



PETER GARRETT MP

Member for Kingsford Smith
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Reconciliation and the Arts

Sorry Day Speech Friday 26 May 2006 First Fleet Park, Circular Quay West, Sydney

[Acknowledgements and paying of respect]

This is not just any other Sorry Day – for right now, more than ever, I think we need to be addressing the issues, rebutting the myths and dealing with the challenges in regard to the Indigenous people of this nation, and the still-vital matter of what I call proper Reconciliation.

I do this after a frenzied week of intense media and political discussion in regard to violence and abuse in certain Aboriginal communities; violence that all Australians, especially those living in these communities, abhor.

And at the end of a week in which hundreds of us farewelled a great friend, described as a “peaceful warrior for Reconciliation” - Rick Farley.

Today, I am sorry.

Sorry that Aboriginal women and children suffer completely unacceptable levels of violence in their communities and homes.

Sorry that all political parties have not done nearly enough to front up to this problem which is well known.

Sorry about some of the superficial comments and media of this week concerning issues and problems that are complex, urgent and immense, and which have been there for a very long time.

And have been known of for so long by governments, media, parliamentarians, social workers, police, bureaucrats, indeed anyone who has lived at or been to the communities which have been suddenly thrown into the spotlight again - yes, again.

Sorry for these matters have come up time and time again over many years, and then disappeared from the public eye as quickly as they have emerged.

Sorry that after 10 years of government, the Federal Government, with what it calls a “new conversation” with Indigenous people, seems to only concentrate, in this dire situation, on the symptoms of the problem - the law and order issues - important as they are, but block the fact that there are underlying causes, and that we do need to focus on ways to lift the conditions, lift the living standards.

Yes, Indigenous Australians deserve the proper policing and protection that all other Australians get, and those found guilty of committing crimes dealt with by the legal system, and if there are impediments to that happening they should be addressed. But let’s also debate, properly, the poverty, the feeling of hopelessness, the lack of education, health care facilities, the lack of housing, and the lack of resources.

In other words friends, let’s also debate the causes of the problem. I sincerely hope pushing law and order is not a smokescreen for another Federal Government attack on the hard-won rights, such as land rights, won by Indigenous people.

I’m sorry for the lack of progress in dealing sincerely and consistently with the challenges facing us in regard to Indigenous disadvantage and the lack of equality of opportunity, of life opportunities for them, in Australia, in 2006.

I’m deeply sorry that with all our wealth and achievements, we in Australia are still in such a sorry state of affairs.

That is not to be defeatist. The defeatist queue already has more than enough people in it – because I think there is a way out of this - and I will go to that shortly.

But first, where are we with Reconciliation? Where is Australia in regard to the living conditions, the livelihood opportunities for Indigenous Australians? How poor is their general state of education, their general state of health? Are things getting better or worse?

We have to address these questions, because the way in which this debate is framed is very important. Let’s (again) spell out the truth.

- Indigenous Australians have an average life expectancy of 17 years less than non-Indigenous Australians. And that is the national average - in many regional and remote communities the gap is closer to 30 years. And it is getting wider.

- Only about three percent of the Indigenous population are at or above the retirement age of 65, compared to 13 percent of the non Indigenous population.
- Aboriginal children aged under 4 are more than twice as likely to be hospitalised for infectious diseases than non Indigenous children. Again, that's the national average, in some parts of Australia such as the Northern Territory the Indigenous children are seven times more likely.
- Indigenous infants are almost three times more likely to die than non Indigenous infants.
- The incidence of kidney failure in some Aboriginal communities is more than 30 times the national average.
- A 2004 quality of life index of people from 100 different nations ranked Australia fourth overall. Indigenous Australians were ranked separately. They came second last. Only the Chinese had a worse quality of life.
- Adult Aboriginal people serving time in jail make up 21 percent of the national prison population, despite accounting for less than two percent of the adult population.

On Reconciliation, we were further along the road to proper, true reconciliation between Indigenous people and the Australian community in the year 2000 than we are now. At least twice since he became Prime Minister more than ten years ago, John Howard has pledged to make Reconciliation, and indigenous issues generally, a priority of his government.

In 1998, in his election victory speech, he vowed to commit himself "very genuinely to the cause of true reconciliation with the Aboriginal people of Australia by the centenary of federation". Well, that's been and gone, and so has the promise.

In 2000, the Olympic Games sent waves of messages out, for a greater understanding, a closer relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

And hundreds of thousands of Australians, of nearly all political persuasions and allegiances, marched for reconciliation. They marched across there! (The Sydney Harbour Bridge).

They spoke with their feet. They expressed their good will, their desire for change, and for action, real action. They, and millions of others, wanted the Prime Minister to say "sorry" to the Stolen Generation. Many influential, important

people and organisations did. He wouldn't. He hasn't. I still believe he should. Yet he won't even admit there was a Stolen Generation.

Some have argued that it no longer matters; that we have moved on; that we need real, practical actions; that pushing him on that matter lets him off the hook on those other things.

But saying sorry and then doing something about it would help improve the relationship between Indigenous people and the rest of the Australian community. It would help bring about greater understanding, it would show that the lessons of the past have been learnt, and that there is a true, total commitment not to go down that path again.

I respectfully submit that nothing has changed to make an apology no longer necessary. It is more necessary than ever.

And in 2000, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation before it ceased to exist, delivered to this government an "Australian Declaration towards Reconciliation" and a clear Roadmap for Reconciliation – four clear strategies – strategies to:

- Sustain the reconciliation process
- To promote Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights
- To overcome disadvantage
- And for economic independence

This Government has not acted on that Roadmap. And it never accepted all of the inspiring and comprehensive "Declaration".

