

THE LIBERAL POSITION AT THE TIME OF THE APOLOGY

The apology of February 13th 2008 is generally considered to have been received in the spirit of bipartisanship, with both major parties supporting the motion of apology and the formation of a “War Cabinet” on Indigenous affairs to be led by both Rudd and Nelson. Whilst the Labor Party had promised, if elected, to apologise to Indigenous Australians at every election since 2001,³ Howard’s successive governments possessed “steadfast opposition to any formal apology”⁴ since 1997, a position which would change following the election of the Australian Labor Party to government on November 24th 2007. For the Liberal Party to oppose the parliamentary motion would have been a poor political move, with 70% of the population supporting the apology.⁵ Yet there were still those within the party who maintained Howard’s mantra, that they “sympathise[d] fundamentally with Australians who are insulted when they [were] told we have a racist, bigoted past... [who] do not believe that our generation should be asked to accept responsibility for the acts of earlier generations.”⁶ Refusing to accept inter-generational responsibility is an understandable, if morally dubious argument, yet, as Rudd pointed out, “the forced removal of Aboriginal children was happening as late as the early 1970s. The 1970s is not exactly a point in remote antiquity. There are still serving members of this Parliament who were first elected to this place in the 1970s.”⁷ Furthermore, the argument overlooks that the apology was delivered on behalf of the institution of Parliament, not any particular government. Despite this, the lack of sympathy from conservatives was reflected in the only members deliberately absent from the House of Representatives that day being members of the Liberal and National Parties. It was also reflected in Nelson’s apology speech, in which, as Barta notes:

[Nelson] started well, then ploughed on to justify the misguided good intentions of the past and the authoritarian intervention going on in the present. On a day that should have been one of grieving and healing, he rubbed open wounds of ongoing child abuse and alcoholic dysfunction. By the end of his speech, Aboriginal people outside parliament and in the Great Hall had turned their backs on him. It was the same gesture made to John Howard when he refused to say sorry 11 years before.

Howard remained true to his resolve. He was the only former Prime Minister who did not attend the sitting. On a day rich in symbolism his absence was perhaps the most apt symbol of all.⁸

As Barta compellingly argues here, this sudden turn-around in Liberal Party policy, an offer of bipartisan support for the apology, can thus be seen as something which occurred only at a very shallow level. The historical, outdated and unpopular attitudes towards Indigenous issues were still very much relevant to the conservatives.

One of these prevailing attitudes is the idea of Paternalism – the denial of basic human rights to Indigenous Australians for what was perceived to be their own benefit. The notions of “protection” and “betterment” were used

- 1 Geoffrey Blainey, “Drawing Up a Balance Sheet of Our History”, *Quadrant*, July-August 1993, p. 10
- 2 Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, *Bringing Them Home – National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, 1997, accessed 12/10/08 at < http://www.humanrights.gov.au/pdf/social_justice/bringing_them_home_report.pdf>
- 3 See, for example: M Latham, *Lateline transcript 2001*, accessed 08/10/08 at < <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/stories/s310570.htm>>; P Garrett, “Garrett backs forest plan, apology”, *The Age* 10/06/2004, accessed 08/10/2008 at < <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/06/10/108679842714.html>>; J Macklin, “Labor shifts on indigenous policy direction”, *The Age* 23/03/2008, accessed 08/10/2008 at < <http://www.theage.com.au/news/National/ALP-to-boost-Aboriginal-funding-report/2007/03/23/1174153293189.html>>
- 4 J Robbins, “The Howard Government and Indigenous Rights: An Imposed National Unity?”, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2007, p. 321
- 5 W Loader, “Australia’s Day Of Apology to the Stolen Generations of its Indigenous Children”, *The Expository Times*, Vol. 119, No. 8, 2008, p. 386
- 6 J Howard, in T Barta, “Sorry and not sorry in Australia: how the apology to the stolen generations buried a history of genocide”, *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol 10, No. 2, 2008, p. 203
- 7 K Rudd, *Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples*, 13 February 2008, <http://www.aph.gov.au/House/Rudd_Speech.pdf>, accessed 17/09/2008
- 8 T Barta, “Sorry and not sorry in Australia”, p. 205



