

After the apology: Patrick Dodson speaks at the National Press Club.

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I acknowledge the Ngambri-Ngunnawal peoples and thank the National Press Club for their kind invitation.

It was raining in Darwin when I left a couple of days ago and the wet is still settled on the land. The wet season will remain for several more weeks yet before giving way to the dry around Easter. The cycle continues.

Here in the south the persistent drought seems to be ending, as even those most concerned with the reality of climate change knew it must. The political cycle, however, is less regular. Today, in our parliament, a crippling long dry spell may have just ended.

Up north the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley and the Northern Territory will be completing their annual cycle of ceremony and renewal of their cultural responsibilities. They will participate in a ceremony and ritual that goes back to what our Yawuru people know as the Bugarrigarra--the time of the Dreaming. Young people will move in ceremony from adolescence to adulthood and come out from the bush with a different set of rights and responsibilities within their community. Old people will sing the songs of the country and teach intricate verse and dance that are the story of the land, the rivers and the seas of our people.

Throughout Australia other Aboriginal people are using contemporary forms to illustrate the nature of our Aboriginal society and to share elements of our story and society with non-Indigenous Australians. As part of the festival of Perth, the Bunuba people of the Fitzroy Valley in the Kimberley are presenting the play Jandamarra. It tells the story of the Bunuba warrior Jandamarra and his battle with the Fitzroy Valley colonisers. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal actors are working together to tell the tale of resistance and of the Bunuba's fight to be Aboriginal people in their own domain.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal musicians, led by Paul Kelly and Archie Roach, have been travelling the country singing the songs of Aboriginal people in their Black Armband Tour. And small groups of individuals and families have gathered in homes and community centres around the country to watch the DVD Liyarn Ngarn--Archie Roach and Pete Postlethwaite's journey in search of Aboriginal Australia and the underlying racism of our society, a story told through conversation and the haunting beauty of Archie's songs.

The audiences at the Festival of Perth, the fans at the Black Armband Tour concerts, and the

families and community groups watching Liyarn Ngarn are on their own journeys of Healing and Reconciliation. They understand what Richard Flanagan meant when he said, 'What Black Australia offers to the nation is not guilt about our history but an invitation to our future'.

Today our national parliament has taken the first step to accepting that invitation to the future! It is a courageous and welcome step. The nation, through Prime Minister Rudd, has apologised to the thousands of Indigenous people over many generations who were stolen or forcibly removed from their families, countries, languages and culture. It takes courage to apologise. It takes courage to forgive. It takes courage to begin a journey when the destination is imagined but not known. On behalf of the nation, parliament has recognised the truth of my brother Mick's words to Prime Minister Howard--that the Bringing Them Home report contains the 'saddest of all stories'. We know these stories are as true as they are sad. Parliament has now accepted the complicity of Australian governments in a misguided attempt to destroy our people. We welcome Prime Minister Rudd's commitment to ensure that those 'saddest of all stories' will not be repeated in the future.

I would like to acknowledge the members of the Stolen Generations and their families who have been victims of these racially motivated policies. We owe them our debt.

To those who fought against assimilation and assaults on our unique existence as Aboriginal and Torres Strait people, I humbly express our gratitude.

To those of you who challenged the nation to say sorry to the Stolen Generations and refused to accept half-hearted expressions of regret, we give our thanks.

To those of you who had the courage to challenge the racism of the past and tell your stories in courts, only to be denied justice, I commend your bravery and wish you peace and contentment in your remaining years.

To the children of those who were removed, I challenge you to find the courage to forgive but never to forget what was done to your families and to take from their stories the commitment and courage to prevail as proud Aboriginal people.

And to those who participated in the removal process and who have looked into their own hearts and found that their intent was good, I thank you for the care and love that you showed to those in need.

But to those whose intent was malign and motivation racist, your actions have now been exposed and repudiated. You need to find the strength to disavow your racist intent and seek forgiveness or may your kind never darken the door of this nation again.

But this is the day for people of the Stolen Generation. I'll speak now to those within our society with a duty of care to children: they need to exercise that duty with the utmost care and regard to children's rights. The violence prevalent in too many of our own communities and families affects children and women and has to stop.

