

The politics of Australia's “National Sorry Day”

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The avowed purpose of the semi-official “National Sorry Day” organised in Australia last week, sponsored by various government agencies, state and local administrations, churches and business leaders, was for the “nation” to apologise to the Aboriginal people for the forced removal of more than 100,000 children from their families between the 1880s and 1960s.

The day was timed to mark the first anniversary of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission report, *Bringing Them Home*, which documented the cruelty inflicted upon the “stolen children” and their families right up until the early 1970s. The campaign won the sympathy of wide layers of professional and working people, reflected in the collection of one million signatures and handwritten messages in “sorry books” over the past 12 months.

Precisely because of the powerful sense of injustice felt on such a widespread scale, great efforts were made in the media and the political establishment to prevent a critical examination of the historical issues involved: Why were Aboriginal children systematically separated from their families? How was this policy connected to the treatment of the Aboriginal people over the past 200 years? What were its economic roots?

The media focussed exclusively on a debate in elite circles over “Sorry Day”. On the one hand, Prime Minister Howard, his Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Herron and other members of the ruling Coalition maintained their stance of refusing to make an official apology for the “stolen generation”.

On the other, a coalition of business chiefs, Aboriginal leaders, politicians, churches and charities and highly-placed liberals such as former High Court judge Sir Roland Wilson (who headed the “stolen children” inquiry) called for such an apology to “heal the wounds” of the past. Those in this camp included former Liberal Party leader John Hewson (now a banker), Victorian

Premier Jeff Kennett, mining company chief executives and Melbourne Lord Mayor Ivan Deveson, who is a former Nissan and Seven television network chief.

Both sides in this debate have a common interest in covering up the class nature of the crimes committed against the Aborigines. One side seeks to exonerate the real perpetrators — their forebears who established today’s mining, pastoral and business empires — by making “white” society as a whole responsible for the injustices. The other side baldly asserts that the separated children were better off in church and government institutions.

When child separation began in the 1880s, Aboriginal people were still being violently driven off the best agricultural and grazing land through massacres, poisoning and the introduction of diseases. That protracted drive expressed a crucial requirement of the emerging Australian capitalist class. The land had to be cleared, and all communal claims over it extinguished, to establish a system of private land ownership.

Even under the later, supposedly more humane, banner of “assimilation” from the 1930s onward, the separation of children was essentially aimed at completing the genocide, by gradually expunging the last traces of Aboriginal society.

Today, however, the needs of business have shifted somewhat. Particularly from the 1960s, rising opposition to the oppression of Aborigines — reflected in over 90 percent support for the 1967 referendum to recognise Aborigines as people to be counted in the national census — obliged the ruling class to turn to a new program. It has created new forms of private property known as “land rights” and “native title” in order to promote the emergence of a cooperative black business layer.

Not accidentally, one feature of “Sorry Day” was the signing of a “mutually advantageous” agreement between Rio Tinto, the world’s largest mining company, and the government’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Commission (ATSIC).

The pact's purpose is to expedite the company's mining projects and increase their profitability. Since the 1996 Australian High Court decision in the Wik case, confirming the existence of "native title" on unoccupied Crown land and pastoral leases, Rio Tinto and other mining companies have recognised that they can best do so by using Aboriginal entrepreneurs as contractors, petty employers and trainers of a cheap labour force.

The Memorandum of Understanding signed at Parliament House, Canberra, by Rio Tinto chief executive Leon Davis and ATSIC chairman Gatjil Djerrkura "commits both organisations to cooperation at national, state and regional level to increase the training, employment and business development opportunities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the company's operations".

One day later, the company announced a \$400 million coking coal mine at Hail Creek, near Mackay in central Queensland. It followed three years of negotiations with representatives of the local Wiri Yuwiburra people, who agreed not to lodge a native title claim over the property in return for an undisclosed financial package along the lines of the Canberra agreement.

On signing the document, Djerrkura declared that "greater liaison and cooperation with the private sector will assist in advancing the economic independence of our people". Djerrkura, the Howard government's hand-picked appointment as ATSIC chair, is a vocal proponent of shifting Aboriginal people from "welfare" to "business". That essentially means scrapping even the present pitiful government health, housing, welfare and education services and stripping Aboriginal workers of unemployment and other benefits to force them back to working for a pittance, either for the mining companies or Aboriginal employers.

This agenda, presented as Aboriginal "self-determination," also dovetails in with the corporate-government program of abolishing the post-war welfare state for the entire working class, in order to cut company taxes and labour costs. The conflict in ruling circles over "Sorry Day" is bound up with differences over how to best impose this program.

In the first instance, Howard and his followers are seeking to avoid the potentially huge compensation claims that might be encouraged by an official statement of apology — a concern that Labor Party leader Kim Beazley has publicly endorsed.

Secondly, as they implement the vicious cost-cutting

measures required by global capitalism, Howard and other Coalition leaders are attempting to divert the frustrations of small farmers and rural people, as well as more backward workers, into a program of racist scapegoating.

Howard and Herron are reviving the old racist arguments used to justify the seizure of Aboriginal children. By asserting, as Herron has done, that the children benefitted from being torn from their families, they echo their predecessors in portraying Aborigines as being of inferior intelligence, unable to manage their own affairs. Moreover, by arguing that separated children gained access to education and a better life, they defend the official policy of the day, which did not provide even the most basic social facilities to Aboriginal families.

The primary objection of key big business chiefs is that this orientation cuts across their cultivation of lucrative partnerships with Aboriginal business proprietors. Albeit in different forms, the leaders of each side in this official debate are seeking to camouflage the crimes of the past in order to perpetrate new ones today and in the future.

For all those genuinely outraged by the treatment of Aboriginal people, there is only one way to overcome the immense historical injustices perpetrated by the current economic system. A united movement of all workers — Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal — is needed to fight for the complete re-organisation of society on the basis of genuine social equality. As a first step, the vast social wealth and resources controlled by the mining corporations, agri-businesses and bankers must be placed under public ownership and used for the benefit of all.



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