When words aren't enough

By Noel Pearson
The Australian
12 February 2008

There is no one simple angle to take on this week's apology by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to members of the stolen generations and their descendants and families on behalf of the Parliament of Australia. There are different angles, some of which are at odds with each other. On the eve of its delivery I remain convulsed by these contradictions, but the majority of Australians – black and white, progressive and conservative, Labor and Coalition, young and old – believe that the apology is the right thing to do. Before I yield to this overwhelming view, I will discuss the various fraught angles from which this week's apology might be assessed.

Firstly one can analyse the apology through the prism of cultural war. Let us first admit that the imperative to apologise is a product of Australia's culture wars of the past decade. The political and cultural right's motivations for making Aboriginal history and policy the killing floor for the culture wars predated the conservative ascendancy of the past 11 years. The right's culture wars were themselves an accumulated reaction to the left's own vociferous cultural crusades of the '60s and '70s. The right launched a relentless blitz on an intellectually hapless left, vulnerably bloated by the excesses of political correctness. The right returned the contumely to which they had been subjected, with interest.

John Howard's refusal to apologise to the stolen generations was used by those who opposed his prime ministership as a bludgeon with which to morally and politically beat him. The chief motivation was not policy or spirit or moral philosophy, it was cultural war. The progressives wished for Howard to either humiliate himself by saying sorry or he had to show how much of a heartless bastard he was. To the end Howard refused to prostrate himself in the way his cultural opponents demanded of him, and in retrospect they can say that Howard was out of step with the feeling of decent Australians. But this was not the case for four consecutive parliamentary terms.

Howard himself was equally engaged in cultural war. He understood that the excesses of leftist political correctness had yielded the right huge cultural advantage, which meant that his refusal to apologise was an electoral plus. As with so many of the other cultural battles of that decade, the progressive contempt for Howard in respect of Aboriginal history and policy only increased Howard's standing. I always think of this (somewhat unsavoury) image: the teflon which Howard for so long was coated was made from the spit of his opponents. The more spit, the more teflon.

So let's not get too caught up with the "this is an act of decency whose time has come" lines. The imperative for the apology was a product of cultural war. If that was not its original intention, then it immediately became a weapon in this war.

A second way in which the apology might be considered is from a philosophical angle, and my argument here has been pre-empted by, of all people, Keith Windschuttle, writing in last weekend's *Weekend Australian*. Which is the more sincere of the two following positions? To say "we will not apologise to the stolen generations – and we won't pay compensation" or "we will apologise – but we won't pay compensation"?

It is not possible to say that there is no money with which to compensate those who have been wronged. If this issue is of such importance to the majority of Australians, then surely an appropriate fraction of the $30 billion tax cuts could be committed to compensation?

It is not possible to say that there are no legal grounds for compensation, because the Trevorrow case has established that the wrongs done against stolen generations member Bruce Trevorrow gave rise to a legal entitlement to compensation. It may be argued that the liability falls upon the states rather than the Commonwealth, but if the Commonwealth is this week going to assume moral responsibility on behalf of the country, then why not assume the responsibility for redress?

It is not possible to say that those who are entitled to legal redress can chase their claims through the courts. What if this position were taken with the asbestosis victims of James Hardie? Those who are likely to be entitled to similar claims as Bruce Treverrow are soon going to die. The greater number

already have. Talk about Bernie Banton: there are thousands of Bernie Bantons involved here. How sincere is it to say sorry and then leave them to the pain, cost, inconvenience and uncertainty of interminable court proceedings?

A third way is to look at the psychological angle. There is no doubt that the majority hope within the political leadership and ordinary white Australians is that the country will be able to, to use the Prime Minister's own words, "move on". There are two ways to take this hope. The first is ominous; that it represents a hope to dispose of the apology in as decent (and politically and financially costless) a way as possible, and to put the whole subject into the "that box is ticked" compartment. The second is optimistic; that it represents a necessary starting for a genuinely hopeful era in indigenous affairs.

But who will be able to "move on" after this Wednesday's apology?

The majority of white Australians will be able to move on (particularly with the warm inner glow that will come with having said sorry), but I doubt that indigenous Australians will. Those people stolen from their families who feel entitled to compensation will never be able to move on. Indeed too many of them will be condemned to harbour a sense of injustice for the rest of their lives. Far from moving on, these people – whose lives have been much consumed by this issue – will die with a sense of unresolved justice.