Fathers and uncles also have a duty of care in both Aboriginal and Australian law. There has been far too much brutality, by black and white, upon our people. It has taken us nowhere and it diminishes our humanity.

Our next national task is to fight back against the causes of crushing poverty and injustice. Having turned the corner with a national apology, we can now recommit to that national task in

true partnership. The government's statement highlights the need for a better way of dealing with nation building--an Australian way. This challenge to build a new Australia is vital to us as Indigenous peoples. It is also vital to the integrity of the nation itself.

In modern Australia Aboriginal people are still unrecognised within the constitution and do not have an established role to play in the building of our nation. The concept of terra nullius persists. We can change this together.

I agree with the Prime Minister that we have turned a page in the book of our national journey. We have on the table before us a clean page on which great things may be written. It is a page that future generations of Australians might read with pride, recognising the moment when hope re-emerged; the moment when we confronted our past and embarked on a journey of social revival characterised by vision, wisdom, courage and nation building. It is watershed renaissance moment.

After this moment Australia can be imagined as a different place. A place where Aboriginal citizens no longer live in third world conditions. A place where our kids are safe. A place where community rights--of choice, consultation, participation and responsibility--matter more than administrative procedures and public sector management guidelines.

A focus upon regional governance has much to offer for the better delivery of services and for the development of strategies to come to grips with the real issues facing our communities. An army of public servants is not needed as much as competent structures engaging the Aboriginal people.

The task ahead is not to be underestimated. The facts are well known. They stand as a testament to our failures to date and will remain as blemishes on our national landscape unless we embark upon a new dialogue. These blemishes are not tattoos or birthmarks; they are removable stains on the fabric of our society and we must begin the task immediately. Here are some key areas of action:

- * The overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in our prison systems. This means that our communities are losing their young men and women at a time when they are most needed.
- * The appalling figures relating to Aboriginal health. The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life-expectancy remains so great, with lifestyle diseases being the main causes of death and ill-health.
- * The tragic suicide, drug taking and despair in so many in our communities, especially amongst the young. This cheats many people out of the full potential that life within a reconciled Australia could bring.
- * Government service providers' inability to deliver to Aboriginal Australians the citizenship services that most other Australians take for granted. The continued desire for the control and management of Aboriginal peoples seems to have led us to this sorry state.
- * The lack of education facilities and curricula enabling our young people to compete in the mainstream economy and develop regional and culturally relevant industries for our communities. Even mundane profit generating ones would not be too bad!
- * Housing needs for basic shelter and security. Without this much else is difficult. It is urgent and costly but necessary. This has got to be a major priority.

* The importance of sustaining our languages and our cultural practices. Since colonisation this has not been given real consideration; its values and principles have been continually undermined.

* The recognition of native title rights and other rights gained by way of land and cultural heritage legislation. This is the post-colonial acknowledgement of our survival as peoples belonging to specific areas of country, with systems of governance and laws that have survived the assaults of history.

These issues have been highlighted by Royal Commissions and Coronial Inquiries in every jurisdiction in this country for more than a century. They continue to challenge us.

The place of Aboriginal people in the constitutional and institutional frameworks of our nation has to be approached from the point of understanding our greatest fears about such a discussion and its outcome. This should not daunt us. We saw in the ceremonial opening at parliament that change to institutions is possible. I look forward to the Usher of the Black Rod one day carrying a woman's digging stick, a powerful symbol of sustenance and strength.

Now is a good time to ask ourselves why we have had such limited success in genuinely confronting our failure to address the needs of the Indigenous people of our country and reconcile our position in our country. The recent debate that has raged in the lead-up to the National Apology to the Stolen Generations has not been edifying. There is even an exaggerated anxiety that there will be an avalanche of demands for monetary compensation. Even if the court were to say there is a case for compensation, would the scale cripple our economic future? Is our fear of having our past governments and its servants condemned for their failure to act to protect Indigenous Australians so great that we simply cannot countenance the notion of reviewing their actions and establishing processes for recompense, restitution or reconciliation? Any group of people who have been treated badly under legitimate laws of the Crown deserve to pursue compensation--judicially, legally and politically. They deserve our support.

