

AUSTRALIAN RESPONSES TO THE REMOVAL POLICIES

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'Ten Years Later: *Bringing Them Home* and the Forced Removal of Children' Conference

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Generations of Australians have grown up believing that Aboriginal culture is worthless, that Aboriginal people are morally inferior to us. That is the myth by which we justified our takeover of the continent without making treaties. That is the myth which led to the policy of removing Aboriginal children from their families.

If Australian society is to prosper, this myth must be overthrown. It has cut us off from a vital source of wisdom on how to manage this fragile continent, and we are increasingly seeing the consequences. As John Sanderson, former Governor of Western Australia, said recently, 'It takes some doing to destroy the entire ecology of a continent in two and a half centuries, but somehow we are well on the way to achieving this staggering feat.'¹ We will have to open our eyes to Aboriginal perspectives on managing this land, especially as the southern part of the continent dries out, and our European agricultural methods become less and less viable.

The *Bringing Them Home* Report² has played a major role in undermining the myth of Aboriginal inferiority.

That was not immediately apparent when the Report was published. The Howard Government had just come into office, and their response came straight from the myth. They had argued in the election campaign that Aboriginal interests had won too many concessions thanks to an undue sense of guilt among white Australians. They had no intention of responding positively to a report which told in heart-rending detail of the agony endured by Aboriginals as a result of the removal policies. For eight months they made no response except to say that there would be no apology, and no compensation would be paid. Several ministers attempted to discredit the Report.

The public reaction was totally different. The *Bringing Them Home* Report sold in far greater numbers than any comparable report, and the tone of letters to the newspapers showed that many people were horrified by their Government's cold-hearted response. Most may not have understood much about Aboriginal people, but everyone could understand the pain of a mother whose child has been forcibly removed. Speaking a few weeks after the release of the Report, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Dodson told an Aboriginal conference:

[W]e have seen a most extraordinary turn of events in this country. Day after day and now week after week the newspapers and airwaves have been jammed with talk about our families and children. Day after day the letter pages a [sic] filled with the reactions of ordinary Australians, horrified at the truths they never knew. Never before have so many Australians turned their attention to our families. Never before has Australia really known or cared about our children. Children taken from the arms of their mothers. Taken from their cultures.³

As community concern welled up, the tone of official pronouncements softened. Eventually the Government announced that they would put \$63 million into adopting a few of the Report's recommendations. Link-Up services – which bring together Aboriginal families separated by the removal policies – received Government funding, as did counselling services for the Stolen Generations.⁴

However, the sums invested were utterly inadequate to meet the need. Where Canada, faced with a similar situation, has invested hundreds of millions of dollars, Australia has invested only tens of millions. Few Stolen Generations people are able to receive help from health professionals.

Some of the Stolen Generations sought redress through the courts. The Federal Government paid expensive lawyers to oppose them. The best-known case, *Cubillo v Commonwealth*,⁵ in which two members of the Stolen Generations sued the Government for wrongful treatment, cost over \$10 million. In his judgment in August 2000, Justice O'Loughlin of the Federal Court accepted that both had been abused in the institutions to which they had been taken, but he could not find that the Federal Government bore any responsibility for this abuse, even though government officers had removed the children to the institution. So the case was dismissed.⁶

Perhaps it was this intransigence that galvanised so many Australians. Stolen Generations members live in every town, and in most suburbs of our cities. Many non-Indigenous Australians would have encountered them at some stage – at school, in clinics or welfare offices. But, alienated as they are by traumatic experiences in childhood, they are often unable to make friends with their neighbours. And their neighbours, having no concept of what they have endured, are unable to bridge the gulf of misunderstanding. Often the Stolen Generations' only friends are those they grew up with in their institution. Since the *Bringing Them Home* Report appeared, however, many of these neighbours have reached out to the Stolen Generations, building bridges across the gulf.

The person principally responsible for focusing national attention onto the Report was Sir Ronald Wilson. He had been profoundly affected by the *Bringing Them Home* Inquiry:

It was like no other I have undertaken. Other inquiries were intellectual exercises, a matter of collating information and making recommendations. But for these people to reveal what had happened to them took immense courage and every emotional stimulus they could muster.

At each session, the tape would be turned on and we would wait ... I would look into the face of the person who was to speak to us. I would see the muscles straining to hold back the tears. But tears would stream down, still no words being spoken. And then, hesitantly, words would come.

