

**ASPECTS FROM COLONIAL HISTORY. A FORMAL RECONCILIATION REGARDING  
THE AUSTRALIAN NATIVE PEOPLE**

<b>Abstract:</b>	<p><i>Genocide can take many forms and be justified in many different ways. The cultural genocide that was intended to annihilate the identity of the Aboriginal people in Australia during the 20th century was based on the assumption that these people were visibly “inferior” to those who colonized Australia and thus, had to be “civilized”. It was a process of internal colonialism present in other parts of the world, too, and its intention was to assimilate the ethnic groups of Aboriginal people and integrate them by educating their children by force, in the schools of the white people.</i></p> <p><i>To admit the wrongs done, and the injustice of governmental programmes was not an easy task but, in Australia, it happened in 2008 when Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered a public speech, which took him a lot of courage, saying officially “sorry” for the “stolen generations; that were affected by the forced removal of children on racial grounds” made fully lawful by the authority. In his speech The Prime minister mentioned they could resolve together all the common problems while preserving the dignity of difference and trying to give Australia a new beginning, a new chapter in looking for a new kind of identity which should include “cultures that provide a unique uninterrupted human thread, linking the Australian Continent the one of the most ancient prehistory of our planet!</i></p>
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### **The West and the Rest**

The West has dominated the Rest because of imperialism through different forms of colonization and settlement, even extraction, which had had very different long-term impact.<sup>1</sup> Edward Said cited Thomas Hodgkin who talked about the difference between theories of imperialism that try to “describe it” and theories of imperialism that try to “end it”<sup>2</sup>. “Ethnic cleansing has been used by many countries in the past, including democracies such as Australia, New Zealand,...which saw settlers violently removing or killing off the indigenous populations of the territories in which they settled”<sup>3</sup>. In order to create a new national identity some states tried “to assimilate minority populations into the culture of an existing ethnic or linguistic group”<sup>4</sup>. These were different ways to reshape national identity to fit the existing characteristics of modern Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Civilization-The West and the Rest*, Penguin Books, London, 2012

<sup>2</sup> Edward W. Said, *Power, Politics and Culture*, Bloomsbury, London, 2005, p. 185

<sup>3</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Identity, Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*, Profile Books, London, 2019, pp.140-141

<sup>4</sup> Idem

As we know, many victims of colonialism have increasingly put forward their views, demanding redress of grievances, inherited from colonial rule, or symbolic recognitions of wrongs, done to their ancestors<sup>1</sup>.

Aboriginals demanded land rights in Australia, “their claims being given a judicial imprimatur with the Mabo decision by the High Court in Canberra in 1992. Groups of African-Americans and other descendants of enslaved Africans claimed reparation for the evils of the slave trade while cultural leaders of many formerly colonized people have asked for the restitution of sacred items (and human remains) enshrined in Western museums.”<sup>2</sup>

But, the reception of such demands has proved ambivalent and many leaders have been reluctant to say “sorry” for colonial racist policies, offering only symbolic compensations for such injustices<sup>3</sup>. John Howard, a former Prime Minister of Australia from the Liberal Party, and the predecessor of Kevin Rudd, even had held the widespread view that “an apology would open the floodgates to litigation (and expensive compensation) and that the present generations could not be held to account for past actions of others!”<sup>4</sup>

Today, debates continue to rage on such topics as the extent of systematic torture practised by French troops in colonial Algeria, the level of cruelty of Belgians in the Congo, the “genocide” of the Herero people caused by the Germans in 1904, in Namibia, “and the role of colonialism in creating an inequitable and iniquitous disparity in wealth between the North and the South”<sup>5</sup>. There are many such arguments about the benefits and demerits of contemporary globalization which perpetuate claims of development and underdevelopment in the areas of the ex-colonies<sup>6</sup>. Some commentators have found in colonial conditions the origins of bloody post-colonial conflagrations visible in recent years from Northern Ireland to Palestine, from Rwanda or the Sudan to East Timor<sup>7</sup>. This colonial legacy, the many volatile accusations of “colonialism” and “imperialism”, the public interest in empire and many scholarly debates about overseas expansion are manifestly issues of the present, not just the past<sup>8</sup>.