Then, a year ago now, the Prime Minister, at a National Reconciliation Workshop, stated that reconciliation is about "rights as well as responsibilities...symbols as well as practical achievement". He said he was willing to meet Indigenous leaders "more than half way".

These were considered major shifts. But what has happened? How has this shift manifest itself in real, practical actions, in what Mr Howard used to call "true reconciliation".

Truth is – it hasn't. Nothing much has changed. In fact things have got worse on the ground, we have actually gone backwards. And by the measure of the huge gaps in living conditions and health – and, importantly, education – the government's approach at so called "practical reconciliation" has so far failed.

Towns such as Wadeye are the products of generations of government neglect and of the early history of settlement. They have not got the resources they deserve. They have been let down, they have been deserted. Yes, by generations of government neglect at both Commonwealth and territory level.

And so it has continued. Three years ago, Wadeye was chosen, among great fanfare, with the Prime Minister visiting for a few hours, as a trial site for the “Indigenous Communities Co-ordination Pilots program”.

It was a COAG “bold experiment”. It was meant to fix disadvantage in such a community. But the improvements in basic delivery services – services other Australians get, and take for granted, as an every-day right - have not been delivered.

What is worse, there is no national strategy to deal with the living conditions and life opportunities gap. There are hundreds of millions of dollars of allocated money – needed money – unspent, particularly on Indigenous Education. There is increasing frustration in the community about the ad hoc, cherry-picking way, money is being spent.

That is what we need, a comprehensive national strategy that addresses the long term underlying causes of abuse, like poverty and social dysfunction.

And we have to address this situation head-on, and not get tricked into avoiding speaking the plain truth.

We have now had years of false, unsubstantiated claims that that some alleged phenomenon called “political correctness” has stopped the truth being told, stopped the hard decisions being made, and been the cause of false history, wrong priorities and policies.

Quite the contrary – people have used the term to dismiss truths like the Stolen Generation that they did not want to accept, and to lamely attack people who have long understood that symbols as well as practical measures are needed to address the major shame we have on our hands.

So let’s not get distracted by a narrow law and order debate, important as it is that the criminal justice system is accountable, or by calls to close down townships – that would merely transfer the problems, mostly into urban areas where the potential for problems and costs would be even greater.

Let’s understand that what is happening in some communities is a sign of the break down of culture, not the culture itself.

I cannot emphasise strongly enough the need to have rights and symbols, responsibilities and practical achievements - all of them – as part of the reconciliation effort, and the package of measures and real actions needed to address the gaps in life choices, in living standards, in opportunities, in conditions, in health, in education, in housing, in social justice and delivery of services.

It is not an either-or situation. You can't deliver rights without resources. And you can't deliver resources without rights. You can't have proper reconciliation without both. Indigenous Australians need both and on that basis we build better relationships and prospects for Indigenous people.

I am not saying it is the responsibility only of governments to create that better relationship. But the government is not effectively and adequately contributing to either the necessary symbols/rights delivery, or the practical achievements and on-ground services and resources which are needed.

It still strikes me how few of us have ever properly met an indigenous Australian, had real interaction, cultural exchange, worked through issues together. We need cultural exchange, we need to get together. And we need Indigenous Australians to be directly, democratically involved in the decision-making.

To me, Sorry Day, and its reason for existence, is still important. For me, it was never otherwise. Sorry is still important. It is still one important part of the Reconciliation process this country should be going through.

The Howard Government defeated plans to officially keep the name Sorry Day, preferring a "National Day of Healing". Nothing wrong with having a "national day of healing", but why not a "sorry day"?

I can well see why the refusal to have it as "Sorry Day" greatly offended those people of the Stolen Generation, those people forcibly removed from their parents.

You might think after this long speech that now as a Labor politician I'm only interested in criticising John Howard, I'm not. I focus on the Prime Minister because he's the leader of the country and he has it in his power to help. And he's had that power for more than 10 years.

But I also want to say clearly that all politicians in all parties have a responsibility. There is much Labor can be proud of in its past actions but much to bemoan as well, for no one has proved capable of satisfactorily addressing this issue and we all share the blame. But today in terms of what governments can and should do, the buck stops at the PM's desk.

As *The Australian* newspaper recently observed; "There is no universal solution to indigenous misery" but there are things we need to do; namely address violence, get the bureaucrats out of the way and resource schools and health care, to get on with it.

Sorry Day still exists because the first Australians are coming last and it's time that changed.

Sorry Day is about respect, fairness, about recognising the past mistakes, and recognising the present need for Indigenous people to have identity, to have self-esteem, to have rights, to have resources, to have life opportunities and life choices, to have the well-being enjoyed by other Australians.

We must sincerely believe there should be equal rights and access; justice and equity.

We must recognise that by providing that, we are giving people a hand-up not a hand-out.

We, as a nation, have the resources - financial, political, social - to do it.

Whilst some important measures have been instituted, some rights established, some improvements made, we still have a long way to go. But I know we can make it. It won't be overnight and it won't be easy. There is a lot of hurt and there is no magic wand. And there will be barriers, and people – those who find short-term destinations and agendas to distract them from long-term goals and solutions – in the way. We must and we can go round them.

But just like no one particular party or group of individuals is to blame for what has gone on, no particular party or section of the community has all the answers, all the solutions, to do it alone.

The 'Father of Reconciliation' Pat Dodson was quoted at Rick Farley's funeral as saying Rick carried the spirit of reconciliation and social justice for Aboriginal people in his heart and his hands.

The heart is the rights, the symbols, the justice and fairness; the hands are the on the ground measures.

The symbols and rights are interdependent. You can't have one without the other. On Sorry Day you need both for us to achieve true, proper Reconciliation.