The whole issue of making good on the past, including compensating the Stolen Generation, should indeed be pursued. Let us do so in a considered and negotiated manner as part of a carefully constructed process aimed at building an Australian nation that recognises and respects Aboriginal history, culture, language and society. Consensus making and consultation processes have delivered a national apology. Such skills will be necessary on all sides to draw up the vision we need for the future.

In recent years we have been engulfed in a spurious discourse over symbolism versus practical outcomes, over rights versus responsibilities, and the notion that the collective or community is somehow at odds with the rights and aspirations of individuals. Symbolism is a powerful means to forge new thinking and discourse. I see today's apology as an epic gesture on the part of the Australian settler state to find accommodation with the dispossessed and colonised. Additionally, we as a nation should be capable of developing practical public policy that recognises the fact that Indigenous society--which draws on thousands of years of cultural and religious connection to Australian lands--has survived. We are capable of creating a relationship where the imperatives of Indigenous life are understood and respected by governments and institutionalised as part of good governance.

Let us not pretend that the journey from this point will not be challenging. It must involve the capacity of our leaders and opinion makers to imagine a renewed nation and to be prepared to

take and support the steps towards a true renaissance.

I know from my past experience as Chairman of the Aboriginal Reconciliation Council that there is a reservoir of goodwill in the Australian population and a determination to reconcile our history and cement an honoured and respected place for Indigenous people within our polity. What has been lacking has been the political leadership and the will to harness the public yearning for national transformation.

The new Australian government talks of building bridges of engagement and building a national consensus on the evolving relationship between the Australian nation-state and Indigenous peoples. This dialogue must begin immediately. Its scope must be defined through negotiation. Let us set the timelines with enough room to achieve the outcomes but with clearly defined signposts of progress, and a process that is both public and transparent.

We know from global history that nations and societies have the capacity to break the shackles of paralysis and fear. Who could have predicted in the late 1980s that the monolithic empire of the Soviet Union, with its subjugated eastern European states, could have dissolved without bloodshed into a mosaic of democratic nations so rapidly? And who could have dreamed in 1989, at the height of the most repressive days of apartheid, that South Africa within five years would elect Nelson Mandela to lead a new democratic nation with a constitution enshrining the world's best human rights practice?

We have at this point in Australian history an opportunity for a national renaissance based on modern settler Australia connecting with those who have occupied and managed these lands for countless millennia. In this process we have the liberating potential to forge a unique national identity and purpose; one that rises above the tragedy of our colonial and racist history and enshrines respect for cultural diversity as a pivotal cornerstone of our nation's existence.

Recent commentators have pointed out that the accommodation of Indigenous Australia within our nation-state has a strategic and economic imperative as well as a moral foundation. As Australia integrates into the economic and social structures of our Asian region the vestiges of British colonialism and its racist hangover are unquestionably an impediment to our Asian future. We need to recognise and celebrate the political and social moments that will influence the national transformation of our relationship with Indigenous Australia. We have missed some key points in the past with the potential for transformation. The recognition of Indigenous rights through the Mabo and Wik High Court judgments should have been seminal landmarks in our nation's history. Considered dialogue was needed but it was overwhelmed by conflict, fear, and solutions imposed by vested interests. Tragically, for our nation, the legal recognition that Indigenous people's ownership and connection to land had survived British invasion and two centuries of settler society occupation was not the cause for celebration and renewal it may have been. Instead the loud demands by industry and some state governments to extinguish or curtail Indigenous rights in the name of economic certainty prevailed. Wik's translation into legislation required us to accept that our traditional custodial rights remained secondary and subservient. The apology today regains the momentum of moments lost.

So, in 2008, what will be the strategic leverage points that promote serious dialogue about our nation's future relationship with Indigenous Australia? Most importantly, the relationship between governments and Indigenous people must be rigorously transparent and be based on the highest principles of integrity. After an appalling historical relationship, which is at the heart of today's apology, the building of trust between the Australian governments and

Indigenous communities must be an urgent priority in the development of our relationship.