Such a debate took place at Oxford in 2015 with the topic: “Britain Does Owe Reparations”, a debate started by Dr Shashi Tharoor M.P., who supports the idea that Britain caused India a lot of big problems that are still present in the Indian society. In his speech, Dr Tharoor mentioned that “India was already Britain’s biggest cash cow, the world’s biggest purchaser of British goods and exports and the source for highly paid employment for British civil servants. We literally paid for our own oppression. And as has been pointed out, the worthy British Victorian families that made their money out of the slave economy, one-fifth of the elites of the wealthy class in Britain in 19th century owed their money to transporting 3 million Africans across the waters. And in fact in 1833 when slavery was abolished and what happened was a compensation of 20 million pounds was paid not as reparations to those who had lost their lives or who had suffered or been oppressed by slavery but to those who had lost their property”<sup>9</sup>.

### **Moments of reconciliation**

Kevin Rudd became Australia’s Prime Minister after the 2007 election. A diplomat turned politician, with a strong religious conviction, he headed a government that was broadly to the left of his predecessor John Howard. Among his first priorities, he was gearing up for a landmark speech on the maltreatment of Australia’s Aboriginal people, supported by a series of governmental policies, that made this genocide official and lawful<sup>10</sup>. One of the most relevant examples is represented by the 1997 official report, entitled *Bringing Them*

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Aldrich (Ed.), *The Age of Empires*, Thames&Hudson, London, 2020, p. 13

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 13-14

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14

<sup>4</sup> Simon Sebag Montefiore (Ed.), *Speeches That Changed the World*, Quercus, London, 2014, p. 226

<sup>5</sup> Robert Aldrich, *Op. cit.*, p. 14

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*

<sup>7</sup> *Idem*

<sup>8</sup> Robert Aldrich, *Op. cit.*, p.15

<sup>9</sup> Shashi Tharoor’s Full Speech Asking UK to Pay India for 200 Years of Its Colonial Rule, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/read-shashi-tharoor-s-full-speech-asking-uk-to-pay-india-for-200-years-of-its-colonial-rule-1024821.htm> (2.05.2024)

<sup>10</sup> Simon S. Montefiore, *Op. cit.*, p. 226

*Home*. This document examined former federal and state policies to remove young Aboriginal children from their families and send them to institutions or white foster homes<sup>1</sup>.

This document offers a clear perspective regarding the governmental policies that were followed by massive removal of children from their families. “The questions this history raises for us to contemplate today, at the very least, are what implications it has for relations between Aboriginal and white Australians, and what traces of that systematic attempt at social and biological engineering remain in current child welfare practices and institutions...Indigenous children have been forcibly separated from their families and communities since the very first days of the European occupation of Australia”<sup>2</sup>. “Violent battles over rights to land, food and water sources characterised race relations in the nineteenth century. Throughout this conflict, Indigenous children were kidnapped and exploited for their labour. Indigenous children were still being ‘run down’ by Europeans in the northern areas of Australia in the early twentieth century...Governments and missionaries also targeted Indigenous children for removal from their families. Their motives were to “inculcate European values and work habits in children, who would then be employed in service to the colonial settlers”. In 1814 Governor Macquarie funded the first school for Aboriginal children. Its novelty was an initial attraction for Indigenous families but within a few years it evoked a hostile response when it became apparent that its purpose was to distance the children from their families and communities”<sup>3</sup>. “Although colonial governments in the nineteenth century professed abhorrence at the brutality of expansionist European settlers, they were unwilling or unable to stop their activities. When news of the massacres and atrocities reached the British Government it appointed a Select Committee to inquire into the condition of Aboriginal people (...). The violence and disease associated with colonisation was characterised, in the language of social Darwinism, as a natural process of ‘survival of the fittest’<sup>4</sup>. “According to this analysis, the future of Aboriginal people was inevitably doomed; what was needed from governments and missionaries was to ‘smooth the dying pillow’. The government response was to reserve land for the exclusive use of Indigenous people and assign responsibility for their welfare to a Chief Protector or Protection Board. By 1911 the Northern Territory and every State except Tasmania had ‘protectionist legislation’ giving the Chief Protector or Protection Board extensive power to control Indigenous people. In some States and in the Northern Territory the Chief Protector was made the legal guardian of all Aboriginal children, displacing the rights of parents. The management of the reserves was delegated to government appointed managers or missionaries in receipt of government subsidies. Enforcement of the protectionist legislation at the local level was the responsibility of ‘protectors’ who were usually police officers”<sup>5</sup>. In the name of protection Indigenous people were subject to near-total control. Their entry to and exit from reserves was regulated as was their everyday life on the reserves, their right to marry and their employment. With a view to encouraging the conversion of the children to Christianity and distancing them from their Indigenous lifestyle, children were housed in dormitories and contact with their families strictly limited<sup>6</sup>.

