
the hardest word

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Was Kevin Rudd's "sorry" speech an act of heartfelt reconciliation or an empty gesture? One year on, Qweekend asks 14 indigenous Australians.

To read it now, one year on, it no longer contains the fire glow of its initial delivery, nor does it make its way so directly to the human heart, removed from its astonishing emotional context on that morning of February 13 last year. But Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's now famous "sorry" speech to Australia's Stolen Generations, his first major act of parliamentary business as leader of the nation, remains a significant specimen of political rhetoric. Flat on the page it continues to show life because we can still readily connect it to the memory of that cloudy Canberra day, and how the nation stopped in the manner of great sporting events or great tragedy

More than 1.3 million Australians watched Rudd read the speech live on television. Thousands of indigenous Australians converged on the capital, filling the House of Representatives visitors' gallery and spilling outside.

As Australians, we are largely unused to witnessing first-hand the making of history, unless it from the blade of a cricket bat or the lunging head of a horse.

Here we would be spectators to something as intangible, yet as elementary, as an apology from one group of human beings to another. Here, at nine o'clock on a Wednesday morning in late summer, a prime minister would open the 42nd Parliament of the Commonwealth by attempting to build a metaphorical bridge between white and black Australians using words alone.

It had taken its time in coming. In 1995, the Keating Labor government established the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families. The resultant "Bringing Them Home" report, presented by the Human Rights Commission two years later, not only detailed family tragedies of incomprehensible cruelty and sorrow, but made 54 recommendations, one of which was a formal government apology. Then came the frozen decade of John Howard's Liberal government, and finally Kevin Rudd and February 13, 2008.

"The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia's history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future," Rudd solemnly told parliament. "For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry." And later: "Australians are a passionate lot. We are also a very practical lot. For us, symbolism is important but, unless the great symbolism of reconciliation is accompanied by an even greater substance, it is little

more than a clanging gong." Rudd won almost universal praise for his "sorry" speech. The Independent newspaper in London went as far as to predict that Rudd's process of reconciliation "could well become the hallmark of his prime ministership".

There were detractors but few as curmudgeonly as Coalition backbencher Wilson Tuckey, who walked out before the apology was delivered. "The substance is that nothing's changed this morning and, like a lot of other promises he's made to Australians in the election [of late 2007], we will be able to stand here in a year's time and see none of them is going to happen." It's been a year's time. What - in the words of indigenous Australians - has happened since we turned a new page in our history?

UNCLE ALBERT HOLT Stolen Generations victim and Aboriginal community elder, Brisbane (pictured) I got an invite to go down to Canberra for the apology from [Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin and of course I didn't hesitate. It was quite a day. About 100 elders were bussed to Parliament House. We were greeted by the prime minister, his wife Therese [Rein and Jenny Macklin. About 70 per cent of the elders were women, and the prime minister gave each of them a kiss on the cheek. I can't be sure, but for many of them it would have been the first time in their lives a white man dignified them in that way.

I was born on Cherbourg mission. My parents were taken away from their spiritual land in western Queensland and put there. We were made to feel inferior. It was terrible. There was a lot of suffering. It wasn't a normal day without suffering. We weren't treated like human beings.

The teachers told us to forget about who we were and where we came from and just ride off into the sunset.

I still remember my mother telling us that we should never carry anger or bitterness towards white people throughout our lives, because although there were not so good white people in the world there were also good white people. I never forgot that.

I think the apology has changed things. I see a future now for my grandchildren and great-grandchildren. There's a lot more people now intent on closing the gap. You have to bear in

STEPHEN HAGAN Activist, academic and writer, Toowoomba (pictured above) I watched it on television. I was overwhelmed. I started with a couple of tears and then it turned into a flood. I was really moved by this gentleman, Kevin Rudd, and hopeful that he would be the shining light. If the prime minister's done nothing else, he's been able to rein in the cynics about the Stolen Generations.

I think there is a groundswell of support in Australia for indigenous people. The numbers are increasing but they're far outweighed by the number of detractors, by people who have difficulty accepting indigenous people as equals.

Rudd's got to show the mettle now ... he should embark on an education program that redresses this perception that Aboriginal people are lazy and drunk and noncontributors to society.

