

Victories for Indigenous people are always short-lived. That's why we need a treaty – now

@IndigenousX host Steve Bunbadgee Hodder Watt was in Canberra for Kevin Rudd's national apology in 2008. It was easy to get caught up in the emotion, he says, but real progress for Aboriginal people is still not happening



'When we arrived we were confused to see so many people in the assembly facing away from the screens, looking back in the direction of the Old Parliament House. We soon discovered those people were protesting the Liberal opposition leader Brendan Nelson.' Photograph: Steve Bunbadgee Hodder Watt

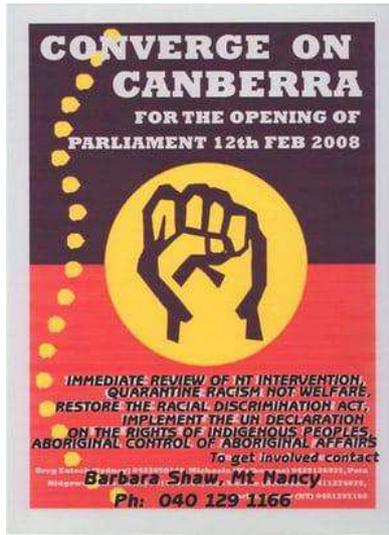
[Steve Bunbadgee Hodder Watt](#) for IndigenousX

Monday 13 February 2017 10.55 AEDT Last modified on Thursday 11 May 2017 17.02 AEST

Nine years ago I happened to be on the lawns at Parliament House in Canberra for the National Apology. It was an accidental showing on my part. I'd flown down to the ACT from Alice Springs to cover an event the day before called the Converge on Canberra rally, which was protesting the [Northern Territory](#) Emergency Response (NTER), otherwise known as the "intervention".

As a reporter for [CAAMA Radio](#), I rode along in the bus with other members of the central Australian community, people from remote desert areas who had converged to voice their angst at the paternalistic and draconian policies that had been imposed upon them by the federal government barely six months earlier.

The gathering sought to end "welfare quarantining", compulsory land acquisition and "mission manager" powers that were part of the NTER. There were also calls for an immediate review of the intervention, and for reinstating the Racial Discrimination Act, implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Aboriginal People and for Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs.



That the then prime minister, Kevin Rudd, was apologising for paternalistic policies which led to the Stolen Generations – policies based on the justification of the “protection of Aboriginal children” – just one day after we had protested the NTER – the latest version of the same paternalistic line of thinking – is just another bitter irony in the legacy of Indigenous advancement.

On 13 February 2008, Rudd was delivering his apology as our elderly demonstrators shuffled onto the bus headed for Parliament House. When we arrived we were confused to see so many people in the assembly facing away from the screens, looking back in the direction of the Old Parliament House. We soon discovered those people were protesting the Liberal opposition leader Brendan Nelson who, like his predecessor, the former prime minister John Howard, stopped short of a full acknowledgement and apology for past wrongs, saying that the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families was done “with the best intentions”.

It wasn't all protest, division and anger though. Schoolchildren of all backgrounds waved Aboriginal flags while Kutcha Edwards and John Butler sang the Aboriginal land rights anthem, From Little Things Big Things Grow. Strangers felt closer to one another as a sense of unity washed over the crowd. The elderly survivors cried and embraced each other.

It was easy to get caught up in the emotional grandeur, or even the novelty of the day, but the occasion carried extra weight for our peoples. It isn't often that we get to celebrate the official, widespread acknowledgement of an injustice, especially with the non-Indigenous community celebrating alongside us. I can count on my hands the brief moments in Australian history where we actually became lost in a sea of collective emotion.

Vincent Lingiari and Gough Whitlam created one, possibly the biggest in the 50 years since the 1967 referendum, when they rode the civil rights tide to impress Aboriginal land rights into Australian lore.

But over in Western Australia, less than a decade after Whitlam poured sand into Vincent Lingari's hand, the pastoral industry teamed up with the miners and the then WA Australian Labor party national president and WA premier Brian Burke to “double-bank” then Labor

prime minister [Bob Hawke into dissolving a national land rights plan](#) that could have secured real Aboriginal autonomy and self-determination across the nation.

