

Anniversary to an Apology

[Andrew Hamilton](#) | 14 February 2022

This week is bookended by the Anniversary of the Apology to the Stolen Generations (13 February) and World Social Justice Day (20 February). The Anniversary of the Apology recalls a specific, local event which was preceded by long discussion, celebrated with great publicity, and accompanied by great emotion. Social Justice Day is more general and timeless in its reference and largely passes by unnoticed. It offers a larger view of the rhythm of public life. The difference in focus between the two events is like that of the beach seen at the onrush of a king tide with its rearranging of the beach and local flooding and of the view provided by the tide charts and current patterns over a year. These different perspectives need to be held together.

Certainly
the image
of the king
tide
matches
the
distracted
rhythms of
current
public



conversation. The attention span is relatively short, turning from this outbreak to the next. Calls for symbolic action and declamatory statements abound, such relatively small events as demonstrations and insulting behaviour are milked for universal and urgent significance, and forecasts of the reach of the high tide of the coronavirus and the time of its decline are made

and changed with undiminished confidence. A disillusioned Macbeth found dismissive words for the superficiality of his previous priorities:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage

And then is heard no more. It is a tale

told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing.

The reality of life cries out for a fuller view.

Both the importance and the limits of climactic events that catch the public imagination can be seen in the Apology to Indigenous Australians. The Apology by the representatives of Government was a landmark at the juncture of the road from the past and the path to the future. It defined the harm suffered by Indigenous Australians at the hands of governments obsessed by an ignorant and biased ideology. It also vindicated the Indigenous advocates who had long demanded an end to discriminatory attitudes and behaviour within non-Indigenous Australian society and its institutions. It led to official acknowledgement that the indices of health, education, access to services and representation in the justice system for Indigenous Australians should match those for other Australians. Discrepancies should therefore be addressed. As a result, Governments set targets for the move towards equality.

These were good results on which a more just future could be built. For that reason, the anniversary of the Apology is a cause for celebration. The aftermath has also revealed, however, how deeply dispossession, discrimination and poverty have affected Indigenous communities, the weak commitment of non-Indigenous Australians to change that might embarrass or cost them, and the complexity of the path to equality.

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This is shown starkly in the [annual reports on the range of targets](#) set for moving towards equality between Indigenous and other Australians. The targets have generally been missed.

Perhaps the most poignant and telling test of progress after the Apology lies in whether there is any reduction in the marked discrepancy between the proportion of Indigenous children who are forcibly separated from their family and the proportion of the children of other Australians. Such children composed the stolen generations.

Numbers, of course, do not provide conclusive evidence of change for the better or worse. Statistics can be unreliable. Where the life and welfare of a child are threatened in their family, too, it may sometimes be in their best interests to be placed with other families. The Apology was for the indiscriminate removal of children on racial grounds. It did not envisage children at serious risk if left in their own homes. That said, however, to separate any children from their family and culture has serious consequences for their development. Consequently removal, and particularly permanent removal, must be a last resort. Government policies should always focus on addressing the reasons why children are at risk, and to help families and local communities to care for their children. Where they offer removal as the first or only option, the practice will most likely be based on prejudices as blind and as harmful as those that led to the Stolen Generations.

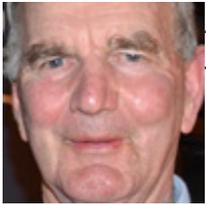
The annual reports of Family Matters, an organization dedicated to the welfare of Indigenous children, are not reassuring. The [2021 Report](#) shows that in 2021 throughout Australia over 20,500 Indigenous children — comprising 16 per cent of all Indigenous children — were in care, separated from their families. Over 17,000 of these children were permanently separated. Less than half were placed with Indigenous carers. In comparison with the children of other Australians, Indigenous children are ten times more likely to be taken into care. Despite commitments, this gap has deepened over the last decade. In response the National Agreement on Closing the Gap set the target of reducing the discrepancy by 45 per cent in 2031. On present trends, however, in ten years' time not only will the gap grow, but the number of Indigenous children in care will rise by 54 per cent.

Many reasons are offered for this appalling sacrifice of another generation of children. The most telling statistic, however, is that over 85 per cent of government funding of children at risk is spent on out of family care, and only 15 per cent on supporting communities and families to raise families well. Effectively, removing Indigenous children from their parents is the solution of choice to family dysfunction.

This evidence of a receding tide can be depressing if we focus exclusively on it. In such a situation World Social Justice Day offers a complementary view. Like Family Matters it rests on the recognition of the dignity of each human being, and especially of the most vulnerable. It is broader in its focus, however, including all the relationships in Australia on which the welfare

of particular groups depends. It insists on the importance of an attitude in governments and society that looks to the good of the whole of society and especially its most vulnerable members in the making of policy, including the collection and allocation of revenue. It insists on the importance of strengthening communities of justice empowered and trusted to care for their members and given a say in the matters that concern them. Social Justice depends on persons who care for justice, communities that build just relationships, and institutions that embody justice in all their relationships.

These are the larger changes on which the welfare of Indigenous children rests. They need to be fed both by the narrowly focused passion on the Apology and the broader commitment of Social Justice Sunday to a more just society.



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Main image: Indigenous Australian Joan Baker, daughter of Ruby Williams who was taken from her family at three years of age, looks on after watching the live television broadcast from the Australian Parliament in Canberra where Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered an apology to the Aboriginal people for injustices committed over two centuries of white settlement on February 13, 2008 in Sydney, Australia. (Kristian Dowling / Getty Images)