There was an expectation that there'd be more than just some symbolic spoken words. But

what we see is the government maintaining the [NT intervention, having not consulted the indigenous community. [Minister Macklin is debating whether to have a new ATSIC. Aboriginal people are being denied the right to vote for their own leaders.

Rudd hasn't set a goal for what he's going to achieve in one year. Maybe it was a good touchy-feely thing to start with, like a good, warm cup of coffee. You know, you feel good in the morning but at the end of the day you're not feeling as good. I can't say what Rudd's intentions were. He certainly was a brave man and I commend him for delivering [the apology]. The world didn't cave in; it didn't implode. For his fearlessness and tenacity, I take my hat off to him.

What's been achieved? I can't see any tangible results, but it's good to know that a prime minister said it

DAVID WILLIAMS Creative director, Gilimbaa indigenous design agency, Brisbane (above) What was good about the speech was that its content had no other agenda than a real apology, no strings, no excuses, no backhanded misinterpretations for fear of retribution. It was an apology for what had happened, for the pain that had been caused to so many and an acknowledgement of the dramatic and lasting effect this has had on the fabric of our nation. It was critical that it was an unequivocal apology, and it was.

I officially started my business a day before the apology, and Gilimbaa has seen first-hand the practical and positive effects of it. For some [clients there was a real sense of vindication and truth and it allowed them to move forward with a sense of dignity and progress. For others there was a sense of understanding of a story that had not been told.

The truth is an amazing thing. Lack of information will bring uncertainty and pessimism to most situations, but when all the cards are on the table, people ask questions, people create, people embrace and understand.

RHONDA APPO Public sector manager (above right) It is too soon to gauge whether or not the apology has made a difference in real terms. Only time will tell. To translate into real change, it must be backed up by solid deeds and a concerted effort by all - not only governments.

At a symbolic level it is a giant leap forward to achieving change, and I have noticed attitudes are slowly shifting and the healing has begun; I have noticed a softening of attitudes, moving towards a less mean-spirited Australia.

I do believe that the change of government and the statement itself gave tremendous hope, goodwill and expectations to the general community. However, it is only a first step: nothing will change if we all expect the "sorry" declaration to do the work for us. It'll take more than just goodwill. It took a lot of guts from Rudd to stand up and say that. I look at the positive. Then again I don't live in the homeland communities where there's no running water and the mortality rates are high. That's where I think it has fallen down. The apology has to be backed up.

SAM WATSON Activist and academic, Brisbane I was there in parliament when the gesture was made.

When I came back down the hill to the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, there were busloads of elderly people who told me nothing had changed. They were going back to their homes and everything was the same as before.

I think a headspace has been created by the symbolism. In real terms, nothing positive has happened to change the circumstances of our people. If anything, the problems are getting worse. The Racial Discrimination Act is still suspended. The intervention is still very much a part of Aboriginal people's lives in the Northern Territory.

Not one new job has been created. No extra food has been put into the mouths of disadvantaged indigenous people. No new opportunities have been created for people in high schools and the tertiary sector. The arrest rates of Aboriginal people are still increasing. The death-incustody rates are still increasing.

We're still no closer to having a representative body for Aboriginal people. On the day of the apology there were hundreds of indigenous people around parliament; when they went home it was once more filled with non-indigenous representatives. That spoke volumes to me. We were there as window dressing. The more we move into the future with Rudd, the more people, particularly Aboriginal people, are questioning his substance and that of his government. It seems to be bells and whistles and a great deal of cliches, a lot of talk, a lot of posturing and symbolism, but no real substance.

NATHAN JARRO Barrister; President, Indigenous Lawyers Association of Qld, Brisbane (right) It was obviously very symbolic. It didn't have much personal impact on me, only because I haven't been directly affected by the forced removal of families. In my involvement with various committees and roles within the Aboriginal community, I haven't seen much impact to date. It's a fantastic step - I'm sure many people have told you that. There was a lot of angst over Howard's refusal to apologise. That's been done now and I think there's a sense of satisfaction. But now it's time for both parties to move on to improve the living standards and conditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

It's pretty bad out there for certain Aboriginal people.