This Committee Inquiry proposed to establish a protectorate system, because “the education of the young will of course be amongst the foremost of the cares of the missionaries; and the Protectors should render every assistance in their power in advancing this all-important part of any general scheme of improvement. The protectorate system was based on the notion that Indigenous people would willingly establish self-

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<sup>1</sup> Idem

<sup>2</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, *Bringing them Home Report (1997)*, April 1997, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/projects/bringing-them-home-report-1997> (2.05.2024)

<sup>3</sup> Idem

<sup>4</sup> *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report Bringing Them Home. Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families April 1997*, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/projects/bringing-them-home-report-1997> (2.05.2024)

<sup>5</sup> Idem

<sup>6</sup> *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report Bringing Them Home Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families April 1997*, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/projects/bringing-them-home-report-1997> (2.05.2024)

sufficient agricultural communities on reserved areas modeled on an English village and would not interfere with the land claims of the colonists”<sup>1</sup>.

### Race ideology and its consequences

As race ideology developed in the 19th century, the American scholar Thomas Metcalve has shown how this ideology in that era defined European civilization as being at the peak human attainment, while the darker-skinned races were portrayed as being primitive, weak and dependent on European Tutelage in order to develop. “This was present in the territories of the white man’s dominance where the cult of British superiority was present”.<sup>2</sup> James Ramsey, a surgeon and Anglican priest stated that “lighter-skinned people would naturally attach themselves to the white race, as the more honourable relation, and so become a barrier against the designs of the black”<sup>3</sup>. “White children came into the state’s control, benefitting from greater care. In the case of Aboriginal children, it was taken that they never saw their parents or families again. They were often given new names, and because of distances involved in rural areas, it was easier to prevent parents and children on separate missions from meeting each other.”<sup>4</sup> Government officials considered, that by forcibly removing Indigenous children from their families and separating them from their communities and work for non-Indigenous people, this mixed descent population would, over time, ‘merge’ with the non-Indigenous population, as shown in Brisbane’s *Telegraph* newspaper reported in May 1937<sup>5</sup>.

The Chief Protector of WA, Mr Neville, considers 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.”<sup>6</sup> He mentioned that, sixty years ago, there were over 60,000 full-blooded natives in Western Australia. Nowadays there are only 20,000. And in the future, there would be assimilated. Perhaps it would take one hundred years, maybe longer, but the race is dying as programmed. As the pure-blooded Aboriginal was not a quick breeder, but the half-caste was. In Western Australia there were half-caste families of twenty and upwards. That showed the magnitude of the problem<sup>7</sup>. In Neville’s view, skin colour was the key to assimilation. He considered that, children with lighter skin colour would automatically be accepted into non-Indigenous society and lose their native identity<sup>8</sup>.

