

Let the healing begin

Response to government to the national apology to the Stolen Generations

**By Tom Calma, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner,
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Member's Hall, Parliament House, Canberra

Prime Minister, the Hon Kevin Rudd; Opposition Leader, Brendan Nelson; the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, the Hon Jenny Macklin; former Prime Ministers, Professor Bruce Wilson representing the late Sir Ronald Wilson, Stolen Generations patrons Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue and Bobby Randall, NSDC Chair Helen Moran and SGA Chair Christine King, Ministers; Members of Parliament; Senators, members of the stolen generations and your families; my Indigenous brothers and sisters; and distinguished guests from around Australia and overseas.

May I begin by acknowledging the Ngunnawal peoples – the traditional owners of the land where we meet today and pay my respects to you and to your elders.

I have been asked by the National Sorry Day Committee and the Stolen Generations Alliance; the two national bodies that represent the Stolen Generations and their families, to respond to the Parliament's Apology and to talk briefly about the importance of today's events.

I am deeply honoured to be entrusted with this responsibility and to participate in today's proceedings.

I am particularly honoured to do so in my capacity as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner at the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. The inaugural Social Justice Commissioner, Professor Mick Dodson, was the Co-Commissioner of the national inquiry, along with the then President, the late Sir Ronald Wilson, that culminated in the *Bringing them home* report. The next Social Justice Commissioner, Dr Bill Jonas, contributed greatly to the understanding of the report and the importance of its findings.

Today is an historic day.

It's the day our leaders – across the political spectrum – have chosen dignity, hope and respect as the guiding principles for the relationship with our first nations' peoples.

Through one direct act, Parliament has acknowledged the existence and the impacts of the past policies and practices of forcibly removing Indigenous children from their families.

And by doing so, has paid respect to the Stolen Generations. For their suffering and their loss. For their resilience. And ultimately, for their dignity.

Let me tell you what this apology means to me. For many years, my family has been searching in vain to find information about my great-grandmother, May, who was taken at the turn of the 20th Century.

Recently, Link Up in Darwin located some information in the Archives. In a document titled 'list of half-castes in the NT' dated 2 December 1899, a government official named George Thompson wrote the following about my great-grandmother:

Half caste May is a well grown girl, is living with her mother in the black's camp at Woolwonga, her mother will not part with her, she mixes up a great deal with the Chinamen, she only has a narga on.

My great-grandmother's ordeal was not un-common and nor was the chilling account - 'her mother *will not* part with her'.

The is not about black armbands and guilt. It never was.

It is about belonging.

The introductory words of the 1997 *Bringing them home* report remind us of this. It reads:

. . . the past is very much with us today, in the continuing devastation of the lives of Indigenous Australians. That devastation cannot be addressed unless the whole community listens with an open heart and mind to the stories of what has happened in the past and, having listened and understood, commits itself to reconciliation.

By acknowledging and paying respect, Parliament has now laid the foundations for healing to take place and for a reconciled Australia in which everyone belongs.

For today is not just about the Stolen Generations - it is about every Australian.

Today's actions enable every single one of us to move forward *together* – with joint aspirations and a national story that contains a shared past and future.

It is a matter of great sadness that the experiences of the Stolen Generations have been used as a source of division among the Australian community since the release of the *Bringing them home* report. There are many individuals who have made their name as 'Stolen Generations deniers and rebuffers'.

This vitriol has re-traumatised many of the Stolen Generations. It has cast doubts on the integrity of many individuals, and ultimately has denied Indigenous people basic human dignity and decency.

These are not traits associated with 'the Australian way'. Nor is it any way to respond to human tragedy.

Let us feel proud that we are now facing the difficult and dark experiences from our past in order to move forward.

Let us also feel proud that – as a nation - we respect our fellow citizens, we care for their plight and we offer our hand in friendship so that we may all enjoy the bounty of this great nation.

Prime Minister, can I thank you for your leadership on this issue.

It is far more difficult to try and unite people than to divide them.

Your efforts should be praised universally for attempting to create a bridge between the many diverse elements of our society.

To the leader of the Opposition, can I also acknowledge your leadership. It is of great significance that this motion was passed with bipartisan support.

For too long, Indigenous peoples have been used as a political football. More often than not, this has promoted fear, misunderstanding intolerance and inaction.

And to all Parliamentarians, I say – let today be a new beginning, not an end point.

Last month, I facilitated discussions between the government and Stolen Generations groups about the apology. The overwhelming message from those meetings was that this should be seen as the first step in a partnership.

The Stolen Generations have needs that have yet to be met, mainly due to under-funding of Link Ups and other support organisations. There remains a pressing need for specific assistance tailored to the particular circumstances of those forcibly removed from their families.

And there are many recommendations of the *Bringing them home* report that have not been implemented.

In fact, there has been little attempt to even consider many of these recommendations at the federal or state level in recent years, or for them to be implemented systematically across all jurisdictions. To the Premiers and state and territory government representatives here today, we urge you to join the partnership to address the unfinished business.

Prime Minister, I mentioned earlier that it is harder to try and unite people than it is to divide them. This is because if people have hope, they also have expectations.

The consultations between your government and Stolen Generations groups identified a number of elements to build upon from today. These include:

- committing to a partnership with Stolen Generations groups, as well as Link Ups and other service providers, with ongoing consultation and participation;
- committing to a comprehensive government response to the needs of the Stolen Generations, as identified in the *Bringing them home* report; and
- adopting a whole-of-government approach – across departments and across governments – to achieve this.

There is much hope that today's apology can create the impetus for a renewed partnership between the federal government and state and territory governments to fully implement the recommendations of the *Bringing them home* report.

It is timely that the federal government take a leadership role in developing a national process to make this happen.

Finally, can I acknowledge the support of the many millions of non-Indigenous Australians who have walked with us on the path of reconciliation and justice, and can I pay tribute to the members of the Stolen Generations, for your incredible resilience, stoicism and dignity in the face of untold suffering.

Let your healing, and the healing of the nation, begin.

Thank you.