One of my misgivings about the apology has been my belief that nothing good will ever come from our people viewing ourselves as victims and making our case to the wider community on the basis of our status as victims. We have been – and the people who lost their families certainly were – victimised in history, but we must now stop the politics of victim-hood. Because we lose power in ourselves when we adopt the psychology of victim-hood. Whatever moral power we might gain over white Australia from presenting ourselves as victims, we lose in ourselves. Our people have survived two harsh centuries because of the agency of our ancestors – not the charity or un-charity of the wider society. Indeed our ancestors underwrote our survival as a people notwithstanding gross and widespread un-charity.

My worry is that this apology will sanction a view of history which cements a detrimental psychology of victim-hood – rather than a stronger psychology of defiance, survival and agency.

Then there is the historical angle on the apology. The 1997 report by the late Sir Ronald Wilson and Mick Dodson is not a rigorous history of the removal of Aboriginal children and the breaking up of families. It is a report advocating justice according to the authors' judgment.

As a report advocating justice the report is fine. But it does not represent a defensible history – and, given its shortcomings as a work of history, the report was open to the conservative critique which followed. And indigenous activists' decision to adopt historian Peter Read's now famous nomenclature – the Stolen Generations – inspired Quadrant Magazine's riposte – the Rescued Generations.

There is always danger when historical phenomena is sought to be characterised through the employment of a simple title, such as Stolen Generations. Such titles are necessarily reductive and complexity is susceptible to being lost to generalisation.

The truth is that the removal of Aboriginal children and the breaking up of Aboriginal families is a history of complexity and great variety. People were stolen – people were rescued; people were brought in chains – people were brought by their parents; mixed-blood children were in danger from their tribal step-fathers – others were loved and treated as their own; people were in danger from whites – and people were protected by whites. The motivations and actions of those whites involved in this history – governments and missions – ranged from cruel to caring, malign to loving, well-intentioned to evil.

The 19 year old Bavarian missionary who came to the year-old Lutheran mission at Cape Bedford in Cape York Peninsula in 1887, and would spend more than 50 years of his life underwriting the future of the Guugu Yimithirr people, cannot but be a hero to me and to my people. We owe an unrepayable debt to Georg Heinrich Schwartz and the white people who supported my grandparents and countless others to rebuild their lives after they arrived at the mission as young children in 1910. My grandfather

Ngulunhthul came in from the local bush to the Aboriginal Reserve that was created to facilitate the mission. My great-grandfather, Arrimi, would remain in the bush in the Cooktown district, constantly evading police attempts to incarcerate him at Palm Island and remaining in contact with his son Ngulunhthul, and later his grandson, my father. My grandmother was torn away from her family near Chillagoe, to the west of Cairns, and she would lose her own language and culture in favour of the local Guugu Yimithirr language and culture of her new home. Indeed it was the creation of reserves and the establishment of missions which enabled Aboriginal cultures and languages to survive throughout Cape York Peninsula. Those two young children who met at the mission today count scores of their descendants whose existence is owed to their determination to survive in the teeth of hardship and loss.

Schwartz embodied all of the strengths, weaknesses and contradictions that one would expect of a man who placed himself in the crucible of history. Would that we were judged by history in the way we might be tempted to judge Schwartz – we are not a bootlace on the courage and achievement of such people.

The past is a complex place, and no amount of what Robert Hughes called "anachronistic moralising" can assist us in its appreciation or understanding.

My own view is that Aboriginal people's lives were stolen by history. It wasn't just that children were stolen in a literal sense, it was more the case that the prospects of Aboriginal people being able to pursue any form of sustainable and decent life were stolen from them. Yes, there was grog, there was prostitution, there was untold misery in Aboriginal camps – and if an Aboriginal mother brought their child to the gates of the mission for their protection, nevertheless were not these lives stolen from them? And even where Aboriginal people managed to carve out some form of life for themselves in the midst of an unforgiving and unrelenting white society – they were still vulnerable to arbitrary removal powers of the state.

This history also cannot be understood just through the specific policy intentions of the governments and the missions. It must be understood by reference to the severe life options that were available to Aboriginal people in the wake of European occupation and indigenous dispossession. The life options of the Guugu Yimithirr on the frontiers of Cooktown in the 1880s had near collapsed and were diminishing fast. Without the Cape Bedford Mission the Guugu Yimithirr had no good survival options. Yes, like missions throughout colonial history, the Cape Bedford Mission both provided a haven from the hell of life on the Australian frontier, as well as facilitating the process of colonisation. It was Schwartz' possible role in bringing about the end of the traditional life at Barrow Point, north of Cape Bedford, through his influence on government policy, which troubled my late old friend, Urwunjin Roger Hart – last native speaker of the Barrow Point language – to his dying day. On many counts this old man had reasons to respect and thank Schwartz, but history is never simple.