Assuming the fact that, the theory is right, argument in government circles centered around the optimum age for forced removal. Experts at a Royal Commission in South Australia, in 1913 at disagreed whether children should be removed at birth or about at the age of two years old. The ‘protectionist’ legislation was generally used in preference to the general child welfare legislation to remove Indigenous children. In that way government officials under the authority of the Chief Protector or the Board could simply order the removal of an Indigenous child without having to establish to a court’s satisfaction that the child was neglected. In Queensland and Western Australia, the Chief Protector<sup>9</sup> used his removal and guardianship powers to force all Indigenous people onto large, highly regulated government settlements and missions, to remove children from their mothers at about the age of four years and place them in dormitories away from their families and to send

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<sup>1</sup> Victorian Government Submission in Response to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper, May 2023 <https://www.education.gov.au/system/files/documents/submission-file/2023-05/Victorian%20Government.pdf> (2.05.2024)

<sup>2</sup> Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire. What the British Did to India*, Penguin Random House, London, 2017, p. 107

<sup>3</sup> Padraic X. Scanlan, *Slave Empire, How Slavery Built Modern Britain*, Robinson, London, 2022, p. 160

<sup>4</sup> Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, [https://bth.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/report/bringing\\_them\\_home\\_report.pdf](https://bth.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/report/bringing_them_home_report.pdf) (2.05.2024)

<sup>5</sup> *The National Apology to the Stolen Generations*, [https://healingfoundation.org.au/app/uploads/2021/02/HF\\_Apology\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_Feb2021.pdf](https://healingfoundation.org.au/app/uploads/2021/02/HF_Apology_Fact_Sheet_Feb2021.pdf) (2.05.2024)

<sup>6</sup> Idem

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, Bringing them Home Report (1997) | Australian Human Rights Commission (29.05.2024)

<sup>8</sup> Idem

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, Bringing them Home Report (1997) | Australian Human Rights Commission (29.05.2024)

them off the missions and settlements at about 14 to work. Indigenous girls who became pregnant were sent back to the mission or dormitory to have their child. The removal process then repeated itself<sup>1</sup>.

Another method used of forcing people of mixed descent away from their native families and communities and into non-Indigenous society was to change the definition of 'Aboriginality' in the protection legislation to fit the government's current policy in relation to Aboriginal affairs. Those with more than a stipulated proportion of European descent were disqualified from living on reserves with their relatives or receiving rations. This tactic of 'dispersing' Aboriginal camps was used in Victoria and New South Wales<sup>2</sup>.

According to an analysis of the definition of 'Aboriginality' it has been found more than 67 definitions in over 700 pieces of legislation. In the 1980s a new definition was proposed in the Constitutional Section of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs' Report on a review of the administration of the working definition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The section offered the following definition: "An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives. This three-part definition (descent, self-identification, and community recognition) was soon adopted by Federal Government departments as their 'working definition' for determining eligibility to some services and benefits. The definition also found its way into State legislation (e.g. in the NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983: where 'Aboriginal means a person who: (a) is a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia, (b) identifies as an Aboriginal, and (c) is accepted by the Aboriginal community as an Aboriginal') and was accepted by the High Court as giving meaning to the expression 'Aboriginal race' within s. 51 (xxvi) of the Constitution (Justice Deane in *Commonwealth v. Tasmania* 1983). It was also used by the Federal Court when, in a first instance decision, it found that the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody had no jurisdiction to inquire into the death of Darren Wouters as the community did not identify him as Aboriginal nor did he identify himself as Aboriginal (although the Full Federal Court subsequently found in *Attorney-General (Cwlth) v State of Queensland*, July 1990, that the Royal Commission's letter patents were framed in such a way as to make Aboriginal descent a sufficient criterion). The advantages of this three-part definition were not, however, apparent to all<sup>3</sup>.

### **“Bringing Them Home” and reconciliation go on**

Thus, the Report entitled “Bringing Them Home” reflects the cultural and ethnic genocide that took place in Australia, lawfully supported by the government, between 1910 and 1970. During this period “as many as 30 percent of Aboriginal children – the stolen generations”, numbering 50, 000 people – were treated in this way, all part of an attempt to assimilate them into modern Australian culture”<sup>4</sup>. Campaigners and activists had claimed that the consequences of such dislocation were often disastrous for the individuals concerned, not to mention their birth families and numerous stories began to emerge of physical and psychological maltreatment”<sup>5</sup>.