HARRY MIDALIA

Harry Midalia is a 20 year old student from Perth, Western Australia. He is currently in his final year of a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Western Australia, majoring in Linguistics. His areas of interest include sociolinguistics, specifically concerned with race and social class, phonetics and phonology. He has been involved in UNYA for over four years, and is currently one of the Western Australian Vice-Presidents as well as a member of the 2010 UNYC Organising Committee. He also works part-time at a learning centre for years one to twelve, and regularly volunteers for the Australian Greens.

to justify the forced removal of children from their parents, as there was widespread belief in the possibility of “solving” the “Native problem” through integration with White Australia, or even, in Western Australia and the Northern Territory from the 1920s onward, through biological absorption.⁹ As esteemed historian Anna Haebich convincingly argues:

“[p]ublic debates at the turn of the century over the ‘duty’ of colonists to ‘rescue’ the growing number of ‘near white’ ‘half-caste’ children were less contentious but equally widely canvassed. In most states and territories during the early decades of the twentieth century, these practices solidified into rigid systems of removal and the institutionalisation of children from mixed-lineage families. Wide-ranging powers of removal were introduced that erased the normally sacred rights of parents and children to remain together.”¹⁰

The New South Wales *Aboriginal Protection Act* of 1909 gave the Protection Board custody over all Aboriginal children. The board, “at its discretion, removed them from their families and sent them to children’s homes or to service with white families.”¹¹ The removal of children from their parents was thus justified in the name of protection – with many historians such as Haebich, Dirk Moses and Robert Manne claiming that this process was part of both the economic subjugation of Aborigines, in holding them in domestic servitude, as well as a desire to eliminate them through biological absorption. Indeed, the Northern Territory’s Chief Protector, Dr Cecil Cook, would arrange marriages between stolen half-caste women and white men under the pretext of these women needing husbands.¹² Even if concern over Aborigines’ living standards is taken to be genuine, the systematic removal of between 10 and 30 per cent (and subsequently up to 50,000) of mixed-lineage children from their parents until the 1970s,¹³ in conjunction with talk of the “Aboriginal problem” and overt eugenics programs, was indisputably racially motivated. Governments who, disturbingly, claimed to have the best interests of Aborigines at heart delivered the institutionalised racist policies of the early- and mid-twentieth century, to the profound detriment of Indigenous Australians.

This paternalistic attitude prevails in contemporary conservative thinking, despite the bipartisan support for the apology to Indigenous Australians. Brendan Nelson, in his reply speech, demonstrated that conservatives in Australia had still failed to grasp that the apology was for the deep pain inflicted upon, to use Rudd’s words, “a proud people and a proud culture” by successive Parliamentary policies of institutionalised racism shrouded in paternalistic rhetoric:

It is reasonably argued that removal from squalor led to better lives: children fed, housed and educated for an adult world which they could not have imagined. However, from my life as a family doctor and knowing the impact of my own father’s removal from his unmarried, teenage mother, I know that not knowing who you are is the source of deep, scarring sorrows, the real meaning of which can be known only to those who have endured it. No-one should bring a sense of moral superiority to this debate in seeking to diminish the view that good in many cases was sought to be done.¹⁴

Nelson failed to grasp the spirit of the day by focusing on the paternalistic rhetoric of the past and ignoring the pain and suffering experienced by Indigenous Australians. He alternated clumsily between attempts to defend the policies of the past and reflecting on their negative consequences. In doing so, he trivialised the Stolen Generations by imagining them as unfortunate victims of well-meaning policy gone wrong, just as Howard had done.¹⁵ His own retelling of his personal history as analogous to the experience of the Stolen Generations shows the moral obtuseness of many conservative Australian politicians and their failure to understand the significance of the systemic loss of language, cultural identity, kinship system and country experienced by Indigenous Australians.

