

# A Statement of Apology



ORIGINAL DRAFT

**I ACKNOWLEDGE THE NGUNNAWAL PEOPLE ON WHOSE TRADITIONAL LANDS THIS PARLIAMENT HOUSE STANDS. I ALSO ACKNOWLEDGE JIMMY CLEMENTS, ELDER OF THE WIRADJURI PEOPLE.** Fellow Parliamentarians, Fellow Australians, Aboriginal brothers and sisters, Jimmy Clements symbolises the persistence and strength of Aboriginal people. At the 1927 opening of this parliament he was regarded as a curiosity. But he walked for a week to be there, and he was there for a purpose. We have his photograph in the grounds of the parliament. We have his photograph on the steps of the parliament. Jimmy Clements now talks to us. He is saying this house is on Aboriginal land. Aboriginal people must always be at its heart. Without Aboriginal people, Australian governance means nothing. But when this picture was taken, within our fathers and grandfathers lifetimes, the most terrible injustices and cruelty were being committed against Aboriginal people. Not by nasty, ignorant people or soldiers on the frontier, but by people in suits, by governments, by bureaucrats, police and welfare officers. Today I make this statement of acknowledgement, appeasement and apology to all Aboriginal people for the offences committed against Aboriginal children and their families by Australian governments.

In making this statement we move forward as a nation. We do so because today we not only acknowledge wrongs done in the past, we bring into the heart of the governance structure of this country a new vision of our future. A vision filled with the power and good of over 50,000 years of Aboriginal wisdom and knowledge that has never been properly acknowledged or understood by Australian governments.

When we come together and celebrate and understand the great qualities of Aboriginal culture there is nothing that can stop us as a nation. All Australians will have opened up our hearts and minds to the original spirit and thinking of this land. All Australians will have a chance to be in touch with the vibrations of the earth, the essence of water and air of this great continent. It may still take some time for us to walk together but that will be our vision and our destiny and, our lives, black and white, and the very conduct of this country, will be more complete and true.

There are some in our nation who think that an apology is not necessary for all that has befallen Aboriginal people. Some of these people say that an apology is about wallowing in the wrongs of the past. To the contrary, today we move forward stronger and better. Governments have tried to suppress and eliminate Aboriginality. We now walk out of that dark veil of ignorance and prejudice and into the light. We walk forward to acknowledge the tremendous spirit, knowledge and resilience of Aboriginal people.

Let us be clear it is not as a result of some white benevolence that I stand here today, it is as a result of the historical struggles of Aboriginal people to overcome every terrible act, every adversity, every

physical and mental harm that is possible to be endured by man. Today is a day of Aboriginal triumph, a day in which we salute Aboriginal men and women who have not only survived but now bring forth a new era for our nation.

One of the important aspects of my statement today is to take ownership within the modern history of Australia for one of the cruellest and most ignorant crimes against Aboriginal people. This was not a crime committed two hundred years ago. It was a crime committed by modern government. It was a crime committed on the base of a supposedly scientific principle of the superiority of one race over another. Many Australians fought in WWII against countries and governments that wanted to found societies on the basis of race. These same eugenic principles were behind the policy of taking away Aboriginal children from their families and breeding out the Aboriginality from their physical and mental lives. These policies were not carried out by evil Nazis or Japanese fanatics, they were carried out by Australian government bureaucrats, policeman and welfare officers.

I want to acknowledge the children who suffered so much under this terrible regime. All of them are great heroes as great as our greatest WWII soldiers. Nothing could make them forsake their families, culture or where they came from. Nothing would make them walk away from their heritage. Because of their triumph we now go forward as a nation with a far more rigorous understanding of the strength of Aboriginal culture. The sacrifices of the stolen generation will never be forgotten in the annals of this nation's history. We will look back on their adversity with admiration for their spirit and endurance. We will

remember them and in doing so we will never allow the rights of children to their families, culture and heritage to be taken away on Australian soil again.

We need to de-politicise the history of our country. We need to objectify all that has happened. We need to tell of all that has happened without fear or favour. Most of all in this we need to understand the true picture of what has happened, within our midst, to our Aboriginal people.