On 13 February 2008, Kevin Rudd completed an electoral pledge when he gave an address to the Parliament on that “unfinished business of the nation” in order to provide “an apology without qualification”<sup>6</sup>. Rudd spoke at long last to a full House of Representatives and a packed public gallery, containing many prominent members of the Aboriginal community. Outside Parliament, crowds gathered, listening to the live broadcast. Rudd a calm, measured speaker gave a speech reflecting a pattern of reiteration and statement and response: “For the pain, suffering and hurt we say sorry”<sup>7</sup> making and justifying a formal apology on behalf of

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<sup>1</sup> Idem

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, Bringing them Home Report (1997) | Australian Human Rights Commission (29.05.2024)

<sup>3</sup> Department of the Parliamentary Library, *The definition of Aboriginality*, ”Research Note”, No. 18, 2000 <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id:%22library/prspub/7M036%22> (2.05.2024)

<sup>4</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, *Bringing them Home Report (1997) Op..cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Simon Sebag Montefiore (Ed.), *Op. cit.*, p. 228

<sup>6</sup> House of Representatives, *Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples Speech. Wednesday, 13 February 2008* [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/2008-13/0003/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/2008-13/0003/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf) (2.05.2024)

<sup>7</sup> Simon Sebag Montefiore (Ed.) *Op.Cit.*, p.229



the federal government, Rudd also highlighted individual cases of suffering and administrative cynicism which had emerged from the investigations”<sup>1</sup>

In practical terms, Rudd didn’t propose compensation for the “stolen generations” but rather new initiatives on “indigenous policy” and new funds to “close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity”<sup>2</sup>. Rudd’s willingness to apologize formally has clearly resonated beyond Australia, perhaps most notably in Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s apology on 11 June 2008 to Canada’s equivalent of Australia’s “stolen generations” – the children forced into Indian Residential Schools since the 1870<sup>3</sup>

“To the Stolen Generations...I Am Sorry”

Kevin Rudd, Parliamentary motion apologizing for the mistreatment of Australia’s Aboriginal people, 13 February 2008

Speech (fragments)

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 national 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”<sup>4</sup>.

The Prime Minister also added that:

“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”<sup>5</sup>.

Minister Kevin Rudd, being extremely decided, mentioned that “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

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<sup>1</sup> Idem

<sup>2</sup> *Sorry - Kevin Rudd and Brendan Nelson's speeches*, <https://www.ozpolitic.com/articles/sorry.html>, (2.05.2024)

<sup>3</sup> Michael Tager, *Political Apologies to Indigenous Peoples in Comparative Perspective*, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228195299\\_Political\\_Apologies\\_to\\_Indigenous\\_Peoples\\_in\\_Comparative\\_Perspective](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228195299_Political_Apologies_to_Indigenous_Peoples_in_Comparative_Perspective) (02.05.2024)

<sup>4</sup> Australian Government, *Apology to Australia’s Indigenous People*, <https://www.indigenous.gov.au/reconciliation/apology-australias-indigenous-peoples> (2.05.2024)

<sup>5</sup> Parliament of Australia, *Kevin Rudd's Sorry Speech*, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/kevin-rudds-sorry-speech-20080214-gds0xh.html> (2.05.2024)

to embrace their future. Our nation, Australia, has reached such a time. 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."<sup>1</sup>

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...The uncomfortable truth for us all is that the parliament 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"<sup>2</sup>. 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"<sup>3</sup>.

### **Real stories to be told**

Prime Minister Rudd not only spoke about general problems of the natives, but also insisted on presenting particular cases of natives that he considered to be relevant to the general story.

"Nanna Nungala Fejo, as she prefers to be called, was born in the late 1920<sup>s</sup>.