We sat there as long as it took. We heard the story, told with that person's whole being, reliving experiences which had been buried deep, sometimes for decades. They weren't speaking with their minds; they were speaking with their hearts. And my heart had to open if I was to understand them.⁷

This affected him deeply. As he told an overflow audience at Old Parliament House in Canberra,

I came to this inquiry as a man over the hill at 73, with fifty years behind me as a hardboiled lawyer, mixing it with all sorts of antagonists, and yet this inquiry changed me. And if it can change me, it can change our nation.⁸

That was no rhetorical statement. From then on he spoke publicly in forum after forum, drawing crowds in their hundreds:

Children were removed because the Aboriginal race was seen as an embarrassment to white Australia. The aim was to strip the children of their Aboriginality and accustom them to live in a white Australia. The tragedy was compounded when the children, as they grew up, encountered the racism which shaped the policy, and found themselves rejected by the very society for which they were being prepared.⁹

He criss-crossed the country, meeting State and Territory leaders to discuss the implementation of the *Bringing Them Home* Report's recommendations. He asked for apologies from Australian governments, churches, the police and all who had been involved in implementing the removal policies – and led the way himself. 'I was a leader of the Presbyterian Church in Western Australia at the time we ran Sister Kate's Home, where removed children grew up,' he said. 'I was proud of the home, with its system of cottage families. Imagine my pain when I discovered, during this inquiry, that children were sexually abused in those cottages.'¹⁰ He and the Presbyterian Church apologised wholeheartedly to the Aboriginal people.

His actions struck a chord. In the following months, most of Australia's State parliaments and churches held formal ceremonies to hear from representatives of the Stolen Generations, and to apologise for their role in this tragedy.¹¹ They were profoundly moving events, which sent a burst of hope through the Aboriginal community that perhaps a new day was dawning.

A bigger ceremony was yet to come. The *Bringing Them Home* Report recommended that a Sorry Day be held annually to commemorate the tragedy. This had been proposed by several of those who gave evidence to the Inquiry when asked what could help the healing process.

Sorry is a potent word. As Sir Ronald said, 'It indicates understanding, a willingness to enter into the suffering, and implies a commitment to do more.'¹² In Aboriginal English it has a further meaning: when Aboriginal people come together to grieve after a death, they describe this as 'sorry business'. So a Sorry Day would be meaningful to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

The Federal Government was not interested. But could a Sorry Day be held on a community basis? Sir Ronald consulted spokespeople for the Stolen Generations, and they jointly invited 30 people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to meet and consider this question. At that meeting, in January 1998, the participants decided to try. They chose 26 May as the day, since the Report had been tabled in the Federal Parliament on May 26 1997, and decided they would be led by an Aboriginal and a non-Aboriginal Co-Chair. As Co-Chairs they elected Carol Kendall, Chair of the National Indigenous Stolen Generations Working Group, and Greg Thompson, who worked with World Vision. Thus was launched the National Sorry Day Committee.

In a statement the Committee and the Working Group described Sorry Day as:

a day when all Australians can express their sorrow for the whole tragic episode, and celebrate the beginning of a new understanding. ... Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will participate in a Day dedicated to the memory of loved ones who never came home, or who are still finding their way home. ... This commemoration can help restore the dignity stripped from those affected by removal and offers those who carried out the policy – and their successors – a chance to move beyond denial and guilt. It could shape a far more creative partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, with immense benefit to both.¹³

A former Governor-General of Australia, Sir Zelman Cowen, accepted the role of patron. In March the idea was launched to the nation through the media. It spread like a bushfire. Education authorities produced study material, community groups gave strong backing. The Sorry Day Committee was merely a group of people with almost no money, and no ability to organise events across the nation. But that didn't matter, because people organised their own events. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians met to plan. Artists painted, musicians composed, writers and playwrights wrote.

One community group had already launched 'sorry books' in which everyone could express their sorrow, and apologise for the harm done by the removal policies. Demand for the books grew until eventually over 1000 were in circulation – in public libraries, council offices, schools, churches – and nearly a million people wrote messages, many telling of personal experiences which prompted them to contribute.

On Sorry Day the books were handed to Aboriginal elders in hundreds of ceremonies in cities, towns and rural centres all over the country. Universities, government departments, local councils and churches held gatherings to hear from Stolen Generations people. There were theatrical presentations, cultural displays, and town barbecues. Thousands of schools arranged projects and commemorations. In Melbourne, the Lord Mayor handed the keys of the city to representatives of the Stolen Generations in welcome to people who had been long ignored, and the city churches rang their bells in tribute. In Adelaide, a memorial was unveiled at the site of a former home for removed children. In Sydney, thousands rallied at the Opera House. Among them was Luigi, with his ice-cream van, handing out free gelati. 'We Italian Australians need to say sorry too,' he explained.

