

The Sins of the Nation and the Ritual of Apologies

By Danielle Celermajer

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Danielle Celermajer's rich and eloquent exploration of the political apology is located in the world that straddles contemporary political imperatives and the pre-modern religious ritual, a world where the manifestations of justice demand renewal. Declaring at the outset that she does not 'see apology as in any way approaching a sufficient response to gross violations of human rights' (p 12), Celermajer argues that addressing the wrongs of the past through narrow institutions of justice — by punishing individual wrongdoers and compensating victims — fails to give significance to collective or state responsibility and so reduces the potential (within apology) for national transformation. Celermajer is concerned with systemic violations of rights and, more particularly, with the transformation of the social and political systems in which they linger. Her enterprise is to find enduring ways of dislodging 'the entrenched patterns of disrespect and misrecognition that underpin the violations that wrack societies and relations between nations' (p 5), a task, she contends, beyond the competence of traditional institutions of justice whose focus is predominantly individual punishment.

In *The Sins of the Nation and the Ritual of Apologies*, Celermajer explores the notion of collective repentance in Judaism and early Christianity, proposing that traditions of atonement and penitence signal a way of transcending 'this deficit in justice' (p 247) by providing the possibility of collective and prospective reparations which both redress the victims of historical harm and, more significantly, heal and re-orientate societies emerging from indicted pasts. Celermajer's meticulous investigation of the apologetic form in Judaic and Christian practice is layered with acute insights and interpretation. She emphasises that it is the *form* of religious apology, and not its substance, that offers the prospect for social transformation; that the collective ritual of repentance removed from its content may be instructive to political actors seeking to address 'systematic violations in the course of reconstituting their political communities' (p 140). The book demonstrates that the performative aspects of apology, its mode of speech, its structure and setting, are compelling features of the mechanism and, individually or in combination, they can undoubtedly alter the delivery and reception of a political apology. However, in prioritising the form of an apology over its substance, Celermajer perhaps undersells the persuasive weight and role of individual narrative in activating social transformation. While the medium of apology is an effective vehicle for its message, if the content is weak and devoid of meaning and public resonance, the political apology is at risk of losing its hold.

In her analysis of the history of contemporary political apologies, Celermajer devotes a significant proportion of the book to an examination of Australia's history of recurring human rights violations against its first peoples, acutely illustrated by the implementation of racist forced removal policies originating in the late 1800s. Against this backdrop, designated 'the most blemished chapter' (*World Today* 1999) in Australian history by former Liberal Prime Minister John Howard, Celermajer traces the evolution of the post-Howard 2008 apology to the Stolen Generations, which she describes as 'the most significant social movement (in Australia) since the Vietnam war' (p 2). Soon after the Australian Labor Party ousted the Howard Government from power in November 2007, Prime Minister-elect Kevin Rudd 'signaled his administration's change of direction' (*BBC World* 2007) by undertaking to issue a national apology to the Stolen Generations within months of the commencement of his first parliamentary term. The change of direction came in February 2008, when Rudd apologised to Indigenous Australians for the harm suffered as a consequence of forced removal policies devised and executed by former federal and state governments. Despite earlier calls for an apology, the focus on an expression of collective responsibility gained momentum with the publication in 1997 of *Bringing Them Home*, the report of the Australian Human Rights Commission's National Inquiry into the Forced Removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families. Ten years after the national inquiry and after Prime Minister John Howard's assertion that 'Australians who will never entertain an apology because they don't believe that there is anything to apologise for' (*Australian* 2007), the Rudd apology broke the 'stony, stubborn and deafening silence' (p 210) of the nation's Parliament and committed the country to a future where 'the injustices of the past must never, never happen again' (*ABC News* 2008).