THE NORTHERN TERRITORY INTERVENTION

Turning their backs on the principle of self-determination expounded since Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, the Howard government in its final year launched the Northern Territory Intervention – a program which bore many resemblances to the worst of paternalism. Control of Aboriginal use of welfare money by the Howard government was uncomfortably similar to the Protectionist duties of various States’ *Aborigines Acts*. Nelson sought to legitimise the intervention in his reply speech, lamenting the way that the “episodic preoccupation with symbolism and...cultural sensitivities” of previous governments had allowed autonomous remote Aboriginal communities to harbour “lives of misery.”¹⁷ The intervention resonated with the outdated paternalism of the Stolen Generation era, removing the freedoms and land rights of Aborigines – in what was perceived to be a policy for their own good. Through the introduction of this policy, and Brendan Nelson’s unrelenting and contextually inappropriate defence of it on the day of apology, it is evident that paternalistic ideologies still underpinned conservative policy in Indigenous matters and were used on a day of healing as an expedient justification for the morally indefensible removal of mixed-lineage children.

The triumphalist colonial ideology of the Stolen Generations period was also significant in justifying the white supremacist practice of the forced removal of mixed-lineage children. The earliest examples of child-removal in Australia occurred during colonial times, in which Aboriginal children were captured for use as an unpaid labour force. Haebich contends

[t]his practice was publically known and unofficially condoned by colonial governments... Public endorsement of such arrangements can be inferred from the condemnation of those few colonists who spoke out against it. Reverend John Gribble publically accused employers in the Carnarvon district of northern Western Australia in the mid 1880s of kidnapping Aboriginal children and treating them like slaves. He was subsequently driven out of town, physically assaulted, vilified in the Perth press, rejected by his own church and finally bundled out of the colony by police under the cover of darkness.¹⁹

Under the guise of “civilising” Indigenous Australians by integrating them into white society, stolen children were converted to Christianity and economically exploited. Indigenous Australians were seen as “savages” especially in pre-Federation times. As Haebich observes, “[m]ost white

9 A Haebich, “Between Knowing and not Knowing: Public knowledge of the Stolen Generations”, *Aboriginal History*, Vol 25, 2001, p. 78

10 Ibid, p. 77.

11 S Forsyth, “Telling Stories: nurses, politicians and Aboriginal Australians, circa 1900-1980s”, *Contemporary Nurse*, Vol. 24, 2007, p. 36

12 R Manne, “Absurd Historical Denialism”, *The Age*, 15/11/99

13 K Rudd, *Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples*

14 B Nelson, *Response to the Apology to Australia’s Indigenous People*, 13 February 2008, <http://www.aph.gov.au/House/Nelson_speech.pdf>, accessed 17/09/2008>

15 K Smits, “Deliberation and Past Injustice: Recognition and the Reasonableness of Apology in the Australian Case”, *Constellations*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2008, p. 239

16 T Abbott, “Paternalism Reconsidered”, *Quadrant*, September 2006, p. 32

17 B Nelson, *Response to the Apology to Australia’s Indigenous People*

18 T Barta, *Sorry and not sorry in Australia*, p. 205

19 A Haebich, “Between Knowing and not Knowing”, p. 77

HARRY MIDALIA

WHO IS SORRY? CONSERVATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS AND THEIR HISTORY

“We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the Nation.

For the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written.”

(Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, from *motion 1 of the 42nd Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 13 February 2008)

As the two-year anniversary of the Federal Labour Government’s historic apology to the Stolen Generations made on February 13th 2008 passes by, the controversy formerly surrounding the possibility of any such apology seems to have been extinguished. Prior to the Federal Labor Government’s apology, Australia’s Indigenous population had been forced to endure an eleven-year promotion of an insulting and shameful case of historical denialism under Prime Minister John Howard. Australia’s “History Wars” have seen almost three decades of debate over, amongst other issues, whether or not government policies from Colonisation until the early 1970s to remove so-called “half-caste” children from their parents existed and, if so, the extent and impact of these removals. For the most part, those of conservative political viewpoints such as historians Geoffrey Blainey and Keith Windschuttle, journalist Andrew Bolt and indeed many members of Howard’s Liberal governments have publicly and emphatically rallied against what Blainey has termed the “black armband view of history.”¹ Following from such a denial of the less palatable aspects of Australia’s treatment of Aborigines was the Howard government’s refusal to apologise to the Indigenous people of Australia for previous Acts of Parliament, as recommended in the 1997 *Bringing Them Home Report*.² In addition to maintaining the historical view of colonial triumph, the government also continued to promote the archaic ideologies of the Stolen Generations period through paternalistic and interventionist policies, whilst seeking to remove guilt from the national conscience by stubbornly refusing to accept the existence of past practices. Through tracing these conservative beliefs and ideologies and their manifestations throughout Australia’s history, it is evident that, despite being out of date with popular opinion, they continued to exist in the Liberal Party of Australia at the time of the apology. This is evidenced by the opinions expressed by then-Opposition Leader Brendan Nelson, and by current Opposition Leader Tony Abbott.

