

The Apology Needs Action

By Bronwyn Fredericks

After the Apology: Perspectives from Indigenous Speakers

School of Historical Studies – Public Forum in association with the

Re-orienting Whiteness Conference

Wednesday 3 December 2008

Charles Pearson Theatre, University of Melbourne

I wish to offer an acknowledgement to the Aboriginal people on whose lands I am speaking tonight. I also offer an acknowledgement to the other women I share the panel with this evening: Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin, Ms Muriel Bamblett, Dr Maggie Walter and Professor Lynette Russell. I am indeed honoured to be sharing the floor with such highly regarded women.

In reflecting on the Australian government's Apology to the Stolen Generations, delivered on 13 February 2008, I share that on the day I was overwhelmed with my own feelings. I felt hope. I felt joy. I felt tears of sadness for my grandfather who never knew his mother and never came to learn about her life. My family has only come to find her gravesite and know of her life and of her struggles in recent times and this journey continues as it does for many Aboriginal families. I felt a sense of relief for all who had been affected by the past government policies in relation to Aboriginal children and families.

After some time I began to reflect on the nature of the Apology and Kevin Rudd's choice of words and in particular

Our challenge for the future is to embrace a new partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The core of this partnership for the future is closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians on life expectancy, educational achievement and employment opportunities. This new partnership on closing the gap will set concrete targets for the future: within a decade to halve the widening gap in literacy,

numeracy and employment outcomes and opportunities for Indigenous children, within a decade to halve the appalling gap in infant mortality rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children and, within a generation, to close the equally appalling 17-year life gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous when it comes to overall life expectancy.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples
House of Representatives Parliament House, Canberra, 13 February 2008

A comprehensive policy paper was prepared by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) and Oxfam Australia detailing both the problems of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and the solutions based on an extensive review of the evidence within Australia and overseas for improving the health outcomes of Indigenous populations.¹ Further to this, the document *Healing Hands Indigenous Health Rights Action Kit* prepared by ANTAR (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation) identified that the percentage of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population expected to live to age 65 was 24% for men and 35% for women.² This is of extreme concern as it should be. The health of Indigenous Australians is significantly poorer than that of other Australians and of other Indigenous peoples in the world.³ What is of even more concern to me in the past week is that a couple of newspaper articles have been arguing the age frames might not be right. To me the overriding concern should be that there is such a gap.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people we live these statistics. We, the women on this panel and those within the audience know of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are sick and we know those people who die young and the funerals we attend each year. They are our family members, friends, colleagues and fellow community members.

¹ National Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation & Oxfam Australia, 2007, *CLOSE THE GAP Solutions to the Indigenous health crisis facing Australia*, NACCHO, Braddon, ACT..

² Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, (u.d.) *Healing hands Indigenous health rights action kit*, ANTAR, Sydney, p.8.

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2008, *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

In the past twelve months much has been said using the words 'Close the Gap' and the Close the Gap coalition presented the Federal Government and Opposition with a set of National Indigenous Health Equality Targets to address the 17-year life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.⁴ The Close the Gap campaign is calling on Australian governments to take action to achieve health equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders within 25 years through:

- increasing Indigenous Australians' access to health services
- addressing critical social issues such as poor housing, nutrition and education
- building Indigenous control and participation in the delivery of health and other services
- numerous other areas.⁵

It is with all of this in my mind that I reflect on the Apology and look forward to seeing what will be in the new Federal budget and then each state and territory budget to address the gap in health, education, employment, housing and other areas. I look forward to seeing action behind the words, to seeing Prime Minister Kevin Rudd walking his talk and sentiments of the Apology and overseeing his ministers enact the Apology in real change and strategies focused on 'Closing the Gap'.

I would also like to see the Australian Labor Party (ALP) look at itself and Close the Gap in Indigenous specific representation and in the numbers of Indigenous people within the ALP and encourage the union movement to do the same.

The ALP's record of nominating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for pre-selection and union positions is extremely poor. The ALP's record of negotiating, consulting with and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has also been poor. Gary Foley's chapter titled 'The Australian Labor Party and the *Native Title Act*' in Moreton-Robinson's book *Sovereign Subjects Sovereignty Matters* (2007: 118-

⁴ National Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation & Oxfam Australia, 2007, *CLOSE THE GAP. Solutions to the Indigenous Health Crisis facing Australia*. NACCHO, Braddon, ACT.

⁵ Ibid.