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, two white men and an Aboriginal stockman on horseback cracking his stock whip.

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-

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<sup>1</sup> House of Representatives, *Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples Speech*. Wednesday, 13 February 2008), *Op. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*

<sup>3</sup> Parliament of Australia, *Kevin Rudd's Sorry Speech*, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/kevin-rudds-sorry-speech-20080214-gds0xh.html> (2.05.2024)

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, 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.

### **Remembering the past can heal the present**

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<sup>1</sup>. We, the parliaments of the nation, are ultimately not those who gave effect to our laws. And the problem lay with the laws themselves. Therefore, for our nation, the course of action is clear: that is to deal now with what has become one of the darkest chapters in Australia's history. 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 apologize for the hurt, the pain and suffering we, the parliament, have caused you by the laws that previous parliaments have enacted. We apologize 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. 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.

It is for our nation to bring these first two centuries of our settled history to an end, as we begin a new chapter. We embrace with pride, admiration and awe these great and ancient cultures we are 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. 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<sup>2</sup>. Following documents, we can go deeper into the Story of the Stolen Generations, discovering more elements about the Aboriginal people of Australia. We are told that the Native Australians, also called the First Nations people, are believed to have lived in Australia, for more than 65,000 years. "Following the arrival of the British in 1788, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations across much of Australia were decimated through frontier, violence, introduced diseases, loss of access to land, resources, and traditional lifestyles. As a result of colonization many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were removed from their traditional homelands and relocated to reserves or missions on the fringes of non-Indigenous settlements"<sup>3</sup>.

"From the 1860s, jurisdictions such as Victoria and Queensland had legislation that allowed for the removal of Aboriginal children from their families. Across the late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, colonies and then states, implemented 'protection' legislation and by 1901 all states except Tasmania have a 'Chief Protector

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Parliament of Australia, *Kevin Rudd's Sorry Speech*, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/kevin-rudds-sorry-speech-20080214-gds0xh.html> (2.05.2024)

<sup>2</sup> House of Representatives, *Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples Speech*, Wednesday, 13 February 2008, <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansardr%2F2008-02-13%2F0003%22>, (2.05.2024)

<sup>3</sup> *Australia's First Peoples*, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/australias-first-peoples#toc-who-are-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-> (2.05.2024)



or Protection Board. These protection departments had extensive powers that were used to control all aspects of Aboriginal peoples' lives. People needed permission to move in and out of the reserves and settlements, to marry or to hold employment, and in many places their wages were controlled by the government. In most places, people were not allowed to practise culture or speak their traditional languages. Parents lost decision-making autonomy over their children”<sup>1</sup>.

“In the 1950<sup>s</sup>, following more than 150 years of violence against and dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Australia formally adopted a policy of assimilation. This meant policies of all Australian governments were aimed at ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and those of mixed descent, were to be absorbed into mainstream society”<sup>2</sup>.

This document reveals more information regarding these dark policies of discrimination, mentioning that “A key part of this objective was forcing children to grow up white. It is estimated that under protection legislation and the policy of assimilation, between the 1910s and 1970s, as many as one in three Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and communities. The children were placed in dormitories and other institutions, non-Indigenous foster homes or adopted by non-Indigenous families”<sup>3</sup>. The frightening ultimate aim of this governmental programme was “to eradicate Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people as a distinct cultural group. The policies have not only overtly racist, but the resulting disruption to families, communities and culture has contributed significantly to many of the challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today”<sup>4</sup>.

The consequence of these policies intended by the authorities was in fact a program of eugenics. It was intended to change the natives radically and assimilate them, in spite of the harm it caused, the “result of forcibly removals was comprehensively documented and acknowledged for the first time through the then Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's national inquiry into the separation of these children from their families, launched in 1995. The Inquiry's final report, bringing them home, was tabled in 1997 and described the physical, psychological and sexual abuse, sexual and labour exploitation, racism, grief and suffering, disruption of family life and loss of identity, culture heritage and community suffered by members of the Stolen Generations and their descendants. Evidence presented to the Inquiry underscored the ways that children were emotionally and psychologically isolated from their families- many were taught to believe their families had relinquished them because they were unwanted and unloved, or told that their parents were dead. Aboriginality was denigrated and Aboriginal people were discussed in derogatory ways, in an attempt to indoctrinate children and diminish their desire to return to family, Country and culture”<sup>5</sup>.