In 1992 my great predecessor Paul Keating said in his historic Redfern speech: "It begins, I think with the act of recognition. Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us. With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds. We failed to ask, how would I feel if this were done to me? As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded us all<sup>1</sup>".

So let us now talk with some precision about the history of Aboriginal nations in this country since colonisation.

We may divide the history of Aboriginal/European relations into five periods. In the first period, let us call it the frontier period from 1770 to 1861, untold catastrophes befell the Aboriginal people. We estimate the Aboriginal population of Australia to be between 2 million and 400,000 at the time James Cook and Joseph Banks dropped in

on and spent some months with Noel Pearson's forbears on the Endeavour River in 1770. Theories now suggest that even before Aboriginal people came into contact with Europeans, the seeds of disease took an enormous toll on the Aboriginal population. We know of the military assaults on Indigenous lands, the most notorious being the genocidal actions of Governor Arthur in Tasmania. But up and down the frontier atrocities were committed, lands were stolen and Aboriginal people suffered. By 1861 the Aboriginal population was down to 180,000.

From 1861 onwards a new terror began for Aboriginal people. This was the period in which the seeds of the ideas that led to the taking away of children first fermented in the minds of people charged with "the protection" of Aboriginal people. Prior to 1861, missionaries were prepared to accept according to the principles of their religions, that Aboriginal people were every bit as capable as Europeans. But with the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origins of the Species* in 1859, a new theory starts to take hold and the conception that Aboriginal people are a "disappearing race" starts to take hold in Australian public life.

This had equally catastrophic consequences for Aboriginal people and communities. In the most optimistic circumstances Aboriginal people like Colin Hood succeed in persuading figures such as Alfred Deakin that reserves such as Framlingham needed to be preserved as traditional Aboriginal hunting areas. But in the worst, and in the majority of cases, Aboriginal people were confined to reserves without any rights to work or lead an independent life on their own lands.

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1. Paul Keating, speech to launch the year of the World's Indigenous Peoples, Redfern Park, 10 December, 1992

This was the origins of the Australian Aboriginal welfare ghetto which many ignorant people claim as a result of Indigenous culture. But I say to you, it was not Aboriginal people who created the reserves, who took away rights, who created dependency. It was Australian governments and they have been doing so for over 100 years.

Throughout this period Aboriginal people increasingly come to the mainstream of Australian society to demand independence. In the 1880s William Cooper and Jack Patten petition the king and in other parts of Australia Aboriginal political organisations dedicated to the attainment of citizenship, land and economic rights start to form.

But dark forces were at work in the thinking of Aboriginal administrators right through the period from 1860 to the 1960s. The formation of Aboriginal Protection Leagues becomes imbued with an eugenic principle. Legislation passed at the time of Australian Federation created an active eugenic protection regime in which governmental department heads were made the legal guardians of all Aboriginal children. The goals of government were to simultaneously protect the dying race of Aboriginal people and to separate out those of mixed race who could be assimilated into European society. In the 1930s the eugenic power of the State was intensified and Aboriginal administrators like the infamous J.W. Neville were given greater ability to determine every aspect of the lives of Aboriginal people.

From the 1880s on the agitation of Aboriginal people like Louisa Briggs, William Cooper, Jack Patten, Colin Hood, the great Atkinson family, Fred Maynard, John Moseley, William Harris, Edward Jacobs, Arthur Kickett, Doug Nicholls and Marge Tucker was against the lack of rights and

independence suffered by Aboriginal people in this period. The great struggle of 1967 with the recognition of Indigenous people as independent citizens - Australia's greatest Constitutional campaign and victory, has its origins in these early battlers for Aboriginal rights.

But beneath the seeming progress of Aboriginal activists in the 20th century, Aboriginal families were being torn apart by the policies of protection, assimilation and paternalism. Even in later periods the institutional lineage of this terrible period continued. Those of us with a one eyed view of history like to focus on progress. But while the great Aboriginal leaders were gradually succeeding in changing the thinking of the Australian people, the eugenic strategy continued unabated. An estimated 13,000 children were separated from their families and placed in orphanages or adopted into white family homes. This was the great unearthing that was done by the inquiry headed by Sir Ronald Wilson and Professor Mick Dodson. The tragedy was that it was first released in 1996 when the Howard government first came to office and little was done at a Federal level to implement its findings.

