

Saying sorry

Speech on motion from Mr Stanhope 14th February 2008

Let me start by repeating the word which finally made it onto the political agenda yesterday but has not made it into this revised motion – Sorry.

Sorry, sorry, sorry.

Yesterday a nation said sorry – yes, the word was uttered even on the behalf of those who have been fed on Howard’s politics of resentment and who, in righteous anger, blitzed the shockjocks on talkback radio yesterday. Like the vandals who painted racist comments on Gugan Gulwan youth centre a few weeks ago, such people are already sounding, simply, ungracious and emotionally dwarfed, unable to make the leap that will be just as good for their healing as well as for the Indigenous people of this country. Under the politics of resentment, the idea prevailed that if someone was given something – even if it was just empathy expressed in a word – there was less for anyone else. But yesterday, as we saw, the dominant discourse changed, leaving behind the Pauline Hansonites, who believe they suffer when compassion and empathy towards original Australians is expressed. Brendan Nelson realises it, even Mal Brough acknowledges it; the journey of healing for the stolen generation of Aboriginal people has begun, and those of us who sat on Parliament House’s lawns realised yesterday that it is a journey which we can all take, to our mutual benefit.

Let me consider some of those benefits today.

A couple of years ago, I was given the privilege of looking at the Barmah forests with Monica Morgan Yorta Yorta people, to hear the stories of how people lived richly on and by the river we know as Murray (called, variously by the peoples who lived long it, Mobilong, Millewa, Murrundi, and Dhungalla by the Yorta Yorta). I could not see it through Yorta Yorta eyes, of course; but it was enough to give me a sense of how people could live sustainably in their environment for tens of thousands of years.

Because I have lived for many years near landscapes whose theft from Aboriginal owners was more recent, I have had the privilege of walking over lands marked by few settler steps. I know what its like to look towards Mt Kosciusko and see only mountains and valleys in between; this land is not kind to people who like straight bitumen roads, the morning café latte, Radio National and good TV reception. But judging by the axe heads and other tools to be found in those parts, it was home to many people over a long, long time.

The story told by the second generation of white settlers in our valley was that there weren't ever any Aboriginal groups living there. It was Sorry country they said, though probably not in those words. The old-timers said that it was country where Aboriginal people were sent for punishment – banished from their families and camping groups, surely the harshest punishment apart from death.

These people didn't feel sorry. Not by a long shot. One Sunday I attended with my children the 100 year anniversary of the establishment of the first school in the area. The families built it with their own hands of course, and then attracted a teacher. Really commendable, the pioneering spirit of which we are so proud. But what was that school, those cleared lands and roads built on the backs of? It was chilling to hear the old tale of conquering the wild land and getting rid of the stubborn savages, told as a white pioneering history.

Howard told a similar story in a much more sophisticated way. He left out the nasties, but I never caught an iota of self doubt in his judgements, as this totally unempathic man in his comfortable mansion on the most expensive real estate in Australia looked over the bays of Sydney, which once teemed with fish and birds – and on the land, plants in myriad forms and animals plentiful enough that they could be caught with tools of wood and stone. Beautiful forests, streams and seascapes.

As an Aboriginal friend said to me once, where you see beauty, I see food.

Today, due to the good will and empathy of Kevin Rudd and his government, we as a nation have the collective opportunity of saying 'sorry'. I considered amending the motion to explicitly incorporate that word, but thought it would be churlish to do so.

If we are sorry we should say so.

In its literal sense, we are sorry for the earlier practice of taking children away from their families. This racist policy, potentially and, perhaps

deliberately, genocidal, was excused by Howard and his ilk as: 'carried out with the best of intentions'. Few of these removals – thefts, as Sir Ronald Wilson called them – could be justified as objectively proven child protection, and the evidence from the stories is that only some of the children had good and fulfilling childhoods. Others were slaves, doing domestic and other work in the homes of others and for the institutions which were supposedly caring for them; beatings, rape, fractured families, that loneliness and the amputation of separation, felt as an aching in the belly which never goes away, even for those lucky enough to locate mothers, children, brothers, sisters, any remnant of precious family.

Sorry will not cure the broken hearts and the dislocation, but it is a recognition that there is material reason for that pain, shifting it from the personal to the social and political, where it belongs.

Sorry is bigger than that though. When I say 'sorry' I think of the way that Aboriginal people have been ripped away not only from families but also from country; the country that we have been shown over and over again in the paintings that our art market prices so highly; country that can be traced on Aboriginal skins. Our forebears moved them out of their country and our contemporary politicians and bureaucrats move them out again; from Redfern, for instance, right now. From the townships to the outstations and back again.

While we set up a system for land rights, it is of little use to most Aboriginal communities. Even before it was drenched by the bucketloads of extinguishment of Wik, the politicians and lawyers made it necessary for peoples whose boundaries were fluid to claim exclusive ownership over their neighbours and co-tenants, while proving a material connection of continuous habitation. Thus the Yorta Yorta, whose land management principles would save the dying Barmah Forests, were denied entitlement to their lands. To this point, the contribution that they and other Aboriginal peoples of the Murray Darling Basin could make to sustainable management of the rivers, wetlands and woodlands of the ailing basin, has been rejected. Saying 'sorry' has to mean 'sorry for stuffing up your country, for damaging it without asking for permission.

Now I believe we must say sorry to Aboriginal people and rethink the intervention, which treats Northern Territory Aboriginal people as second class citizens. Many found that their vouchers – a system set up with the best of intentions to quarantine part of Centrelink allowances for food – were useless in Canberra's Woolworths. What is this then but a restriction on travel, a kind of mandatory detention?

There is a lot of work to do. Now Rudd's government must talk with Aboriginal people about the best ways to work together. I believe, along with my Senate colleague Bob Brown, that compensation is essential and the money should be set aside while its method of delivery is considered. Health and education, housing and employment: there is a lot to do and now we can get on with it.

I am proud to be part of a Parliament that said sorry a decade ago. I am especially proud that Greens MLAs Lucy Horodny and Kerrie Tucker were the original instigators of the apology and that they worked with Marian Reilly of the ALP to persuade a reluctant Liberal Government to move it. But Ms Carnell did do it; and as Chief Minister, it was right that she did on behalf of all Canberra Residents; as it is right that Prime Minister Rudd should, for all Australians.