Australians would have endorsed the following statement by a colonist writing to the New South Wales Board of Education in 1852: 'unless the connection between the old and young is completely severed — an act repugnant at first view to all — there is, I am convinced, no human power of civilising or even perpetuating the race.'²⁰ One such of these was James Isdell, a Western Australian pastoralist and "travelling protector" in 1907, who stressed that the "inhumanity" of Indigenous Australians meant that the removal of their children for a civilising process would not be painful, as "[t]hey soon forget their offspring."²¹ The desire to "civilise" Indigenous Australians was often used as justification for the removal of children from their families. The reality was that many of these children were economically exploited. In his apology speech, Prime Minister Rudd told of the experience of Nanna Nungala Fejo, stolen from her mother around age four:

They were herded and piled onto the back of the truck. Tears flowing, her mum tried clinging to the sides of the truck as her children were taken away...Now the children would be handed over the missions to be cared for by the churches...The kids were simply told to line up in three lines. Nanna Fejo and her sisters stood in the middle line, her older brother and cousin on her left. Those on the left were told that they had become Catholics, those in the middle Methodists and those on the right Church of England...She stayed at the mission until after the war, when she was allowed to leave for a prearranged job as a domestic in Darwin. She was 16. Nanna Fejo never saw her mum again. After she left the mission, her brother let her know that her mum had died years before, a broken woman fretting for the children that had literally been ripped away from her.²²

As well as a story of profound pain and loss, Nanna Nungala Fejo's experience reveals the religious and economic dimensions of the systematic removal of children. Just as in pre-Federation days, attempts were being made to "civilise" the Stolen Generations of Indigenous children through placing them in religious institutions. Crucial to this story, however, is Nanna Fejo's leaving of the mission to serve as a domestic in a prearranged job. Economic freedom and choice is central to conservative politics, and yet Fejo was only allowed to leave the mission for a pre-arranged job. Such hypocrisy must be racially motivated. This racial division of labour in the early 20th Century which was made possible through the integrating of Aboriginal children into the white economy and justified with religious and civil ideologies, whilst being seen as morally correct due to triumphalist attitudes towards colonisation of Indigenous Australians.

THE LIBERAL POSITION TODAY

In 2006, current Opposition Leader Tony Abbott released his paper "Paternalism Reconsidered" in the conservative publication, *Quadrant*. A bastion of the Right-wing side in the "History Wars", *Quadrant* has repeatedly published articles which deny the extent to which the Stolen Generations existed and which affirm interventionist policies in Indigenous affairs. Abbott urged his readers not to allow guilt to interfere with Indigenous health issues, claiming that

Australians' sense of guilt about the past and naïve idealisation of communal life may now be the biggest single obstacle to the betterment of Aboriginal people...As the historian John Hirst put it in 2004: "The last oppressor of the Aborigines is the belief that they are naturally suited to self-governing in small communities"¹⁶

In his article, Abbott argued that the only way to improve health outcomes for Indigenous Australians was to ignore any desire for autonomy and intervene for the "betterment of Aboriginal people." Such an ethnocentric view of "betterment" and its manifestation in the Northern Territory intervention bears a striking and uncomfortable resemblance to the Paternalistic attitudes of the past. As Australia edges closer to a Federal election this year, it is important to revisit this colonial mindset that still evident in conservatives today, paying particular attention to Abbott's own views. There is still a colonial mindset, seen in the prevailing belief that the modern, economically developed Australia is both superior to and incompatible with traditional ways of life or any new innovative approaches to Indigenous affairs.