139) provides an overview of a period in history and the ALP.⁶ In his work Gary Foley demonstrates ‘the duplicity and hypocrisy of successive Labor administrations (state and federal) in their dealings with Indigenous Australians’⁷

Despite all of the talk in forums I have attended, [author note: maybe word ‘attended; and hearing that they want to have Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander election candidates, it has still not happened. I will not listen anymore to non-Indigenous ALP members saying ‘we don’t have anyone’. This reeks of non-Indigenous people thinking that they know more about which Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people might be more suitable and who might be available than we do. This also highlights the ways in which the ongoing processes of colonialism against Aboriginal people still continues to operate.

We will have people if the will is there to make it happen. After all, it is done for people within and tied to unions, factions, electoral offices and particular branches. For example, Peter Beattie’s previous electorate of Brisbane Central (Peter Beattie you may recall was Queensland’s immediate past Premier) is an example of how a union official becomes a member of State Parliament. I will also declare at this point that I am also a temporary resident of that electorate. There were photographs in the free local newspaper of Grace Grace with the new Premier Anna Bligh showing the reader that Grace Grace had the support of the Premier prior to the ALP plebiscite (voting process) even being closed. That is, before the ALP members in that electorate had voted who would be their preferred candidate. It was fairly obvious whom Anna Bligh wanted.

I was also in Rockhampton when the present Federal Member of Parliament was first being endorsed and pre-selected within the ALP in the 1990s. I was working in Rockhampton and Central Queensland when I saw the ALP member pre-selected for the new seat of Dawson. I watched these processes from the sidelines, as factions and unions did numbers and as promises were made. Currently, of the three State members and two Federal Members of Parliament that cover the greater Rockhampton and surrounding areas, three were practising lawyers prior to being elected. Clearly being a lawyer or a union delegate helps one to become a candidate, but sometimes even this

⁶ Foley, Gary, 2007, The Australian Labor Party and the *Native Title Act*, in A. Moreton-Robinson (Ed.). *Sovereign Subjects. Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, pp.118-139.

⁷ Foley, p.139.

doesn't matter if you have 'mates' in the right places within the Party. Sometimes you don't even have to be a member of the ALP and you can end up being a candidate for a winnable seat if you have a 'mate' who can talk you up in the right circles, for example Cheryl Kernot who moved from the Australian Democrats and Chris Bombolas who moved across from a position as a TV Sports Reporter. There are many more examples and situations where jobs for 'mates' and 'friends' operates. There are also positions in electoral offices, union offices and positions within the representational structure that are negotiated and offered to certain people over others. Some of these positions also come with substantial salaries, privileges and benefits. We all know about incidences where someone has seemingly been gifted the 'job' or a 'job' in organisations, institutions and in government departments. The ALP is no different. However, the number of non-Indigenous men and women who have been given 'jobs' in the ALP stands in stark contrast to the number of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander men and women who have been given 'jobs'. This is despite the ALP historically casting 'itself as the natural political friend of the Indigenous rights movement'⁸ and of Indigenous peoples in general. The number of non-Indigenous men and women who have 'mates' in the ALP in the right circles also stands in contrast to the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have 'mates' in the right circles. The way I see it at this present time, is that there is a gulf between the theory and practice of the ALP and the personal actions of numerous men and women within the ALP in regards to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. That is, there is most definitely a difference in what the ALP promises and what it does. The power and privilege that are afforded to non-Indigenous people within the ALP is not afforded to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In fact, the relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in most circumstances remains one of exclusion and assimilation where our epistemological and ontological positions are not just buried by ALP policy and procedure but also steamrolled over with pathological presumptions. In this way the ALP acts discursively to frame and constrain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and maintain the dominance, power and control of non-Indigenous peoples.⁹

⁸ Foley, p.139.

⁹ Moreton-Robinson, A, 2007, 'Writing off Indigenous Sovereignty', in A. Moreton-Robinson (Ed.) *Sovereign Subjects. Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, pp.86-104.

In reflecting on the Apology, I ask the question, will there again be a gulf between the words spoken and the actions and behaviours? Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has apologised for what others have done in the past and the pain and hurt experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. His passionate performative Apology also gained him virtue and kudos in the process and perhaps even offered some white Australians a form of redemption.

I believe however that as the leader of the ALP he needs to also turn his focus on what his own Party is doing. There is a focus within the ALP on the past and the future but not on what people within the ALP is doing now. Changes need to happen within the fabric that makes the ALP the ALP, otherwise it will reek of, 'do as I say not do as I do'. It will mean in the future we will hear the repeat of past narratives and the words of insincere guilt and that 'the sentiment was there' or that the Apology was offered with 'all the best of intentions' as a way of recuperating white virtue.