At the end of the day you've got to live and work with nonindigenous people. I'd rather see things in force as opposed to a symbolic gesture. At the moment, where's the direction?

On a state level, at least the Family Responsibilities Commission is trying to address those enormous issues.

With the present commonwealth government, what's happening? There was a huge anticipation, I guess. These things don't happen overnight.

LINDA BIUMAIWAI Indigenous School Based Trainee Coordinator, Sea World Resort, Gold Coast (right) I am a strong believer that the glass is always half full, and try to instil this in my life. We have survived and suffered for so long that I try to grab on to all the positive things and milk them for all they're worth.

Rudd's "sorry" speech had a huge impact on me and I believe it certainly brought the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to the forefront of Australians' minds. A history that is still felt by our people and hard to explain to those who do not live with the aftermath.

I do live with added hope after the speech and believe that inroads are being made. The 20/20 Summit and upcoming Citizens' Parliament are examples of first steps towards demonstrating commitment to grassroots people.

I am now patiently waiting for the outcomes of these forums to trickle down to the people, and hope the government is truly listening to what's being said. Change does take time and while we have waited for so long, I am happy to wait a little longer and get it right.

NATALIE ALBERTS Assistant director, Musgrave Park Cultural Centre, Brisbane A week leading up to that day I was so busy with lots of projects and organising a lunch for the community to celebrate the apology that it wasn't until two nights before that I actually sat down and it hit me what was about to happen. I was teary-eyed, then I was sobbing. A heavy load came over the top of me. My mum was the youngest of eight children who was brought up on the Cherbourg mission. My grandmother was sent to Cherbourg. I thought - wow! The government was actually going to apologise. At the same time it brought up all those old hurts and feelings.

We watched it on television and the first thing everyone thought was - well, what now? What does it mean?

I don't think much has happened in a year. If anything, everything seems to have slowed down. The bureaucracy.

Being bounced from one government department to another. I think it's just been business as usual.

We hope everything's not forgotten. We really would like to see practical outcomes on a grassroots level. The Rudd Government needs to prove itself now, having given the indigenous community so much hope.

MAX LENNOY Lecturer, James Cook University; director of Remote Area Teacher Education Program, School of Education, Townsville On that day I was torn between being with a crowd of people or taking it in by myself and I chose the latter.

I didn't want to get caught up in a group mentality. It was a sombre occasion.

I always thought it was intended to be an apology to all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of the nation, with the Stolen Generations as its focus. Those pains can't be addressed by nice words. They're addressed by what you actually do after the apology. I think we're all waiting for that final paragraph - this is what we're going to do as an action plan, this is the process.

It was great to see a lot of non-indigenous people acknowledging the apology. I believe it was set up to tickle the ears of a whole range of people, and I think now it has had a

psychological effect on how people view each other in this country. I'm hoping February 13 will be remembered as something iconic, and that the people who worked so hard over the years towards reconciliation are remembered in the way others are remembered on Australia Day.

GARY FOLEY Indigenous activist, historian and academic, Melbourne It is inevitable that the event will be a part of future white Australian mythology about how wonderfully they have always treated the Aboriginal people. It will become part of white Australia's long history of denial.

The key point is that it's not in fact an apology to Aboriginal people at all. Given the duplicitous wording of it all, it means nothing. [Rudd could have taken the opportunity to make it an apology to all Aboriginal people accompanied by some offer of reconciliation. Or at the very least a truth and reconciliation commission similar to that created in South Africa at the end of apartheid, where the nation is forced to face up to the truth rather than just gloss over and dismiss it all in a single speech.

I think it should be taught in political science classes as an example of the duplicity and deceit of politicians. It should be taught in psychology classes in terms of how a nation eases its guilt. It should be taught in drama school as a classic example of Australian political comedy. It should be taught in driving schools as a magnificent example of defensive driving and evasive tactics and manoeuvres.

It should also be taught in kindergartens as a fairy tale.

(Edited extract from an article first published in the Melbourne Historical Journal, December 2008.)