The NT intervention occurred in the context of an ideological crusade. It was promoted by conservative policy think tanks and influential media commentators as a neo-liberal prescription for Indigenous policy. It involved the privatisation of land and homes; the dismantling of Indigenous decision-making processes; and the shock treatment of abolishing the CDEP scheme, which Indigenous economies in remote settlements had depended on. This created a level of distrust; government and Indigenous relationships broke down; and policy became dysfunctional and incoherent, not only for the Northern Territory but nationally as well.

I hope the reality of the apology signals a far deeper intent to quickly remedy this situation with the participation of the Aboriginal leadership. It was against this background that I previously proposed the notion of a structured national dialogue involving diverse Indigenous and other Australian leaders who would come together to address the legacy of our shared history, create pathways to reconstruct Indigenous communities and build a consensus for a lasting settlement between Indigenous people and the Australian nation-state. We, as Australians committed to a better future, should seize this moment of hope.

We cannot rely upon government leadership alone but must seek out our fellow citizens and challenge the presuppositions and fears that block our dialogue.

We can dare to imagine the nation we will become. A nation respected by others for having achieved inclusiveness. A nation that respects our diversity constitutionally and celebrates our unity. We can work towards a bipartisan, multi-government commitment to narrow the gaps in social indicators. We can shape agreed solutions based on dynamic partnerships at national, regional and local levels.

We do not need to reinvent solutions. There are many seminal reports and judgments that can guide our actions.

The constitutional and institutional position of the Aboriginal people needs to be bolstered to achieve a better and inclusive nation-state. The constitutional power exists--it will be applied when the national will insists.

We can imagine a nation where Aboriginal people can fully enjoy their rights, interests and responsibilities without the non-Aboriginal majority feeling threatened and fearful.

We can look every other nation in the eye when we join a global consensus on the Declaration of Indigenous Peoples' Rights passed by the United Nations last year, ratifying it and adopting it into national legislation, policy and practice.

We can translate these endeavours into practice if we value consensus and sideline adversity; if we encourage our leaders to lead firstly by listening; and if we learn from organisations or individuals with experience and expertise in international processes of negotiation. The saying of these few words in our national parliament opens the bridge to the future. It is a future we can share; a future we can shape; a future we shall achieve if we have the courage.

We the Indigenous people have a long history in this country. For a relatively short time we have been sharing it with others; nevertheless, our fates are intrinsically bound. We must use what is good out of our traditions to build our future.

We cannot continue on an endless journey of acrimony and unhappiness. The nation is capable of better. We have great resources, both physical and human. For the first time in many years the resolution of the unfinished business between us seems possible. What greater achievement could we bequeath to our children than a nation united, where its Indigenous people and their cultures, laws and languages are central to the foundations of the nation-state? We should aim to achieve the best possible future, looking to others who have gone down similar roads for their help, advice and experience. But we also need to look within our own histories and our own resources to make things happen.

Today we have made a good start to a new way--to a renaissance. With hope comes courage; with courage comes commitment; with commitment comes change.

Back in the bush, the sun is rising and the morning star is fading. The ceremony ground campfires are not yet lit. The young leaders of tomorrow must finish off their learning before returning to this other world. Here they will carry on their responsibilities: to heal our broken hearts; to give life to our hope; to ensure that when our spirits return to our country we will all be truly free. The words of apology echoing across the nation make it possible for us to now begin to talk together as one--Liyarn Ngarn.

I take heart today from the words of Jose Ramos Horta, a man who today is finding the courage to survive a vicious, violent attack on him and his nation:

Now you say this victory [against Indonesia] took courage, but I think more courage is required to be humble, to admit your mistakes, your sins, to be honest.

More courage is required to forgive than is required to take up arms.

Which means that I am not the most courageous person in the world. Because, after all, courage is easier said than done.

For Jose Ramos Horta's interview, go to <www.speaktruth.org/defend/profiles/profile_33.asp>.

Patrick Dodson is chairman of the Kimberley Development Commission and of the Lingjari foundation. He is former director of the Central Land Council and of the Kimberley Land Council, and was for six years chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.

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