That evening, 15 minutes of the half-hour ABC Television news was devoted to Sorry Day and to the heartfelt response of Australia's best-known Aboriginal leaders. Prominent politicians were seen in tears as they watched a ceremony in the Federal Parliament's theatrette. Next morning, many papers carried the news on their front pages. And in the following days it was a main subject of opinion columns and talk-back radio.

Why did Sorry Day touch such a chord? One of the deepest human pains is that of a mother who loses her child, or a child its mother. Yet the gulf between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians was simply too immense for even this pain to flow across it. The *Bringing Them Home* Report exposed this gulf, and many Australians were shocked. Sorry Day was a chance to accept blame, and to do something about it. As one person expressed it:

I thought back to my primary school classroom. I can name every person in that class except the four Aboriginal boys who sat at the back of the class, never asked a question, stuck with each other in the playground, never played with the rest of us. I looked on them as incredibly dull. When I read *Bringing Them Home*, I began to understand what they had

probably endured, and why they felt so alienated from the rest of us. And I felt ashamed.¹⁴

The Federal Government was taken aback by the strength of Sorry Day. They had no idea how to respond to a campaign which included many people active on their side of politics. The Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, John Herron, appeared on television to explain why the Government would not apologise. He gently criticised the community response with the rhetoric that sorry books would not do anything for Indigenous health – though his medical training got the better of his political instincts when he qualified that with the caveat, ‘except perhaps mental health.’ Other than him, the Government made little response.

But many of the Stolen Generations were deeply moved. For the first time, they felt that the Australian community understood what they had gone through. Now, many of the Stolen Generations felt, they could look towards healing. From across the country many met together. Out of their discussions came a decision to launch a ‘Journey of Healing’. Former ATSI Chair Lowitja O’Donoghue and former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser became its patrons.

The Journey of Healing’s underlying concept is that, if the wounds are to be healed, both government and the community, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, have a vital role. It offers every Australian the chance to be part of healing this deep national wound. And many have responded. Hundreds of events are arranged each year, principally on the anniversary of Sorry Day, bringing together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. In many places, radio stations invite Stolen Generations people in the neighbourhood to tell their stories. All over the country, ordinary Australians are learning what many of their Aboriginal compatriots endured, not in the abstract but through people they bump into in the supermarket. Understanding is growing, and people who have felt alienated for years are experiencing the welcome of their local communities. In a supportive environment, they can begin to heal.

This was most clearly seen a year later, in May 2000, when the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation invited all who wished to show their support for reconciliation to join them on a walk across the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It turned out to be the largest demonstration in Australian history. A quarter of a million people walked, many of them carrying signs saying

‘sorry’. Some paid for a sign-writing plane to fly above the Bridge and write the word ‘sorry’ in the sky.

Among the walkers was an Aboriginal woman, Val Linow, who had been removed from her family at the age of two, and abused cruelly while a ward of the state. When she read in the press that the Sorry Day Committee was inviting the Stolen Generations to join the Bridge walk behind a banner proclaiming a Journey of Healing, she phoned angrily to say that after all she had been through, there was no possibility of healing for her. She could not walk behind that banner.

She made a sign of her own – ‘Stolen Generation, I am not a myth’ – which she carried across the Bridge. For her, that walk was a life-changing experience. She later wrote:

When I looked up and saw the word ‘Sorry’ in the heavens, and looked around at the thousands of people, I found myself in tears. I know at last I’m not alone, and seeing the white Australians joining in with the Aboriginals, I felt peace.... Part of me was trying to heal, but most of my healing was the walk over the Bridge.¹⁵

Today she is active in the Journey of Healing in Sydney.

Walks took place in all cities that year, and a total of a million people walked for reconciliation. The Federal Government could not ignore such a demonstration. Prime Minister John Howard announced that a central area in Canberra would be set aside ‘to perpetuate in the minds of the Australian public the importance of reconciliation, and will include a memorial and depiction of the removal of children from their families.’¹⁶

But the Government still wanted control, as they made clear when they refused to include those who had been removed in developing the memorial’s design. This provoked demonstrations, and criticism even from party colleagues such as former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser. The project ground to a halt.

The Co-Chairs of the Sorry Day Committee went to see the Minister for Indigenous Affairs. They told him,

This memorial could be immensely healing if it comes out of genuine consultation. We are prepared to consult the stolen generations, former staff of the institutions to which they were taken, and those who fostered or adopted children,

with the aim of reaching consensus on the design of the memorial.¹⁷

Some months later the Minister accepted this proposal. Consultation teams were speedily organised. They travelled to all States and Territories, and met with several hundred people bursting with ideas. These ideas were brought together in three days of passionate meetings in Sydney. Through the heartache, people listened to each other, and shifted from hard-held points of view. By the end, there was agreement on a strong and heartfelt statement, and it was presented to the Government. The fact that consensus had been reached meant that those who tried to soften the statement had little leverage, and eventually the statement was approved with almost no change.

