the recommendations made by CAR in 2000. For now, another of the many electoral promises of the ALP in Indigenous Affairs is already at work, establishing a new Indigenous Representative Body. Reconciliation seems to be back on track again. Thank you.

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