In 1985, Uluru was handed back to the Anangu traditional owners. Momentarily at least, before they signed it back to the Australian government for joint management. During the ceremony, the Northern Territory's Country Liberal party flew a plane past the Mutitjulu community trailing a banner that read "Ayers Rock for all Australians".



Steve Bunbadgee Hodder Watt

It seems our victories are always short-lived. We had the bright beacon of Mabo for a moment, before John Howard cloaked it with his Wik 10-point plan, replacing traditional owner crowns with native title-holder trinkets. While in the media, fear tactics were used to wage a culture war against potential land entitlements for us. The national newspapers ran stories like, "they're coming for our backyards".

If we jump forward to the 2000s, we find John Howard again, categorically denying Indigenous Australia an apology, instead playing semantics and "expressing deep regret". A minor, begrudging acknowledgement that was also too fleeting. Next minute, he was back aboard his white pony crusading against Atsic.

Howard's big fear – like white Australia's – was us blackfellas realising true self-determination and autonomy over bureaucratic paternalism and assimilation. Closer to the 2007 election, he banked on a tactical catalogue known as the [Reeves Report](#) to help the conservative campaign against the NT Land Council structures. This is how the NTER was ultimately implemented. The national headlines said it was aimed at eradicating child abuse in remote NT Aboriginal communities, but it was essentially a declaration of war on bush mob in the desert and Top End.

I remember listening to Howard's health minister, one Tony Abbott, discuss wholesale health checks of Aboriginal children for sexual abuse. Realising his words meant that my then primary school-aged daughter could be physically examined by doctors to see if she had been abused astounded me. This absurd idea was rightly denounced by the Australian Medical Association shortly afterwards, but consequently has not properly been interrogated since.

Police were given new powers. Vehicles and households could be searched without warrants. New signs were posted on the edge of Aboriginal communities and traditional lands that reminded blackfellas they were now subjected to separate laws. New penalties were applied for the possession and carriage of substances and materials that abound in every other community around the continent.

Not long after the intervention began I witnessed an old Aboriginal lady being heckled by shoppers as she picked through a rubbish bin in front of a supermarket in Mparntwe/Alice Springs. Instead of offering compassion, the hecklers talked at her as if she were a dog. It was just a glimpse of how the race-based intervention policy had normalised a supremacy ethos. A decade on, and still each day there are police officers standing sentry at supermarket and drive-through liquor outlets, checking identifications of Aboriginal people, where they reside and “intend to consume alcohol purchases”.

This history runs parallel to the National Apology. Tens of thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are still affected by the racist policies of previous Australian governments. It speaks to the issues of sovereignty and self-determination and the ongoing dysfunction within Indigenous communities.

Having grown up in Mparntwe most of my life, recently I decided to return to my traditional Lardil homelands on Mornington Island. Being able to enjoy the privilege of having direct access to pristine island country where we still enjoy cultural activities reinforces for me the fact that our peoples have never relinquished our sovereign rights.

In his maiden speech in the NT parliament last year, Yolŋu Independent member for Nhulunbuy, Yingiya Mark Guyula, pointed to the fact that treaties aren't a new concept for communities in the north and emphasised how our link to country and culture has always provided solutions to wider issues:

Family violence is happening now because young men and women have not been through a traditional process of learning to be responsible and preparing for respectful relationships. Our rights to maintain justice has been revoked by Balanda institutions. The only way to fix this is with policies of self-determination, self-management, self-governance and ultimately, a treaty.

When the Macassans first landed on the north-east coast of Arnhem Land they recognised Yolŋu sovereignty and that a system of government already existed here. The Macassans negotiated for the right to fish certain waters and with our authority they were granted this right. The relationship between the Macassans and the Yolŋu tribes became so intertwined that the Macassan culture became included in some of our songlines and law.

It's a history that doesn't fit neatly into the national narrative. It's a history of brown people living self-determined lives, acknowledging and respecting each other's sovereignty. It's now almost a decade since that one word “sorry” was uttered. How long must we wait until it doesn't feel like a shame-job to utter two more: “Treaty. Now.”