The documents about these programs speak about harsh living conditions in dormitories and other kinds of discrimination. They mentioned that “Children were often left hungry and cold. With a view to them becoming laborers or domestic servants, they were taught only basic literacy and numeracy. Punishment for minor transgressions was often severe and children were vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation in dormitories, as well as foster homes, adoptive families, and larger institutions. For many survivors the resulting trauma, pain, and suffering remains long after these laws, policies and practices ended in the 1970s. These native people had to come to terms with the realization that they had been targeted for the purposes of assimilation, lied to, and that their forcible removal from their families, Country and Culture was not only deliberate but sanctioned by law”<sup>6</sup>.

On 13 February 2008, the then Prime Minister Kevi Rudd made a formal apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to the Stolen Generations, on behalf of the Australian Parliament. The journey to the national apology began with the Bringing them home report with recommendation 5 a stating “that all Australian parliaments officially acknowledge the responsibility of their predecessors for the laws, policies and practices of forcible removal”<sup>7</sup>. The national apology was an important part of the healing journey for Stolen Generations survivors. “Healing for survivors, their descendants, families and communities is crucial to end

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<sup>1</sup> Idem

<sup>2</sup> Idem

<sup>3</sup> Idem

<sup>4</sup> Idem

<sup>5</sup> Idem

<sup>6</sup> <https://aiatsis.gov.au/family-history> (29.05.2024)

<sup>7</sup> Idem

the trauma cycle and to overcome, the impacts of complex intergenerational trauma that exists as a result of past government policies”<sup>1</sup>.

## Conclusions

As we have seen it is so clear that “politics raises questions to that cannot be answered by political calculation alone. For sure, there is no escape from this wider issue of morality and responsibility but if we ignore them, history suggests that they will return in the form of anger, resentment, and a burning sense of injustice, which will make our already fragile order more precarious still”<sup>2</sup>.

In spite of the fact that so much effort was made to stop and diminish the effects of the governmental programs of “whitening” the natives, that is, assimilation, genocide, eugenics, “the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in-state care has continued to rise. This is not just, an issue of the past. It is happening today. While the intent of children's removal today may be different to that experienced by the Stolen Generations, the effect is the same: a loss of identity and the exacerbation of intergenerational trauma”<sup>3</sup>.

Nyree (Ngari) Reynolds (born in Wollongong NSW, 1948) is a Wiradjuri artist and art tutor based in the Central West region of NSW. In describing her body of work, Nyree explains: “As an Aboriginal woman of the Wiradjuri Nation I like to tell stories through my paintings. As part of my art practice, I paint the Aboriginal children of the Stolen Generations blending into the landscape, their own Country from which they were removed. My hope is that when people view my work, they will leave with a new understanding of people who have been taken away from their family, home and Country. That they are real people with real stories to be told. Then I know my painting narratives achieved what I hoped they would.”<sup>4</sup>

The painting titled *Sorry* was created in 2006, six years after Nyree participated in the event of the Reconciliation Bridge Walk on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2000. This event involved more than 250,000 people marching together across the Sydney Harbour Bridge, over the course of nearly six hours, to show their support for the concept of ‘reconciliation’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> [aiatsis.gov.au](https://aiatsis.gov.au) (29.05.2024)

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference. How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, Bloomsbury, London, 2003, p. 4

<sup>3</sup> *About Bringing Them Home*, <https://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/legal-and-policy/australias-human-rights-framework/>, (2.05.2024)

<sup>4</sup> <https://australian-museum/learn/first-nations/sorry/> (2.05.2024)

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