In an insensitive moment in his reply speech, Nelson told Parliament of the arrival of white Australians as a group "no less proud (than Aborigines)...with little more than visionary hope, deeply rooted in gritty determination to build an Australian nation for not only its early settlers and Indigenous peoples

but also those who would increasingly come from all parts of the world."²³ This is a clear and unfortunate example, among many, of Nelson overlooking, or indeed denying, the institutionalised racism of Australia both before and after Federation. Nelson also invoked the discourse of colonialism – claiming that "language, disease, ignorance, good intentions, basic human prejudices and a cultural and technological chasm combined to deliver a harshness exceeded only by the land over which each sought to prevail."²⁴ Ignoring 60,000 years of sustainable Aboriginal utilisation of the land of Australia by reducing it to the colonial image of survival in a harsh environment, Nelson imposed his ethnocentric colonial view on a history he is unable to comprehend. He failed to grasp that, ultimately, the harshnesses experienced by Indigenous Australians were the result of brutal colonisation of Australia followed by almost 200 years of institutionalised racism. Although offering bipartisan support for the apology motion, Nelson's conservative ideologies reflected a lack of moral imaginative capacity or empathy. Whilst Rudd asked Australians to "imagine if this had happened to us"²⁵ and apologised for the laws enacted by successive Parliaments which created misery in the lives of Aborigines, Nelson told Parliament that "[o]ur generation does not own these actions, nor should it feel guilt for what was done in many, but certainly not all, cases with the best of intentions."²⁶ Out of touch with 70% of the Australian population, Nelson's speech was clearly designed to appease conservative historians and some Members of the Liberal Party, overlooking any possibility of a eugenics programme in Australia or any sinister aspects of child-removal:

In some cases, government policies evolved from the belief that the Aboriginal race would not survive and should be assimilated; in others, the conviction was that 'half- caste' children in particular should, for their own protection, be removed to government and church run institutions...Others were placed with white families whose kindness motivated them to the belief that rescued children deserved a better life.²⁷

Such a denial of the self-interested motives for the removal of Aboriginal children may not be as extreme and indeed offensive as conservative historian Paddy McGuinness' claim that such children had all fallen victim to "false memory syndrome,"²⁸ yet it reflects the continuity of colonial triumphalism – the view of history shaped by the victorious white man – in contemporary conservative thought, as well as a desire to ignore the confronting aspects of Australian history. The bipartisan support offered for the apology thus cannot be seen as a new period of consensus, but as evidence of the continuity of two prevailing attitudes to the Stolen Generations – the view which acknowledges the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their parents as a disturbing, painful and confronting practice in Australian history, and the view which seeks to simultaneously justify these actions due to their original intent and downplay the extent to which the removal of Aboriginal children occurred. This is not to say that these differences have yet been reflected in any practical policy initiative, yet it is a difference of opinion which continues to divide Australians.

It is thus evident that Australia's apology to the Stolen Generations is not indicative of a new period of historical and ideological consensus. The only significant change has been a change in the official stance of the Liberal Party of Australia, who publicly supported the apology. However, the continuities of paternalism and colonial triumphalism in the conservative view of history prevail. Whilst extreme conservative views such as those that claim the Stolen Generation never existed can be easily dismissed by the wealth of primary source evidence, the conservative denialism of any attempts to breed out Aborigines or exploit them economically continues to be reflected in politics and history. However, with the vast majority of Australians accepting responsibility for the actions of past governments and supporting the apology to Australia's Stolen Generations, we can see that these conservative, sanitised views of history are becoming less mainstream. Australians are becoming more willing to accept the harrowing truth of the horrendous experiences of the Stolen Generations. As Prime Minister Rudd put it, "there comes a time in the history of nations when their peoples must become fully reconciled to their past if they are to go forward with confidence to embrace their future. Our nation, Australia, has reached such a time."²⁹

²⁰ Ibid, p. 76

²¹ Cited in R Manne, Aboriginal child removal and the question of genocide, 1900 – 1940" in: A. Dirk Moses (Ed.), Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History (New York: Berghahn, 2004). pp 217 – 243.

²² K Rudd, Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples

²³ B Nelson, Response to the Apology to Australia's Indigenous People

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ K Rudd, Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples

²⁶ B Nelson, Response to the Apology to Australia's Indigenous People

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ R Manne, "Absurd Historical Denialism",

²⁹ K Rudd, Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples