

Apology to stolen generations: questions and answers

Reconciliation Australia

This material has been prepared by Reconciliation Australia to help Australians understand the background to the apology that will be made to the stolen generations by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. For further information visit <www.reconcile.org.au> and take a look at the “sorry” section.

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Questions

1. Who are the stolen generations?
2. How do we know these people’s stories are true?
3. Why is it important to apologise to the stolen generations?
4. Why should Australians today apologise for something we aren’t responsible for?
5. What does an apology mean to me as a non-Indigenous Australian?
6. Why should we apologise when many Aboriginal people are actually better off because they were removed from dysfunctional families?
7. Will an apology lead to claims for compensation from members of the stolen generations?
8. Why is the word “sorry” important as part of the apology?

Answers

1. Who are the stolen generations?

The term “stolen generations” refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who were forcibly removed from their families and communities by government, welfare or church authorities as children and placed into institutional care or with non-Indigenous



foster families. The forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children began as early as the mid-1800s and continued until 1970.

This removal occurred as the result of official laws and policies aimed at assimilating the Indigenous population into the wider community.

The 1997 *Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission found that between 1 in 10 and 3 in 10 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the period from 1910 to 1970.

The Western Australian and Queensland governments have confirmed that in that period all Indigenous families in their States were affected by the forced removal of children. It's not possible to know precisely how many children were taken because government records of these removals are poor and many government files are inaccurate.

The stolen generation should not be confused with other government policies which aimed to help Aboriginal children from remote areas to go to school with their parents' full consent. It should also not be confused with the removal of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children from dysfunctional families under welfare policies that continue to apply today.

2. How do we know these people's stories are true?

All State and Territory governments have acknowledged past practices and policies of forced removal of Indigenous children on the basis of race. As part of this formal acknowledgement, all State and Territory governments have apologised for the trauma these policies have caused.

The report of the *Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, called the *Bringing Them Home* report, contains extensive evidence of past practices and policies which resulted in the removal of children. It also details the conditions into which many of the children were placed and discussed the negative impact this has had on individuals, their families and the broader Indigenous community.

The Inquiry took evidence from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, government and church representatives, former mission staff, foster and adoptive parents, doctors and health professionals, academics, police and others. It received over 777 submissions, including 535 from Indigenous individuals and organisations, 49 from church organisations and 7 from governments.

3. Why is it important to apologise to the stolen generations?

The *Bringing Them Home* report found that the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities has had life-long and profoundly disabling consequences for those taken and has negatively affected the



Indigenous community. For many of the children, removal meant that they lost all connection to family, traditional land, culture and language.

It never goes away. Just 'cause we're not walking around on crutches or with bandages or plasters on our legs and arms, doesn't mean we're not hurting. Just 'cause you can't see it doesn't mean ... I suspect I'll carry these sorts of wounds 'til the day I die. I'd just like it to be not quite as intense, that's all. (Confidential evidence 580, Queensland. *Bringing Them Home Report*)

The reality of Australia's stolen generations is not a thing of the distant past. Children were being inappropriately removed from their families by Australian authorities until 1969. Many people affected by the tragedy of the stolen generations are still alive today and live with its effects.

The *Bringing Them Home* report recommended that the first step in healing is the acknowledgment of truth and the delivery of an apology. It is the responsibility of the Australian Government, on behalf of previous Australian governments that administered this wrongful policy to acknowledge what was done and apologise for it.

This issue is a "blank spot" in the history of Australia. The damage and trauma these policies caused are felt everyday by Aboriginal people. They internalise their grief, guilt and confusion, inflicting further pain on themselves and others around them. It is about time the Australian Government openly accepted responsibility for their actions and compensate those affected. (Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter, in Buti A, *Bringing them home the ALSA way*)

4. Why should Australians today apologise for something we aren't responsible for?

Individual Australians are not providing the apology. The apology is being provided by the Australian Government in recognition of policies of past governments. Similarly, the former Australian Government apologised to Vietnam veterans for the policies of previous governments. The current Government is apologising for wrongful policies of governments. No individual Australian is being asked to take personal responsibility for actions of past governments.

5. What does an apology mean to me as a non-Indigenous Australian?

Following on from apologies already made by all State and Territory governments and the churches, an official apology to members of the stolen generations by the Australian Government is an important step towards building a respectful new relationship between us as Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Respectful relationships are essential if we are to solve persistent problems.