The Rudd government apology complied in every respect with the broad criteria Celermajer establishes for her analysis of the political apology. It contained words denoting acts of apologetic speech — an expression of regret, a request for forgiveness; it was delivered in public to a political entity (the nation state) by a national leader with authority to speak; and its primary audience was an identifiable group who had suffered a significant public wrong in the past. In many quarters, the apology was hailed as a moral turning point for the nation. Celermajer quotes Australian historian Don Watson (p 212):

I think it's a different country since Wednesday (the day of the apology) ... It's a bit different in most of our heads, whether we're for or against it. And I think that Kevin Rudd has given a sort of moral compass to the matter of our relations with Aboriginal Australia.

However, a year after the Rudd apology, Indigenous leader Patrick Dodson stated that the hope, confidence and trust that the apology had 'rekindled in government'

had rapidly dissipated within Indigenous communities, given the lack of 'follow-up' (*Living Black* 2009) in the form of compensation. Dodson's disillusionment was echoed by Jim Morrison, the co-chair of the Stolen Generations Alliance, in the lead-up to the apology's second anniversary in February 2010. Morrison warned that the apology had 'opened up old wounds, particularly since the government ha[d] failed to deliver any justice' (National Indigenous Radio 2010) to the Stolen Generations to whom the apology was primarily addressed.

Celermajer perceives the purpose of the political apology as altering 'the quality of relationship' by shifting 'the dynamics of power and recognition between the parties and their respective identities' (p 75). The Rudd government's public declaration of recognition and of regret, and the assumption of some collective responsibility for the extensive and enduring harm unleashed by forced removals, was a long-awaited expression of national empathy with Indigenous Australia. This expression of acknowledgement, successful perhaps in form, has however failed to convert to a tangible manifestation of reparation — the Rudd government consistently rejecting claims for compensation and the establishment of a Stolen Generations Reparations Tribunal that would provide reparations geared towards the specific experience of the Stolen Generations. The absence of the apology's follow-up in substance has clearly eroded its legitimacy and suspended, to Australia's moral detriment, its transformative potential. On the other hand, for many non-Indigenous Australians, the expression of apology stands as an affirming and adequate indicator of national regret and the denouement of national shame, leaving the land of the 'fair go' unburdened to mask the 'retention of a profoundly discriminatory culture' (p 152) and Celermajer's 'dynamic of power between the parties' minimally adjusted.

The presentation of political apology is significant but its consequent impact and broad political effect are of equal importance in signaling its transformative success, particularly if, as Celermajer suggests, it 'might constitute a unique and vital political strategy' (p 6) for renewing and augmenting the institutions of justice. If the act of apology is to move beyond stark symbolism and narcissism 'tailored (more) to the interest of the ones giving than the ones receiving' (p 205), its shape and long-term intention perhaps warrant greater consideration than is given in the last chapter of this compelling project. Towards the end of the chapter, Celermajer makes a critical assessment (p 255):

... apology's own capacity to effect shifts in the framework of norms will be supported by corresponding changes in other parts of the institutional framework ... what happens in tandem with apology matters.

The potential of the political apology to redeem its transformative character demands the bold execution by its representative of corresponding measures which translate its moral promise and commitment into enduring, concrete expressions of regret and responsibility. In Australia, the continued absence of this next vital step — a national endorsement of the apology in substance via reparations and constitutional rearrangement — coupled with conduct that actively undermines the apology's pledge (such as the Rudd government's continued suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act to facilitate implementation of key elements of the Northern Territory intervention),¹ serve to perpetuate Celermajer's 'justice deficit' and further alienate Indigenous Australians as they are increasingly marginalised recipients or beneficiaries of a 'mere apology'.

Celermajer groups the political apologies that have emerged during the last 20 years into *historical apologies* (wrongs committed in the 'more remote past', such as those associated with the Holocaust and with colonialism and ethnic or religious discrimination) and *transitional apologies* (wrongs perpetrated in the 'immediate past') (p 15). The latter category portrays apology as one of a number of strategies that interact to support transition to a reconstituted (democratic) political community. In relation to South Africa, Celermajer makes the observation that despite the country's status as 'the heartland of reconciliation politics' (p 37), the representative political apology, in contrast to individual confessional apologies evident throughout the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, did not feature as a distinct, post-transition act. She suggests that the possible reason for this omission was that the new South African leader, Nelson Mandela, was a member of the 'victim group'.

In South Africa, the relevant apologies may have preceded political transition. In late 1993, a few months before South Africa's President, F W de Klerk, and Nelson Mandela were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Mandela apologised for the atrocities allegedly committed by the African National Congress 'during a state of siege' (*New York Times* 1993) and de Klerk apologised for the loss of freedom and dignity and the impairment of human development endured by Black people under apartheid (*Independent* 1993), an apology he reiterated before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1996. Ten years later, De Klerk, recalling that his 1996 apology was 'trivialised or forgotten', said that 'apologies in themselves were never enough'. The 'first and most important step in dealing with any transgression', said De Klerk, was 'to rectify the situation' (IOL 2006). The rectification in South

1 Introduced by the Howard government in 2007, one of the major components of the intervention saw inter alia the introduction of an income management regime which quarantines a percentage of welfare payments for Aboriginal people, prescribing that certain amounts can only be spent on designated items (food and clothing) at specific retailers.

Africa took the form of a national commitment to an extraordinarily comprehensive transitional package designed to overhaul the ideological values embedded in the identity of the ruling polity. The range of measures aimed at exacting political transformation did not specifically include an apology; rather, these measures combined to simultaneously imply and transcend apology. The political, economic and moral imperatives which necessitated the nation's transformation, and the international and domestic investment in the country's civil evolution, required a strategy that guaranteed the dismantling of an unsustainable ideology and equal participation in, and access to, the country's governance and resources. Apology was the critical starting point; what followed would determine its achievement: exhaustive representative negotiations; free and fair elections; a new constitution with a preamble acknowledging the horrors of the past and an entrenched Bill of Rights designed to reshape the nation's future; extensive legislative reform; the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission with amnesty and reparations committees (chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Methodist minister Dr Alex Boraine); political trials; and commemorations.

While the extremes of apartheid are not manifest in Australia's 'divided' society (p 142), the ongoing racism and human rights violations borne by Indigenous Australians, and the parallel absence of creative and appropriate forms of justice, continue to bind the nation to a culture, often unconscious, of discrimination and exclusion. Celermajer properly asserts that the Rudd apology presented the opportunity to throw 'down the gauntlet for a national normative reorientation' (p 154), an opportunity that Australia was initially invited to take up by Prime Minister Paul Keating during his Redfern Address in 1992 (which Celermajer identifies as Australia's 'first or proto-apology' (p 154)). Regrettably, the new leader failed to capture the potency of this act and link its declaration to a negotiated program of structural and attitudinal change, necessary if apology is to effectively contribute to undoing 'the hurt, the alienation, the loss of dignity, the self abnegation which the injustice (and particularly institutionalised and repetitive injustice) has produced' (Brennan 1999, 595). If, in the course of apology, leadership omits dedicated engagement with, and a re-evaluation of, the identity of a nation, a reorientation to the future, Celermajer's study cautions that apologies may simply produce a conservative, not a progressive, dynamic (p 106). And as with the De Klerk apology, Rudd's 'powerful piece of political performance' (p 210) faces the prospect of being trivialised and forgotten.

Celermajer's study of the religious practice of repentance and the political strategy of collective apology yields a notable coincidence: during the final quarter of the 20th century, the re-emergence of the communal form of repentance in the church (predominantly within the Catholic Church) corresponded with a growing invocation of the political apology by world leaders. As 'traditional liberal strategies' (p 140)

for redressing pervasive human rights violations demonstrate their limitations and Celermajor's 'deficit' in the institutions of justice urges an imaginative response, *The Sins of the Nation and the Ritual of Apologies* stands to shift political thinking and strategy at a time when democracy and collective engagement are grappling with their long-term prospects. With the political apology increasingly becoming a feature of contemporary nation-building and inter-national resolution, *The Sins of the Nation* offers leaders of states, politicians and policy makers a timely and critical exploration of an age-old mechanism that not only compels an empathic response to wrongs of the past, but is designed and delivered in a form that invigorates, transforms and safeguards evolving political and social relationships. ●

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