There is a political angle to this week's apology. For the Rudd Government the apology will work politically, provided that there is no issue of compensation. If compensation had been part of the deal then the electoral support for the gesture this week would have unravelled. For this reason there is no conceivable way that Rudd will revisit the issue of compensation, no matter what hopes indigenous leaders might have for this. The tide of support in the Australian community has no doubt influenced the federal Coalition to change its opposition, but the fact that this bipartisan support has been secured by Rudd makes it even more certain that the issue of compensation will never be revisited.

Which brings me to the main political point about the strategy of Aboriginal leaders. Mick Dodson said recently: "I think this is monumental. It is something people have waited for, for a very long time…It's hugely important to us as nation and to members of the Stolen Generations." He then went on to say that the case for compensation would be pursued in the future. Lowitja O'Donoghue said last December that an apology without a compensation fund "won't settle anything". But it would appear that she also is prepared to take the apology now and defer compensation for a later campaign. National Aboriginal Alliance spokesman, Les Malezer said this last weekend that the apology was "not enough". But even the Alliance is prepared to defer compensation to a later campaign: "Once the apology has been issued, and providing the apology is not qualified, we will then go on to ask the Government to now consider how it will pay compensation."
From a strategic angle, these indigenous leaders are fooling themselves or their constituents. If they were serious about compensation, then the time to address it is at the same time as the apology.

It was never going to be easy to insist on the linkage between the apology and compensation, but Michael Mansell calling for the creation of a billion dollar fund is exactly what one must not do if one were serious about securing compensation.

Black fellas will get the words, the white fellas will keep the money. And by Thursday the stolen generations and their apology will be over as a political issue.

Then there is the emotional angle. Empathy is a necessary part of the way history is taught. There is a more advanced discussion in Canada about what teachers of history call “historical empathy”. However this discussion has drawn an important distinction between historical empathy which is said to be legitimate history, and “emotional empathy” which can be shallow and simplistic. Hollywood films, for example, present history through emotional empathy.

It is not possible to discuss fully here the problems with empathy in history, but it is one of the most basic mistakes of history that we can understand past epochs and events by simply imagining ourselves situated in that past. Without first having a thorough understanding of the political economy of that past, any act of imagination based on contemporary feelings, values and moral convictions will be teleologically silly and misleading. This is the problem when history as a discipline meets history as popular culture.

The case for the apology put by indigenous leader and businessman, John Moriarty, and this last weekend by Cathy Freeman, are compelling to me. They urge me to accept that this week’s apology to be of value, notwithstanding the strong arguments to the contrary which I have traversed in this article.

The final angle is spiritual, and I will tell of my own view.

There is a remote place on the lands of the Guugu Yimithirr of striking magnificence, which I visit about a half dozen times a year. To the south of this place, from the top of a massive parabolic dune which constantly changes shape with the winds you can see south across the distant bay the two mountains of Cape Bedford, the place where Missionary Schwartz had dedicated his life’s work. Down near the water is an ancient Aboriginal camp site with evidence of Aboriginal occupation going back hundreds, possibly thousands of years. The fresh water, fresh breezes, clean sand and shelter from insects and a clear view to approaching strangers, made this place a good place to camp. People could hunt and fish along the river and in the surrounding swamps and rainforests during the day and return to this camp in the afternoon. The last time camps like this were occupied by Aboriginal people who still lived traditional lives outside of the mission, was in the years leading up to the second world war.

This place in particular was a good place to hide from the police. It was not just children who were liable to be removed, but adults and old people were also removed to Palm Island.

My constant thought when I return to this place is the history of this camp when children laughed and played in the sand dunes and in the lake. Children would have loved this camp especially. I can see and hear them and I know why this camp was favoured since ancient times.

But then I think of the camps when there was increasingly only the last of the old people living in the bush. People like my great grandfather, Arrimi. Depleted of their children and their young people these camps must have become increasingly sad and lonely. These old people who escaped being removed to Palm Island ended their days in loneliness.

Every time I visit this place I have cause to think about these old people. And the mission. And their children gone.

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