

Senator Aden Ridgeway
National Day of Healing Launch
Great Hall Parliament House, Canberra
Wednesday 25 May 2005

I would like to dedicate this entire day to Christine Jacobs. I was going to get down here this morning and meet her for the first time-but that didn't happen. Tamara, your mother did a fantastic job because if someone of your age can stand up here with that sort of courage and that sort of inspiration that's what we need in leadership in this country.

Christine's tragic death was a wake up call to the entire nation. It's a call that you can't keep putting things off; you have to face up to the truth of our history. So in some ways what would've been Christine's big day is a tragedy. The first time she'd flown in a plane. I acknowledge Sevenoaks College; they were so excited they raised the money to get Tamara here to tell her story.

In telling Christine's story in this way she's tragically made the ultimate sacrifice to what the Journey of Healing and what Reconciliation's about. It's not about political talk it's about human beings being able to relate to each other heart to heart. It's about being able to acknowledge what goes deep and what cuts deep and how to provide some space in which people can find a way to move forward.

There's a lot of courage and I mean the stolen generations who sit here as well, to turn around and say that they will make today a day of healing. It says that they've been getting on with the business despite the politicians; despite the lack of leadership. This is the source of encouragement and strength and leadership that all of us should look to, to find ways forward in which the nation can be reconciled.

As I mentioned earlier, tomorrow, the 26th of May, marks the 1997 anniversary of the public launch of the Bringing them Home Report into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their families. This report detailed a sad and shocking part of our history: the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. This was done by successive Australian Governments between 1910 and the 1970s.

The first Sorry Day was held one year later in 1998. By this time the Bringing them Home Report had been public for a year and the stories of the grief, trauma and damage done to our children, our families and our communities had started to spread.

An ugly part of Australian history was finally in the open.

Of course we Indigenous people have known about it all our lives - there is no Aboriginal family (especially in this part of the country) which has been spared the consequences of this policy - but the wider community was still reeling from the heart breaking stories that were finally being told publicly.

We listened as state government after state government and then the territory governments, then the churches and also a range of other organisations, apologised to us –not out of guilt – but out of acknowledgement for the harm done and suffering caused.

We are yet to have a full apology from the national parliament.

National Day of Healing

The Stolen Generations representatives have not been sitting around waiting for an apology from our Prime Minister; they have been on their own Journey of Healing for a number of years now and this year they have renamed Sorry Day a National Day of Healing.

The National Day of Healing will focus on the healing needed throughout Australian society if we are to achieve reconciliation.

We Indigenous people are regularly lectured on the importance of a new "practical" agenda; a narrow, individualistic and a-historic focus on health, housing and education.

We are told that the stolen generations need to understand that they have to take a back seat to the more pressing and “real issues” like this. That we all need to stop getting “caught up in distractions” like the centrality of a formal parliamentary apology, reparations, and the future of national elected Indigenous leadership in this country.

Well I have some news for the Government: we blackfellas can chew gun and walk at the same time. We can operate many agendas and work on many fronts - just like the rest of Australia. Not only can we do so- we have an obligation to do so. If we do not stand up for our stolen generations – who will?

But make no mistake; our people have been getting on with it for years. We have – after all – survived.

But on this one day of the year, this National Day of Healing; Sorry Day, we do want to remember our fallen, our lost ones, our brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers – some of whom may never return.

I think we are allowed that one day of the year to remember - Sorry Day.

In some ways, Sorry Day is our ANZAC Day. On Sorry Day we come together to remember our fallen and to catch up with our survivors.

Every year, a few more of us don't make it. But while we may hold those memories close, there always will be new faces who want to acknowledge the past and be a part of the healing and to make sure this never happens again.

It's not rocket science.

However, this ideological wet blanket that has been thrown over all debate on Indigenous issues results in a simplistic debate that overlooks basic lessons from the past and is based on stereotypes of Indigenous people.

To give an example of the tenor of debate – almost all current government activity is based on commitments to address Indigenous disadvantage. We are defined as ‘disadvantaged citizens’. The goal is to provide us with ‘the same opportunities as other Australians’

The Ministerial Taskforce on Indigenous has a Charter which sets out the commitments of the federal government. It highlights a focus on practical measures in the areas of health, education, employment and family violence.

But, while it recognises the importance of cultural identity, heritage, traditional law, land and community governance it will not make a commitment in those areas

This illustrates perfectly the mindset of a government, which sees a distinction between addressing disadvantage on the one hand, and cultural issues on the other hand.

It is a false dichotomy. The two are entwined.

A failure to recognise and embrace the cultural characteristics and the cultural capital that Indigenous people possess is one of the major barriers which excludes us. It limits our ability to participate. And it denigrates our greatest strength and asset – our culture.

Of course, we do want to enjoy the same opportunities for our people as for other Australians. Historically, we were not provided with services and access to tools that would equip us to succeed in mainstream society. But having the same opportunities is different from being the same. National inclusiveness is about creating space for our different cultures to co-exist.

Defining us as ‘disadvantaged citizens’ masks the structural and systemic barriers that have contributed to the situation we now found ourselves in. It enables the debate and proposed solutions to be grossly over-simplified.

We are not simply ‘disadvantaged’ people; we have been actively excluded from the economic life of the nation, discriminated against and marginalised. In looking to ways forward we should define our goal as creating opportunities for our inclusion in all forms of the economy – not simply as overcoming ‘disadvantage’.

Today, I acknowledge all Stolen Generations' members across Australia and I also acknowledge the efforts of many individuals, communities and community organisations, who have been working towards reconciliation.

I continue to call on the Government to establish a national Stolen Generations Reparations Tribunal to deliver a humane and compassionate alternative to the adversarial, expensive and traumatic process of litigation.