The legacy of my government is to compensate the Stolen Generation and their families for their suffering and I commit my government to this mission. I commit my government to investigating and implementing the recommendations of the *Bringing them Home* Report particularly Recommendation 14 that "monetary compensation be provided to people affected by forcible removal under the following heads. 1. Racial discrimination. 2. Arbitrary deprivation of liberty. 3. Pain and suffering. 4. Abuse, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse. 5. Disruption of family life.6.

Loss of cultural rights and fulfilment. 7. Loss of native title rights. 8. Labour exploitation. 9. Economic loss. 10. Loss of opportunities". This will not be done through a lengthy litigation process but by the establishment of a \$500,000,000 compensation fund and a claims process headed by Tom Kalma of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. My hope is that this process would be able to be concluded within this government's term of office.

But there is much more that needs to be done. Simple monetary compensation is not enough. Too often in the history of this country a fist full of dollars has been used to cover up problems that are deeply seated in our community. I do have some respect for the motivations of Prime Minister John Howard and Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough's Northern Territory Intervention. But the problem with the intervention as it was rolled out was that Aboriginal community leadership was not at the heart of the process. Some may argue that there is no community leadership in some of remote Aboriginal communities. If that is true then we need to invest in renewing community leadership because we know all too well that Canberra led projects do not work.

It is time to end the bureaucratic power symbolised at its worst by J.W. Neville but in malevolent form also by strategies run out of Canberra to rebuild Aboriginal communities in our period. ATSIC failed because it was too Canberra based. Similarly John Howard's mainstreaming failed because it was dictated by departmental secretaries rather than Indigenous leaders and communities.

Today I announce the creation of a one billion dollar fund to empower Aboriginal communities to create a nationwide network of enabling organisations. These

funds will be administered by 18 regional Aboriginal boards of governance. The regional boards will have procedural rights only and their job will be to maximise the flow through of funds to grass roots communities. Communities will be eligible to receive trust funds of up to \$1 million provided that they can demonstrate the existence of model governance arrangements based on the formation of elders councils, economic development agencies and social enterprise development. These grants will be one off funding to provide a long term capital base for community organisations and enterprises. Organisations will not be eligible through this new fund for recurrent funding. However over time as these new local Aboriginal governance arrangements take root I expect the great majority of Federal government funding to be channelled through these enabling organisations.

The great lesson of the stolen generation tragedy is that Australia needs to place more faith in the resilience and industry of Aboriginal people. This should not be something that is sewed onto a button. This is not something that should be used as a trendy slogan. There is a mammoth amount of work to be done to undo the damage of the past one hundred years. We have to begin the detailed work of making Aboriginal communities work and of giving Aboriginal young people the chance to survive and thrive in our modern world as well as the Aboriginal world. This Future Fund for Aboriginal Communities will be the basis of that work.

In conclusion I now ask the Speaker of the House to recite the language nations of Australian Aboriginal peoples. In doing this we in this House pay our respect to the governance and societal structures of all Aboriginal nations and language groups. We

acknowledge that in the future we must inscribe the living language, polity and culture of all Aboriginal nations into our conduct and being as a nation. This is also a point where we may all personally express our regret at the wrong and hurt caused to our original countrymen. I note that many of these words will have never been uttered in the House before, as we hear them let us think forward of the strong country we will now build together.

