

A Tenth Anniversary Reflection on the National Apology

Fr Frank Brennan SJ

This week we will mark the 10th anniversary of the National Apology. All of us remember where we were that day when Prime Minister Kevin Rudd read the words of the parliamentary motion moved by him and seconded by Brendan Nelson, the Leader of the Opposition:

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.

We apologise for the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians.

We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country.

For the pain, suffering and hurt of these stolen generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.

To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry.

And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.

On 13 February 2008, Australia, through its parliament, moved from a denial of inter-generational guilt to an embracing of inter-generational responsibility for the bad as well as the good that has been done in our name 'Australia'. There was some tension in the air as Brendan Nelson spoke about the ongoing suffering, trauma, deprivation and violence in the lives of many Aboriginal communities culminating in 'too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living lives of existential aimlessness'. The last word on the apology was spoken not by the parliamentarians who at that time did not include an Aborigine in their midst, but by those Aboriginal people in attendance wearing the black T shirts emblazoned with just one word, 'Thanks'. The nation is all the better for an apology which was graciously offered by both sides of Parliament and graciously received by the stolen generations and their many supporters ten years ago.

The question of compensation remains unresolved on the national stage. Rudd was right to put the apology at the beginning of his prime ministership and to separate it from the issue of compensation. Most removals occurred before 1967 when the Commonwealth had no power

to deal with Aborigines in the states. Most of the living now affected by removals were not themselves stolen but their parents were. Though they would not be eligible for individual financial payments, they ought to be eligible for programs and services designed to overcome some of the pain and loss their families have experienced. Some states have now set up modest compensation schemes for the stolen generations and for stolen wages.

We are about to celebrate the tenth anniversary of what was a graced day in our nation's history. Back then, our elected representatives on both sides served us well. A heartfelt apology was given and received. We are all the better for it. Ten years on, we are experiencing a national quandary about where to go in the wake of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* and its unceremonious abandonment by the Turnbull Government. Though committed to closing the gap, we all need to admit that some of the key targets have not been met. We need to recommit to respectful dialogue and engagement, working together. We need to get back to the processes which made the Apology a success.

The process leading up to the apology was right. The compassionate Jenny Macklin consulted widely in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. A cross section of the 'Stolen Generations' sat down with the government to tell their stories and assist with appropriate words. Not only did Prime Minister Rudd touch all necessary institutional consultative bases, he took the time to sit with the Nanna Nungala Fejo and her family. He heard her story then shared it reverently with the nation. This 'elegant, eloquent and wonderful woman in her 80s full of life, full of funny stories, despite what has happened in her life journey' became the human face for the nation trying to get right this gesture of reconciliation.

Let's all recommit to the unifying challenge Kevin Rudd put before the Parliament a decade ago:

It is for the nation to bring the first two centuries of our settled history to a close, as we begin a new chapter. We embrace with pride, admiration and awe these great and ancient cultures we are truly blessed to have among us—cultures that provide a unique, uninterrupted human thread linking our Australian continent to the most ancient prehistory of our planet. Growing from this new respect, we see our Indigenous brothers and sisters with fresh eyes, with new eyes, and we have our minds wide open as to how we might tackle, together, the great practical challenges that Indigenous Australia faces in the future.

Let us turn this page together, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, government and opposition, Commonwealth and state, and write this new chapter in our nation's story together. First Australians, First Fleeters and those who first took the oath of allegiance just a few weeks ago—let us grasp this opportunity to craft a new future for this great land, Australia.

Let's capitalise on the presence of four highly talented Aboriginal leaders sitting on both sides of the aisle in our national Parliament. And let's all put the human face on the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*: 'In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard.'

Fr Frank Brennan SJ is CEO of Catholic Social Services Australia and a board member of the National Apology Foundation