

# Apology, Day 2: Six Critical Issues

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AS EVER, THE GENEROSITY OF THE INDIGENOUS SPIRIT MADE the government's apology to the stolen generations a tremendously moving occasion. Professor Mick Dodson was very right to say yesterday was the stolen generation's day. It was, in every sense of the word. The reason why Kevin Rudd's apology was so right was because of the intensive involvement of elders and representatives of the stolen generation in the drafting of the wording. Jenny Macklin's role in making that happen deserves congratulations. Kevin Rudd also deserves congratulations because his sentiments were so clearly heartfelt. But beyond the sensitive and heart felt apology, the government and opposition's plans for moving forward and their reluctance to show leadership on the compensation issue must be greeted with scepticism. All over Aboriginal Australia everyone knows that Labor is good on symbolism, changing laws and big programmatic spending and bureaucratic decisions but Labor is not good at empowerment of grass roots communities. It is not good at cutting through red tape to make things happen. On the other side, the Opposition has the opposite problem. It is prepared to take action but it still works with an assimilationist mentality and that was very clear from Brendan Nelson's speech yesterday and is also clear from the Northern Territory Intervention. It does not support a vision of sustainable Aboriginal communities, except those components which match non-Indigenous sentiment or understanding. A joint party political exercise will be especially positive in bringing about constitutional change in this country but we cannot expect leadership from politicians about what is needed within Indigenous communities; that would result in just another Indigenous social policy disaster. Unfortunately after the warm glow of yesterday and in their exuberance to move forward, we are once again going to have to expend energy on slapping the politicians down to earth. If they get it right politicians can create the conditions that make it possible for people in regional and remote communities to live independent, creative, connected, poverty free lives in which they orbit back and forth from non-Indigenous society. But resources have to be invested in the long term economic sustainability of people and organisations in remote and regional areas, not in Canberra planning committees, not in great national infrastructure projects, not in making Aboriginal communities as well serviced as model suburbs, not, and I am coming to this later, in arselickers.

**1. Aboriginal people need their own sustainable economic base that will enable them to make their own decisions and assessments about their own lives.** It is much harder to create a sustainable, non-dependent, independently governed enterprise in a remote or regional community - white or black - than it is to plan a new housing strategy and it will not be done in a government's term of office. But unless these steps are taken, all the health and housing in the world, will only diminish over time.

Every dollar of expenditure from government should contribute to Aboriginal economic independence. Compensation for the stolen generation might of course be one means for this to happen. A creative government might consider creating the equivalent of community trusts that provide recipients with guaranteed discretionary spending as well as the capacity to invest in long term assets for themselves and their families. A creative government would realise that taxpayers would benefit from immediately stopping the expensive court process that is so cruelly prolonged for members of the stolen generation. A good government would realise that a \$500m fund would save a tremendous amount of future expenditure and could be a means of creating an independent base for the future.

**2. Governments are too opinion poll driven and are not critical enough about the way polls are framed.** This is a major problem. Governments cannot be trusted to provide leadership because the motivating string behind the government and the opposition's manoeuvres is crude public opinion. Most Australians favoured the apology but less than a majority favour compensation. It was perturbing in my region of the country to hear that, according to one survey, 97 per cent of the population did not favour compensation to members of the stolen generation. This is despite the fact that Bomaderry Children's Home is in the heart of their

community. The truth is few people, even those who live within a kilometre or two of the Bomaderry memorial, are alert to what happened there. Ignorance about the stolen generation is still predominant. Most members of the community only see the aftermath of lives that were torn apart. But I wonder if a government put up a series of options for compensation including a fund that involved community empowerment whether 97 per cent of the population would be against it. I doubt it. But it is not within the thinking of the Canberra political universe to defy received opinion polls or even to ask about the way in which questions were framed or posed or against what backdrop.

**3. Arselickers** Sonny Sims was invited to Canberra on Monday at 5.25pm. Minister Macklin's office got the word something was amiss after Sonny appeared on Illawarra TV saying that the government hadn't invited any of the representatives from Bomaderry - the place where NSW Aboriginal babies and very young people were taken for much of the twentieth century. After the late invitation, in the end he said, I'll stay home, I'm no arselicker.

If the future is going to mean anything it will come from governments forgetting the ignorance of current public opinion and supporting people like Sonny. On any day you will find him fixing drains and maintaining the buildings of the old children's home, consulting with government departments about roads and building sites, or educating children who come to Bomaderry to learn about the stolen generation. A few years ago I brought several Torres Strait Islander boys over to visit Sonny. He took them over to the Bomaderry Memorial and he explained that his father and uncles had all been there as very young children. He explained that his grandfather had tracked the children down and got a job as a market gardener over at nearby Berry so that he could be close to them. But he was not

allowed to talk or visit with them. He had to stand at the wire fence and watch as they played. Through hand signals he conveyed messages to them. He would leave two shillings under a rock on the edge of the playground and the children knew it was there. This was the only contact they were allowed to have with their father. At this I saw the tears well up in the Torres Strait Islander boys eyes and I have no doubt there have been many more who have been moved by Sonny's words.

Sonny ended up having a wonderful day with his grandchildren, the Indigenous community and the non-Indigenous community in Nowra on Wednesday. He like so many others had a spring in his step after Kevin Rudds words. But I cannot think how many times it is the Aboriginal people in the communities who can do the most good who are overlooked.

We cannot expect governments to defy public opinion. Perhaps we may be lucky to get one or two in our lifetimes who have the skill, courage and commitment to do what is right even when they are in the minority. We cannot expect them to recognise the Sonny Sims of this world. But getting it right in the future will depend a lot on ensuring resources flow down to the levels that reward and support people like Sonny. This means being at war with the Canberra regime as it has been.

**4 Passive Social Spending is not enough.** The most significant problem with the way the government is thinking at the moment is that social programs have to be accompanied by forms of economic enterprise and sustainability. Just as the Bringing them Home Report has been dusted off, now too Labor's social development thinking has been dusted off as well. Doctors led by the great Paul Tozzillo recognised fifteen years ago that you could do nothing to combat the underlying health issues facing Aboriginal communities unless you addressed the major contributing causes of

ill health. It was physically impossible to provide the medical resources to fix the health problems unless the public health hazards associated with deficient housing were fixed. So this is why, Jenny Macklin, with a deep knowledge of the health arena is moving to housing as a key area of concern. Complimenting this Nicola Roxon also gave a muscular speech on primary health care yesterday.

But the big learning that has been over this time is that housing and health strategies have to be made sustainable. It may be possible to re-design housing so that it requires far less maintenance than before. But even the best housing in regional and remote housing, when it does require maintenance, requires expensive fittings and detailed knowledge. Who will provide this? Will there need to be another Northern Territory intervention?

Economic ownership and development is critical. When something breaks down a family or an individual are the best line of defence. If they cannot be depended on to fix the problem because they have no funding to do so or because in the past this was done by some fly in building team then we are lost once again. This is not necessarily about home ownership. Mostly it is about having enough discretionary funding in a home or a community to fix something. It is about being well off. It is about having a well paid job and a meaningful and interesting life. It is about owning infrastructure as your own.

**5 Education is not a cure all.** The second problem is the way government and many other see education as a kind of cure all. When I first graduated from university it was absolutely certain that a well paid job followed. This is no longer the case. Too much intellectual energy is being invested in a generalist education strategy for Indigenous people. I well remember Geoff Clark coming to speak at a conference we organised in Sydney in the 1980s stating "Aborig-

inal people have had more training than the clowns in the Moscow Circus, we want jobs!" The generalist education strategy will pay off over a longer period but we need concentrated specialised training strategies like the Heavy Plant Operator training completed in Port Hedland in December and the Community Placement pioneered by Milton James in the meat industry. Jobs are needed in great numbers by Aboriginal people now. We cannot invest in a generalist education strategy and think that it, and only it is going to work.

Training is also a problem. Not matter how good a TAFE trainer is, a 20 hour classroom environment is just not going to cut it in a scenario where operators are going to, for example, work twelve hour night and day shifts in an elite industry. People who get their tickets and are lucky enough to be employed have to suddenly start work in a highly competitive environment with long hours and many different cultural norms to conform to. If they do get a job they will more than likely fail. So there has to be specialised training strategies where trainees are gradually exposed to the environment in which they will be working. This should include night and day shifts and it should also include a range of skill development processes. Mentoring from day one on a job is also critical.

#### **6. Key Industries need to be targeted for employment**

In a place like the Pilbara or the Kimberley where there are many economic opportunities there is absolutely no excuse for the low levels of participation of Aboriginal people in the mining and ancillary industries. This resources boom has given countless numbers of non-Indigenous people the chance to build prosperous new lives. In the Pilbara 16 billion per annum is extracted from Aboriginal lands yet there is only a few hundred Aboriginal people employed across the entire industry. Increasingly mining companies are making donations or cre-

ating foundations to support Indigenous people. But the greatest contribution they can make is to give Aboriginal people jobs.

The real problems here lie in the training, transition to work area and in the human resources regimes that dominate mining companies. It would be a great start if the mining industry would sack the current generation of human resources managers. I have never found one who begins to understand the gamut of issues facing Aboriginal recruits.

We need to understand how much it means to get a job in the mining industry at this present time. In my opinion to get a job in a mining company as an operator is the same thing as being given a job as a teacher in the 1950s. It is a hugely privileged, well paid and rewarding position.

But the gatekeepers here are hugely powerful and the mining industry needs to recognise this.

To get a position as an operator if you are black, white or brindle you will have to pass through a gamut of human resources managers tests. Most Aboriginal people never even appear on the computer screens of mining industry human resources managers. They are screened out because they are more likely than non-Indigenous candidates to have a driving or criminal offence or they do not have the requisite training qualifications or there is something that just puts them at the bottom of the queue or off the screen all together.

At the same time in a buyers market there is so much room to make qualitative judgments about recruits. It is a bit like the old shipping scenario where people turned up at the wharves and the cream who could work hard and would be compliant were picked. The difference between then and now is that it is a private space where most of these decisions are made and everything is confidential. I suspect that the discretionary power associated with giving somebody a job is a major factor in who gets the nod in

these positions. Will you be an arselicker to earn \$100k a year?

It is a very complicated and detailed process to overcome the human resources regime and to ensure Indigenous people get jobs in the mining industry. In my calculations Indigenous trainees have to be twice as good as whitefellas, twice as qualified, with twice as many social and communication skills and they have to be five times tougher and even then the human resources regime will throw out a trap to ensure that a candidate fails to start or is kicked off a site for a misdemeanor. I am not advocating for one moment any diminishment of the requirements that the mining industry places on all employees. All Indigenous people need is the same chance as anyone else.