

Australian parliament "regrets" injustice to Aboriginal people

Behind the politics of "reconciliation"

Nick Beams
30 August 1999

To the casual observer, the passage last Thursday of a resolution by the Australian federal parliament expressing "deep and sincere regret" for past injustices against the Aboriginal people might appear as a step towards the achievement of genuine social equality.

At least that is how the Howard Liberal government is hoping it will be interpreted, especially in the Asian region where Australia's treatment of its indigenous population has been something of a political embarrassment.

Closer examination of the circumstances surrounding the resolution, however, reveals otherwise. The resolution has nothing to do with a commitment to address the mounting social problems confronting Aboriginal people. Rather, it is the outcome of a series of manoeuvres involving members of the government, representatives of big business—especially mining companies—and a thin layer of so-called Aboriginal leaders.

The immediate origins of last Thursday's "historic vote" lie in the Reconciliation Conference held in May 1997. This gathering was no small affair. Staged at a cost of nearly \$1 million by the government-backed Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, and sponsored to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars by some of the biggest corporate names in the country, the conference was supposed to set up a mechanism for the resolution of conflicts between claimants for "native title" rights over land and the operations of mining companies.

As the *Australian Financial Review* put it at the time: "As Australia's mining industry now recognises the task of reconciliation is not a bleeding heart obsession of the white chattering classes, but instead is a matter of practical business."

But the conference was thrown into disarray by the actions of Howard. Anxious not to lose further rural support to the right wing One Nation Party, the prime minister shouted at the audience, launching into a vitriolic defence of his government's 10-point plan to partially extinguish "native title" property rights. These rights had been established by the High Court's decision upholding the claims of the Wik

people.

Howard's display, coupled with the refusal of his government to offer an "apology" to the "stolen generation" of Aboriginal children, forcibly removed by government authorities from their parents as part of the official policy of "assimilation", led to a worsening of relations with the leaders of the various Aboriginal bodies.

For two years the situation remained at an impasse, until the entry of Aboriginal Aden Ridgeway. Ridgeway was elected to the Senate, on the ticket of the Australian Democrats in New South Wales, at the October 1998 elections, and entered the federal parliament on July 1.

Earlier this year, Howard had successfully negotiated the passage of the government's Goods and Services Tax legislation with the Democrats. He was therefore eager to seek further collaboration with them—and Ridgeway in particular—to try and recover the opportunities he had lost at the Reconciliation Conference.

Ridgeway provided the crucial link in the negotiations. A former president of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, he was well known to former NSW Liberal Party president Bill Heffernan, who was made Cabinet secretary after the October 1998 elections.

Heffernan is described as a man with extensive networks and "close to some of the biggest names in business". He worked to ensure passage of a resolution through the Liberal Party and its coalition partner, the National Party. Ridgeway's task was to lock in the support of key Aboriginal leaders, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission chairman Gatjil Djerrjura, the chairwoman of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, Evelyn Scott and former ASTIC chairwoman Lowitja O'Donoghue among others.

Negotiations over a preamble to the Constitution, to be voted on in the November 6 referendum on the republic, provided a test for the new relationship. After discussions with Ridgeway and the Democrats, Howard agreed to drop the proposed reference to "mateship" in the preamble and insert a phrase pointing to Aboriginal "kinship" with the

land, carefully avoiding any mention of “custodianship” (preferred by many Aboriginal leaders) lest this provide the basis for future property or compensation claims.

With the passage of the preamble through both houses of parliament, the stage was set for the expression of “regret”. In his carefully crafted maiden speech to the Senate, Ridgeway, eschewing any use of the terms “sorry” or “apology”, provided the form of words that was then incorporated in the government’s declaration.

While the resolution easily passed through both houses of parliament, it did not win unanimous support. The Labor Party opposed it, after amendments incorporating an unreserved apology and compensation, moved by ALP leader Kim Beazley, were defeated. Beazley’s actions were not motivated by concern to right the wrongs of the past any more than Howard’s were. Rather, his anxiety was that the resolution, while winning support from the leaders of government-backed bodies, would be regarded as a betrayal in the wider Aboriginal community.

The problem with the government resolution, he declared, was that it did not go far enough to “put the issue behind us.”

These considerations were also behind the decision of ten Aboriginal spokesmen, including the co-author of the “stolen generation” report Mick Dodson, to oppose the resolution. Branding it as a “hasty and disgraceful pretence”, they feared losing credibility if they were seen to be backing the government.

Editorial comment in the press, while making the obligatory references to the need to address the social and economic disadvantages of indigenous Australians, threw some light on the real motivations behind the resolution. In an editorial entitled “Time to end a sorry affair” the *Sydney Morning Herald* commented: “The motion of apology to Aborigines passed by the Parliament ... is not perfect, nor as strong as it might have been. But it should put an end to the months of futile wrangling over words which has stood in the way of more constructive action.”

Two years ago, the *Herald*, along with other sections of the press, condemned Howard’s actions at the Reconciliation Conference. But times have changed and the Ridgeway initiative provided new political opportunities.

As the editorial noted, Howard was “lucky to get a second chance to resolve this long-running controversy, which threatened to become an even greater headache for the Government, with international implications, next year before and during the Olympics.”

A lengthy editorial in the Murdoch-owned newspaper the *Australian* contained fulsome praise for Howard, declaring that his parliamentary statement “went much further than any previous prime minister has been prepared to in

acknowledging that Australia, to be a whole country, not only must recognise the disasters of past public policy but must work together with Aboriginal communities for a future that is beneficial to all.”

What that future will bring was set out in a previous *Australian* editorial comment praising a recent speech by corporate lawyer and “Aboriginal leader” Noel Pearson, denouncing government welfare as being responsible for Aboriginal ill-health and unemployment and calling for the imposition of a “market economy”.

The *Australian* editorial noted that while the report on the forced removal of the “stolen generation” was a “necessary step towards official and community recognition that a horrible wrong has been done to tens of thousands of Aboriginal people”, its use of the term “genocide” had harmed the cause of “reconciliation” by describing official policies “in terms appropriate to military dictatorship.”

For the Aboriginal people, however, the capitalist state was, in essence, nothing other than a dictatorship carrying out a form of genocide. After their forbears had been shot or poisoned, the children of the “stolen generation” were forcibly removed from their parents, as part of a policy aimed at the elimination of the Aboriginal race.

As the *Australian* editorial demonstrates, the ideological spokesmen of the ruling class are always extremely sensitive to any exposure of this history. After all, it lays bare one of the darkest secrets of Australian capitalism, puncturing the carefully cultivated myth of a society founded on egalitarianism.

There is a saying that when the ruling classes decide to apologise for the crimes of the past, it is only to better carry on those of the present. The ever-worsening position of the Aboriginal population—a life expectancy 20 years less than the average, increasing rates of imprisonment, rising drug abuse, overcrowded housing, lack of basic facilities, to name but a few of the current social ills—testifies to its truth.

The program of reconciliation has got nothing to do with overcoming past or present injustices. It has a different purpose: to reconcile a thin layer of Aboriginal politicians, bureaucrats, community leaders and aspiring businessmen to the capitalist state and the “free market” agenda, while the more than 200-year oppression of the overwhelming majority of the indigenous population continues.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact