
NATIONAL INDIGENOUS APOLOGY ANNIVERSARY

by The Hon Kevin Rudd MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs

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Three years ago, I delivered an apology in the Australian parliament on behalf of all Australians to the Indigenous peoples of our vast continent. Three years later, I've asked myself the question — what has it all meant? Have there been changes in the material conditions of our first Australians? Have there been changes in the way in which we see each other — Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike? Has there been a change in the way in which the world sees us — this motley collection of peoples from all over the world who have come to this ancient land to make their home.

But a home which, since the Dreamtime, has been the earthly womb of our Indigenous peoples, peoples who cared for the land, peoples who nurtured its spirituality. Or, if we strip away the emotions of the day, and look starkly at the words printed on the page, has it all added up to be no more than a clanging symbol and a sounding gong?

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For in the end, we are all judged by the truth of what we say and do. I've often been asked what it was like to write the Apology. The truthful response is that it was hard. How could a white-fella begin to plumb the depths of Indigenous suffering over hundreds of years? And then, with any confidence proclaim any real empathy with the physical, emotional and spiritual experience of degradation and indignity? Because as the eighth generation descent of Anglo Celtic convicts and settlers, empathy was never the first or best of our human faculties.

Put simply, I experienced the most aggravating case of writer's block. The words did not come.

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I was confronted by the words of one old lady who said to me after we had embraced, that in all her life she had never been kissed by a white-fella. What terrible, wrenching words were these. That the silent obscenity that had been the racial divide in this country had rendered it impossible for this beautiful old lady to be simply embraced as one of us. The rest is now history. The speech was completed. And the Apology delivered.

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I rang another member of the Stolen Generation yesterday — a man this time — to ask what if anything

the Apology had meant to him. He said to me that over the years “he'd never felt like an Australian”. He said he “felt like an outsider in his own country.” He didn't have any aspirations beyond being on the welfare. He told me that for him the Apology was intensely personal. He said that for the first time he felt like both an Australian and an Aboriginal.

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That the act of “saying sorry”, if genuinely meant, can help to set relationships right. That whatever a person's religious views might be, there is something inherently sacred, something inherently spiritual, about human beings truthfully acknowledging that a great wrong had been done. That if this acknowledgment is received in the same spirit in which it is given, there is in fact a transformative quality to this most raw of human experiences.

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Revolutions of the soul are hard to engineer. They are difficult to come by, but when they happen, and when they are based in truth, the change can be both enduring and profound. In the Apology, I spoke of this act of reconciliation as a bridge — a bridge that had to be crossed before the practical work of reconciliation could begin.

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Because the truth is, our own journey of reconciliation between the first Australians and we later Australians has only just begun. We cannot allow our spirits to flag. We cannot allow our efforts to fail. We cannot allow our vision to dim.

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For our future together lies in the simple things like how our eyes meet in the street. But it also lies in the great things. Realising the dream of Aboriginal Australians being among our leading entrepreneurs, our trade unionists, our public servants, our diplomats, our military commanders, our educators, our scientists and our artists.

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It took more than half a century following Dr King's freedom rally address in St Louis for his fellow countrymen to elect their first African-American President. I hope, I pray and I believe that we will elect our first Indigenous Prime Minister well before that time.