In this way, the apology will allow us to work together more effectively towards closing the 17-year life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children — the starkest evidence of how government policies have failed. It is an important starting point in healing the wounds and an historic step forward for our nation that we can be proud of.

The apology is not an expression of personal responsibility or guilt by individual Australians. But it does reflect our Australian values of compassion and a fair go, and allows the victims of bad policy to feel that their pain and suffering has been acknowledged. It's important that Australians understand the background to the apology



so they understand why it's a good thing for the nation — it is this understanding that will realise the great potential of this historic moment to move our nation forward.

These days I don't understand why it should be such a big deal to say sorry for the injustices that have been done to Indigenous people. I know some people feel differently but, to me, saying sorry just feels necessary as a first step towards moving forward together. (Daniel Johns, lead singer of Silverchair)

6. Why should we apologise when many Aboriginal people are actually better off because they were removed from dysfunctional families?

It is true that some Indigenous children were removed from their families on genuine welfare grounds. It is also true that some children who were removed received some advantages, for example in education, but the overwhelming impact of the forced removal policy was damaging.

People involved in the removal of children genuinely believed they were doing the right thing. But as we now know, they were not.

It's important to understand that the “stolen generations” refer to those children who were removed on the basis of their race alone. In contrast with the removal of non-Indigenous children, proof of neglect was not always required to remove Indigenous children. That one of their parents was of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent was enough.

The predominant aim of the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families was to absorb or assimilate children with mixed ancestry into the non-Indigenous community. As Brisbane's *Telegraph* newspaper reported in May 1937:

Mr Neville [the Chief Protector of WA] holds the view that within one hundred years the pure black will be extinct. But the half-caste problem is increasing every year. Therefore their idea is to keep the pure blacks segregated and absorb the half-castes into the white population. Perhaps it will take one hundred years, perhaps longer, but the race is dying.

The *Bringing Them Home* report found that many children were removed solely on the basis of skin colour. Because of this, siblings from the one family who were considered to be of lighter skin colour would be removed when others were left.

The suggestion that stolen generations children were better off is untrue on any reasonable assessment of the cases where they were placed in situations of deprivation, neglect and abuse. People who were removed gave evidence to the Inquiry of their mistreatment under State care — this ranged from inadequate food and clothing, to physical, sexual and psychological abuse.

Almost a quarter of witnesses to the Inquiry who were fostered or adopted reported being physically abused. One in five reported being sexually abused. One in six children sent to institutions reported physical abuse and one in ten reported sexual abuse.



7. Will an apology lead to claims for compensation from members of the stolen generations?

The *Bringing Them Home* report recommended the establishment of a national compensation fund for people affected by the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The aim of the fund would be to offer reparation to those affected and avoid the courts having to deal with costly individual litigation.

An official apology is not directly related to compensation. All State and Territory governments have apologised and this has not triggered any rush of compensation claims.

The Tasmanian Government has chosen to set up a compensation fund for members of the stolen generations in that State. It has provided \$5 million in capped payments to be divided among eligible people and their families.

<<http://www.premier.tas.gov.au/speeches/stolen.html>>

The Government of South Australia is also considering establishing a fund.

Queensland and New South Wales have ruled out stolen generations compensation funds, although both States are providing reparations for policies under which Aboriginal people could be put to work but not paid.

The West Australian Government announced in late 2007 the “Redress WA” program to provide monetary and emotional support to people who were abused as children in State care, including members of the stolen generations. <<http://www.redress.wa.gov.au/>>

The Australia Government has said it will not establish a fund at the national level but will direct funds to counselling services for members of the stolen generations and services that help people who were removed as children to find their families and communities.

Reconciliation for me is about recognising the past. Acting in the present. And building a better future.
(The Hon. Paul Lennon MP, Premier of Tasmania)

8. Why is the word “sorry” important as part of the apology?

The word “sorry” holds special meaning in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. In many Aboriginal communities, sorry is an adapted English word used to describe the rituals surrounding death (Sorry Business). “Sorry”, in these contexts, is also often used to express empathy or sympathy rather than responsibility.

During the 2007 election campaign, then Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd also recognised the significance of the word “sorry”:

... simply saying that you’re sorry is such a powerful symbol. Powerful not because it represents some expiation of guilt. Powerful not because it represents any form of legal requirement. But powerful simply because it restores respect.