Adnyamathanha  
Alawa  
Alyawarr  
Amurrag  
Anindilyakwa  
Anmatyerre  
Antekerrepenhe  
Antikirinya  
Arabana  
Arernte  
Badimaya  
Baganu  
Bakanha  
Bandjalang  
Banjima  
Bardi  
Batjala/Butchalla  
Batjamalh  
Bidia  
Bidjara  
Bilinara  
Blaikman Tok  
Buan  
Bularnu  
Burada  
Dalabon  
Datiwuy  
Dhalwangu  
Dhanggatti  
Dharawal  
Dharug/Dharuk  
Dhurga  
Dirari  
Diyari

Djabugay  
Djambarrpuyngu  
Djapu  
Djinang  
Djinba  
Dyirbal  
Eora  
Gabi-Gabi  
Gagadju  
Gajirrawoong  
Galpu  
Gamilaraay/Kamilaroi  
Gamu  
Gardudjarra  
Gooniyandi  
Gugada  
Gugu Yalanji  
Gumatj  
Gunardba  
Gunavidji/Ndjebbana  
Gunba:lang/Kunbarlang  
Gungabula  
Gunggari  
Gupapuyngu  
Guragone  
Gurindji  
Guugu Yimidhirr  
Guwa  
Guwamu  
Guweman  
Inggarda  
Injinoo Ikya  
Jaabugay  
Jaminjung  
Jarui  
Jawaraworgad  
Jawoyn  
Jeljendi  
Jingilu  
Jiwarli  
Jurruru  
Kaantju  
Kala Kawaw Ya  
Kala Lagaw Ya  
Kalkatungu  
Kamu  
Kanyara group

Karajarri	Mudburra
Kariyarra	Murrinh Patha
Karrwa	Muruwari
Kaurna	Nakkara
Kayardild	Narangga
Kaytetye/Kaytej	Narrinyari
Kija	Nawo
Kok Bera	Ngaanyatjarra
Kriol	Ngadjuri
Kugu Nganchara	Ngalakan
Kukatj	Ngamini
Kukatja	Ngan'gityemerri
Kuku-Yalanji	Ngari
Kunjen	Ngarigu
Kunwinjku	Ngarinyman
Kurrama	Ngarla
Kurtjar	Ngarluma
Kutanji	Ngarnji
Kuuk Thaayorre	Ngarti
Kuuku-Ya'u	Ngatjumaya
Kuyani	Ngayawung
Lardil	Ngiyampaa
Linngithigh	Nhanta
Mabuiag	Nuguna
Madngele	Nunggubuyu
Malak	Nyamal
Malkana	Nyangumarta
Malngin	Nyikina
Malyangapa	Nyininy
Mangarayi	Nyiyaparli
Mangarla	Nyulnyul
Mangeri	Nyungar
Manggalili	Paakanytji
Manjiljarra	Pankarla
Mantharta group	Payungu
Maranunggu	Pertame
Mararba	Pintupi
Marrithiyel	Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara
Martuthunira	Pitta Pitta
Martuwangka	Pulinara
Maung	Rembarrnga
Mayali	Rirratjingu
Mbabaram	Ritharrngu
Mbakwithi Anguthimri	Thaayorre
Meriam Mir	Thalanyji
Miriwoong	Tharrgari
Mirninny	Tiwi

Umpila  
Unggumi  
Uwiynmil  
Wada wurrung  
Wadigali  
Wadjabangaid  
Wadjuk  
Wagiman  
Wakaya  
Wakka-wakka  
Walmajarri  
Wampaya  
Wanguri  
Wanggatha/Wangkatja  
Wangkajunga  
Wangkangurru  
Wanyi  
Wardaman  
Warlmanpa  
Warlpiri  
Warluwara  
Warnman  
Warray  
Warriyangka  
Warumungu  
Watjarri  
Wemba Wemba  
Wergaia  
Wik Mungkan  
Wik Ngathana  
Wilbmbanndiy  
Wiradjuri  
Wirangu  
Wuy wurrung  
Yadymadhang/Jadjmadang  
Yalarnnga/Yalanga  
Yanda  
Yandruwantha  
Yanhangu  
Yanyuwa  
Yaraldi Yu-yu Maraura  
Yardliyawara  
Yarluyandi  
Yawijibaya  
Yawuru  
Yaygirr  
Yidiny

Yindjibarndi  
Yinhawangka  
Yir Yoront  
Yiwayja  
Yiwayja/Iwaidja  
Yolngu  
Yugumbeh/Yubumbee  
Yulparija  
Yuwaalaraay/Yuwaaliyaay