Today the memorial stands between the High Court and the National Library, where thousands of people each year stop and see it. The text begins:

This place honours the people who have suffered under the removal policies and practices. It also honours those Indigenous and non-Indigenous people whose genuine care softened the tragic impact of what are now recognised as cruel and misguided policies.

This was a significant step towards an acceptance by the Federal Government of the basic integrity of the *Bringing Them Home* Report. Over the years, the scepticism with which many Coalition politicians initially treated the Report has largely evaporated. Today practically all accept that the *Bringing Them Home* Report tells a true story. The Health Minister Tony Abbott stated in May 2007,

[t]he forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families is an episode in our history of which we are rightly ashamed. ... The fundamental premise on which it was based – that children were better off away from their black families – was wrong, indeed repugnant. ... We should have known it then. We certainly know it now, and we do have to atone for it.¹⁸

The Government hasn't shown much atonement yet. But the myth has been undermined. Now we need to replace it with stories which build instead of denigrate, stories that bridge the emotional gulf. Stories such as the community response, from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, to the tragedy revealed by the *Bringing Them Home* Report.

Endnotes

- * John Bond is non-Indigenous, a writer and editor, based in Canberra. He was the Secretary of the National Sorry Day Committee from 1998 until 2006, and is now an Executive member of the Stolen Generations Alliance: Australians for Healing, Truth and Justice.
- 1 John Sanderson, 'The 2007 Garran Oration: Is Strategic Surprise Inevitable?' (Speech delivered at the Institute of Public Administration Australia National Conference, Burswood Entertainment Complex, Perth, 19 September 2007), Institute of Public Administration Australia Western Australian Division <www.wa.ipaa.org.au/download.php?id=229> at 20 March 2008.
- 2 National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (*Bringing Them Home* Inquiry), *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 Opportunity Commission* ('HREOC') (1997) (*Bringing Them Home Report*).
- 3 Michael Dodson, 'An Indigenous Home for Indigenous Children' (Speech delivered at the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care National Conference, Townsville, 25–26 June 1997), HREOC <http://www.hreoc.gov.au/about/media/speeches/social_justice/indigenous_home.html> at 20 March 2008.
- 4 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Social Justice Report 1998*, HREOC (1999) 56–7 <http://www.hreoc.gov.au/pdf/social_justice/sjreport_1998.pdf> at 20 March 2008.
- 5 (2000) 103 FCR 1.
- 6 *Ibid* 485 (O'Loughlin J); *aff'd* (2001) 112 FCR 455, 579. The High Court refused to grant special leave to appeal: *Cubillo v Commonwealth* (HCA D10 and D11/2001, 3 May 2002). For a discussion of the case at first instance, see *Cubillo v Commonwealth of Australia*; *Gunner v Commonwealth of Australia* (2000) 5(4) *Australian Indigenous Law Reporter* 29.
- 7 Sir Ronald Wilson, quoted in John Bond, 'Time to Say Sorry to "Stolen Generations"' (1998) 11(1) *For A Change* <<http://www.forachange.net/back/issue/article/1560.html>> at 20 March 2008.
- 8 Sir Ronald Wilson (Speech delivered at Old Parliament House, Canberra, 28 October 1997).
- 9 *Ibid*.
- 10 *Ibid*.
- 11 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, above n 4, 48–52, 63–4.
- 12 Sir Ronald Wilson, quoted in John Bond, above n 7.
- 13 National Indigenous Working Group on the Stolen Generations, quoted in HREOC, *Bringing Them Home: Implementation*

- Progress Report' (1998) 4(3) *Australian Indigenous Law Reporter* 67, Appendix B.
- 14 Anonymous, quoted in John Bond, 'From Saying Sorry to a Journey of Healing: National Sorry Day in Australia' in Paul van Tongeren et al (eds), *People Building Peace II* (2005), <<http://www.peoplebuildingpeace.org/thestories/print.php?id=150&typ=theme>> at 20 March 2008.
- 15 Letter from Valerie Linow to John Bond, June 2000 (copy on file with author).
- 16 John Bond, 'Australia Continues Her Journey of Healing' (2004) 17(3) *For A Change* <<http://www.forachange.net/back/issue/article/1953.html>> at 20 March 2008.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Tony Abbott, quoted in Stolen Generations Alliance <<http://www.sgalliance.org.au/>> at 20 March 2008.

COMMENTARY

