

Only the ignorant oppose an apology

By Phillip Adams

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HOW many people in the community or in parliament opposed to saying sorry have bothered to read *Bringing Them Home*, the 1997 report of the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families?

Had John Howard had his way, nobody would have read that report. The document was damned and denigrated before it was reluctantly and belatedly released, following a shameful campaign to ridicule the chairman of the inquiry, the thoroughly decent Ronald Wilson. Little wonder Howard won't show his face in parliament.

I've met scores of indigenous people whose lives were mutilated by that brutal policy. I've heard the stories from weeping men and women, including accounts of mothers driven insane after children were torn from their arms. To hear fools and bigots still arguing about the appropriateness of the word sorry - or, worse, insisting the children were rescued or saved - sickens me and shames this country.

Wilson's co-chairman Mick Dodson joined me to discuss the apology on Radio National's *Late Night Live* along with Phil Fontaine, the national chief of Canada's Assembly of First Nations. And the parallels between the treatment of indigenous families in our two countries are, to say the least, instructive.

The kidnapping of children from Aboriginal families and communities played a big role in the social wreckage we see today. Many of the children were mixed race and the policy was about eugenics: the breeding of aboriginality out of our population. Ditto in Canada. Fontaine, a member of Canada's stolen generations, quoted a leading politician's justification for the policy: "If we can't kill the Indian, we can kill the Indian in the child."

Between 1870 and 1996, vast numbers of children were removed from their families and placed in so-called Indian residential schools for the purpose of cultural genocide, euphemistically described as civilising. As in Australia, a great many of these rescued kids were appallingly treated.

Canada's federal government committed to formally apologise to these victims of racism. In May 2007, members of parliament agreed unanimously to apologise to the former residents of these wretched schools for "the sad legacy of emotional, physical and sexual abuse". But the process has been stalled by conservatives who parrot the same bigoted bilge we're hearing here this week.

As well as characterising cruelty as compassion, Australian critics of an apology are fearful that it will open the gates to demands for compensation. In Canada, compensation is preceding the formal

apology. On behalf of the tribes and the families the Assembly of First Nations represents, Fontaine negotiated a nearly \$C2billion reparation scheme and since last September almost 80,000 survivors (that's Fontaine's word) have received their payouts.

Canada is to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission along South African lines, which Fontaine says "will ensure that all Canadians understand the serious harm done to our people and send the message around the world that 'never again'."

I doubt we need a commission here. The work of indigenous leaders such as Dodson, who was also counsel assisting the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, ensures we already know the truth. If we want to know it. Now, after years of stalling by the Howard government, the reconciliation process can be resumed.

In *Bringing Them Home*, Wilson and Dodson sought more than an apology from MPs. They wanted our parliaments to "officially acknowledge the responsibility of their predecessors for the laws, policies and practices of forcible removal ... that state and territory police forces, having played a prominent role in implementation of the laws and policies of forcible removal, acknowledge that role" and apologise, along with churches and other non-governmental agencies.

That process began years ago in state parliaments, with the churches joining in. The Rudd Government has, at long last, ended the Howard veto.

Never again. That's perhaps the most important part of the apology. To have that undertaking formalised. On the record. In Hansard.


This historic occasion recalls another great day in Canberra when the Mabo legislation passed through both houses. "Australia has achieved this without blood on the wattle," I wrote at the time. That's not to say it wasn't bitterly fought, particularly on shock-jock radio. And never forget the abhorrent role played by mining companies that ran repulsive television commercials designed to panic the public, particularly in Western Australia. The miners have long since learned their lesson. These days they negotiate with more cultural sensitivity and decency. It's fair to say some of the biggest companies are now leaders in the reconciliation process.

Long overdue and still bitterly opposed, mainly by those ignorant of its purpose, the apology should be equally helpful. Sorry and reconciliation aren't dirty words. Let's sign up and move on.

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