SAM WAGAN WATSON Writer, Brisbane (above right) I was asleep when [the apology happened]. I'd pulled a late shift at the time. I was doing security work. When I got to work the next night, a lot of Polynesians I worked with were really happy for me. I sort of took that on board but at the same time I knew it really wasn't going to affect anything in my life.

I've never agreed with the reconciliation movement, the way it's become a kind of bureaucracy. I always thought if reconciliation is going to work in this country it's going to be between individuals. I have heard older indigenous people say the apology helped them move on, but if I lost my family the apology of a politician would not really ease my broken heart.

I don't think we're that better off than we were, say, a decade ago, especially in Queensland. The biggest question in my mind, having been a speechwriter in state government, is, well, what kind of shelf life was the Rudd Government expecting for this apology? For a lot of indigenous people, it was a very short gesture. [Since Bob Hawke did his "no child in poverty" speech, I'm over that romanticism of Australia. For my generation, there is no romance any more ... I think the buzz faded pretty quickly.

RICHARD FRANKLAND Artist, writer and filmmaker, Torquay, Victoria On the day of the apology I was in Canberra - I'd been asked by the ABC to film some interviews. For me it was an apology to all Aboriginal people, and then more specifically it was an apology to the Stolen Generations.

I found it to be an incredibly emotional time.

Don't get me wrong, there's a hell of a long way to go.

We won't be seeing a black president or a prime minister in this country in the short term. But I see we've made progressive steps towards that and there's many, many steps happening on all these different levels.

I remember walking into the motel and the young white girl behind the counter - both of us were in tears. She felt she'd been forgiven in part by indigenous Australians, and I felt I'd been welcomed home. The handshakes were warmer. There was a lot of anger there on both sides of the fence, but there's a lot of celebrating to do as well. It's up to every Australian with a good sense of right or wrong not to lace people with a guilt trip, not to lace people with a welfare mentality, but to lace people with hope. To say:

this has happened, don't forget it happened, and remember it so it doesn't happen again. I would say the apology is another time we can truly say, "Lest We Forget".

GRACELYN SMALLWOOD Chairman, Townsville Indigenous Human Rights Group I'd be telling you a lie if I told you I wasn't crying on the day that apology was given. It was very emotional for everyone there and those watching it live on television. But we wanted to see something tangible.

My expectation was that culturally appropriate programs would be put in place to address the transgenerational trauma that has been passed down. That day opened up a lot of wounds. If you're going to make such an incredible statement, you've got to have infrastructure in place to follow on. They did this in Canada and South Africa.

Unfortunately we're not seeing any of those fruits.

What we've seen in 12 months is the intervention, which the majority of people are against. They want to deal with child abuse and alcohol abuse but don't have any infrastructure to support that. No jobs. No houses.

We had such high expectations and hopes about this apology. Now we need some think-tanks to get together.

Not people from the government. All these lovely advisory committees, we just don't want them to sing the government's tune, we want them to have their say from the grassroots level and the government to openly adhere to what they're saying.

MELISSA LUCASHENKO Writer, Brisbane (left) I think the whole thing was misinterpreted on a couple of levels. The average non-Aboriginal thought Rudd was apologising for everything - for the massacres, for colonisation, for the theft of land, everything. It wasn't about that.

I got bit cranky because the same black people who are asked for their opinion about everything were inevitably asked for opinions when really the day was about people who'd been removed [from their families, and maybe those who were directly affected by removals, and some of those people are friends of mine. The blackfellas I know who had

been removed, some of them went to Canberra and revelled in it and cried and found it fantastic, and others withdrew into themselves and hid from the kind of avalanche of white sympathy and white emotion. It's a little bit like the [US President Barack Obama thing. Obama being elected is wonderful but in a sense the meaning of it has been hijacked by white people feeling good about it.

It's not a bad thing if you're aware of it. But if you can't distinguish between correcting a racist injustice and patting yourself on the back and not doing anything about being part of a racist society, then it's a problem. These are the kinds of things it's important to be reflective about.

I was in Brisbane [on apology day . I did watch Rudd on TV. I actually think it was a fine gesture and very well done.

I do wish I'd gone down. Instead, I was left mopping up the impact on my own family four generations down the line.