

Seven years later, have Kevin Rudd's promises in the Apology been forgotten?



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Since the apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008, Indigenous child removal rates have increased by 65% – a rate that should be a national scandal



Kevin Rudd with Lowitja Donoghue before the apology, 2008. Photograph: Alan Porritt/AAP

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The National Apology to the Stolen Generations delivered by Kevin Rudd in 2008 celebrates its seventh anniversary today. It was a speech that was seen as the start of a new era – a counter to the “pendulum’s swung too far” attitude that Rudd’s predecessor, John Howard, had towards Indigenous issues.

During the Howard years, Indigenous people were trapped in the gulf between two acrimonious extremes: the “black armband” and “white blindfold” views of our place in the Australian story. Howard’s dogged refusal to apologise to the members of the Stolen Generations was his clever way of benefiting from the deadlock. His stubbornness seemed almost to eclipse the progress made by his predecessor, Paul Keating, whose unequivocal [Redfern Park speech](#) delivered 16 years earlier was tantamount to an apology itself:

It begins, I think, with that act of recognition. Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds. We failed to ask – how would I feel if this were done to me? As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us.

Keating’s speech – delivered with the frankness that was his hallmark, in an Aboriginal community where many white people were nervous to wander – pretty much summed it up. It

was also his government that commissioned the 1997 Bringing them Home “stolen children” [report](#), that would be the battleground for one of the Howard era’s trademark “culture wars”.

Rudd’s apology was a much-needed circuit breaker, where the nation apologised for the treatment of the Stolen Generations. He is rightly remembered for it; it was a great speech that not only addressed the wrongs of the past but made an [undertaking for the future](#):

[F]or the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written. We today take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians. A future where this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again.

The key promise undertaken by the Rudd government was to “close the gap” – an important aspiration, one that is critical if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are to enjoy the same opportunities as all other Australians. Last week, the Productivity Commission released its annual [report](#) on the progress on “closing the gap”. By its own account, [progress has been mixed](#).

Hidden in the report were crucial figures that make Rudd’s promise to never repeat the injustices of the past look very hollow. A 436% increase in care and protection orders issued for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children between 2004-2013 indicates we have not learned from past experience. Most of the children on these orders live away from their parents – the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care have [pointed out](#) that Indigenous children aged 0-17 make up 4.6% of the population, but are 35% of children in out-of-home care.

This figure has increased by 65% since Rudd took to parliament to make amends. Reflecting on the apology, he questioned whether the national commitment to reconciliation had waned since then, noting on Friday that “Australia is now facing an indigenous incarceration epidemic ... We are seeing the emergence of this crisis in indigenous Australia beyond anything we have seen before.”

In the last federal budget, [\\$534m was cut from the Indigenous portfolio](#), in areas that Joe Hockey claimed were waste. There is no doubt that money is spent on approaches that don’t work but it is also the case that many key areas – health, housing, education, housing, employment, community infrastructure – are all under-funded.

Cuts to domestic violence centres, Aboriginal legal services and community-based organisations will mean that there is less support for families in crisis, vulnerable because of poverty, health issues and homelessness and the like. It would seem that the \$534m of “waste” cut from the Indigenous portfolio could have easily been redirected into essential services that would make a big difference to the least advantaged within the Indigenous community. Merely questioning these cuts was enough to provoke Coalition members of parliament to walk out on Bill Shorten’s Closing the Gap speech.

It is important to remember that child welfare matters are handled by state and territory agencies, so simply expecting the federal government to increase support to families in crises and to provide better housing and health is not enough. Without changes to the state-based agencies welfare agencies – underfunded, with too few caseworkers and a churn of staff – outcomes will not improve.

Just as there were protests during the periods where Aborigines Protection Boards removed Aboriginal children from their families, so too today there is a strong grassroots call for reform. The [Grandmothers Against Removals](#) group that has, over a short period of time, become a national voice is trying to raise awareness that Aboriginal child removal is occurring at a rate that is a national scandal.

Perhaps there are two messages to reflect upon this anniversary of the National Apology. You will never “close the gap” if you continue to cut the services that are required in order to overcome disadvantage. And saying “sorry” should mean that you don’t do it again.

- *Disclosure: Larissa Behrendt’s husband, Michael Lavarch, instigated the inquiry that culminated in the Bringing Them Home report while he was attorney-general in the Keating government.*