I ask members of the audience, *how do you see it? Where do you situate yourself? What about the organisations that you belong to?*

If you have been in an organisation and seen the gifting of a job or been gifted such a job or role, are you prepared to offer the same leg up to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander man or woman? If so, why hasn't it happened yet? Are you putting alliances over morality and ethics? Who do you privilege? Who are the beneficiaries? Who suffers? I say this because something else and someone else is being privileged and gifted power and are the beneficiaries other than Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander men and women. Are my words making you squirm in your seat? Does the thought of dispossessing yourself of some of your power and privilege make you nervous or scared? Are you trying right now to tell yourself that where you are employed or the organisation you belong to doesn't do that? Are you sure? How do you know it doesn't minimise Aboriginal people? Marginalise Aboriginal people in the name of this policy or that policy? And if it did it did it in innocence?¹⁰

¹⁰ Nielsen, J, 2004, How Mainstream Law Makes Aboriginal Women Disappear, *Indigenous Law Bulletin Special Focus Edition: Indigenous Women*, March/April, 6(1): 23-25; and Nielsen, J, 2007, There's Always an Easy Out:

I am putting this out there to you, as I believe that the lines between the margins and the centre of life need to be defused if we as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are going to participate and I say that I want to participate without giving up what it means to me to be an Aboriginal woman. In the process of participating I also don't want to be called a witch, stirrer, troublemaker, or someone with a poison pen, a bitch and worse as I have been called before, or be seen as being almost 'ungrateful' and 'unappreciative' of what is being done for me, us, and on our behalf when I, we, raise concerns or express a conflicting point of view.

Do not accuse me, us, of being unwilling to compromise or follow the rules, or perceive me, us, to be uneducated, unacceptable, aggressors and confrontational when I, we, don't agree or have a differing point of view. All of this negates us as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women, our versions of history and the positioning of us, as seen by us. It sits us back in the position of the dominant society thinking it knows what is best for us. Remember we know what is best for us. It will not be easy as part of the challenge is about challenging yourself. It is about challenging the structures that sit across all areas of our lives, the social, political, economic, educational, legal, cultural, and religious spheres.¹¹ By our lives here I mean Indigenous and non-Indigenous people's lives.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people collectively continue to be the most socially and economically disadvantaged and have the poorest health status in Australia. Unless the Apology and Close the Gap is enacted, our children and our grandchildren will continue to inherit the statement made by the National Health and Medical Research

How 'Innocence' and 'Probability' Whitewash Race Discrimination, *Australian Critical Race And Whiteness Studies Association Journal*, 3 (1): 1-15, <http://www.acrawsa.org.au/journal/acrawsa%204-5.pdf>.

¹¹ Brady, M, 2007. Indigenous sovereignty and the Australian state: Relations in a globalising era, in A. Moreton-Robinson (Ed.). *Sovereign Subjects. Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, pp.155-167; and Cronin, D, 2007, Welfare dependency and mutual obligation: Negotiating Indigenous sovereignty in A. Moreton-Robinson (Ed.). *Sovereign Subjects. Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, pp. 179-200; and Mowbray, M, 2007, *Social Determinants and Indigenous Health: The International experience and its policy implications. Report on specially prepared documents, presentations and discussions at the International Symposium on the Social Determinants of Indigenous Health, Adelaide, 29-30 April 2007 for the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH)*, RMIT University, Melbourne.

Council in 1996, that 'Aboriginality is itself a health hazard'.¹² It may be hard for some of you to believe that in one of the most industrialised, 'first world' countries Aboriginal ethnicity and culture are a hazard to one's health. How many other people merely having been born in this continent read or hear about themselves or their people in this way? Racism directed through the processes of colonisation created the situation, and racism maintains it. Thus it is not Aboriginality that is a health hazard, but overt and covert racism, which positioned and still positions Aboriginal peoples and which maintains the structures that keep us marginalised.¹³ Will we see more Apologies in the future for what is not happening now? Or what continues to happen?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people stopped on the 13th February and heard the Apology. Many breathed relief and may have said the word 'finally'. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women I work with are like many others: they are getting on with their work and taking up our responsibilities. We are focusing on our issues of Native Title, sovereignty, Stolen Generations, Stolen Wages, cultural affirmation and advocating for improvements in health, housing, education, employment and life's circumstances.

We have our own responsibilities. We cannot carry your responsibilities and ours. The people at this Forum who have listened to me tonight, I urge you to take up your responsibilities in relation to us. Make the Apology and Close the Gap happen in your daily lives and in the lives of those around you.

Thank you.

¹² National Health and Medical Research Council, 1996, *The Health Australia Project A Review of infrastructure supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health advancement. Discussion Paper*, 20 August 1996, National Health and Medical Research Council, Canberra, p.24.

¹³ See Brady; Cronin; and Moreton-Robinson.