

# An exchange on Australia's "Sorry Day"

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*Below we publish a letter from a reader on a recent WSWs article—"Australian Prime Minister apologises to 'stolen generation': rhetoric versus reality"—followed by a reply by the article's author, Nick Beams.*

What a delightful political position you occupy; you forecast no real change in the problems confronting Aboriginal people and therefore do not need to accept any responsibility for the day to day realities in that forum until "the reorganisation of society from top to bottom, replacing the capitalist system with a society based on human need, not private profit".

That's not going to happen, Nick. Not now, not soon, perhaps not ever, and you know it.

But that doesn't stop you from endlessly intellectualising while avoiding the need to actually do something about the horrendous problems that the world (and to a lesser extent, Australia) faces. You're like the scientist who was on the front page of the *Canberra Times* not too long back, who was asking for funding to examine the possibility of a planet that 'may be like ours', which he'd 'found' by analysing radio pictures of a star 50 light years away, which showed that light was 'bent' near that star, therefore possibly revealing the existence of a planet in a similar relative position to ours! Endless research, dissertation and theorising but not one tangible benefit and, in reality, nothing but artful posturing disguised as scientific effort.

After reading some of your writing, it's apparent that you're the possessor of a formidable intellect, Nick. What a shame you don't have the courage to accompany it and so engage the political world from a perspective that facilitates your authentic participation.

The Rudd Government has been in power for a matter of months; your criticism of their intentions, goals and methodologies is irrelevant (and misleading) because they have not yet been fully assimilated nor implemented.

This failure leads directly to your inability to acknowledge that the 'Sorry Day', which was lauded by the vast majority of Australians, was (hopefully) a turning point for Australia in its relations to its indigenous population which will lead to a new direction for both.

Your assumptions and resulting postulations that the Government's policies are merely a continuation of the Howard regime and therefore corrupt, ineffective and immoral are ideologically based and do not reflect the reality of what is possible under a committed Labor Party in Government.

WC

Dear WC,

Thank you for your email. The issues you raise are common to those who claim that since the perspective of socialist revolution and the "reorganisation of society from top to bottom" is simply out of the question, it is necessary to adopt a "practical" and "realistic" approach to society's problems, working within the present social and political framework.

The differences between us centre on the question of a scientific approach to politics. You appear to recognise this when you identify my approach with that of the Canberra scientist, who, in your view, was obviously wasting his time and should have been concentrating his work

on more practical matters that would bring about a "tangible benefit." At the outset I must say I stand with the Canberra scientist. After all, if your outlook had prevailed throughout history, mankind would never have made any ground-breaking scientific discoveries.

So far as the field of politics is concerned, let me begin by recalling a story told by the Russian scientist K. Timiriazev, cited by the Russian Marxist Aleksandr Voronsky:

"The following picture arises involuntarily in my mind. About forty years ago, one such indignant moralist made it to the attic of the Ecole Normale, and finding there a sickly, pale man surrounded by innumerable bottles and test tubes, burst into eloquent denunciations.

"'You should be ashamed,' he says to the scientist, 'you should be ashamed. All around you there is poverty and hunger, and you busy yourself with some sort of mash made out of sugar and honey. All around you people are suffering from terrible living conditions and diseases, and you are worried about where that gray mud on the bottom of some test tube comes from. Death roams all around you, takes away a father who is the support of his family, tears a child from the embrace of its mother, and you wrack your brains over the question of whether some spots under your microscope are alive or dead. You should be ashamed. It would be better to smash all your test tubes, run from the laboratory, share your labor with the working people, give help to the sick and provide a world of comfort where the physician's art is powerless.'

"The attractive role, of course, would have fallen to the lot of the indignant moralist, and the scientist would have had to mutter something in defence of his ridiculous, egotistical pastime.

"But how these roles would change if our two imaginary people should meet forty years later. Then the scientist would say to the moralist something like this: 'You were right, I didn't share my labor with the working people, but here are a host of workers to whom I returned their millions in wages. I didn't give help to the ill, but now there are whole populations whom I have protected from disease. I didn't go with words of comfort to those in distress, but now there are thousands of fathers and mothers to whom I returned children that had been condemned to certain death.' And in conclusion, our scientist would add with a condescending smile: 'And all this was there in that test tube with sugar and honey, in that gray muck at the bottom of that test tube, and in those spots which were wiggling under my microscope.' I suppose that this time the one filled with shame would be the nobly indignant, but nearsighted moralist" [Aleksandr Voronsky, *Art as the Cognition of Life*, pp. 112-113].

Your write of the "horrendous problems" faced by the world. Some that immediately spring to mind are the eruption of war, the danger of nuclear conflicts, the impact of climate change, massive poverty, the ever-growing threats to democratic rights and the dangers of authoritarian forms of rule. But these only raise the question: what is the underlying cause?

The analysis of the Marxist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site*, based on a scientific analysis stretching back more than 150 years, is that these "horrendous problems" are rooted in the workings of the global capitalist order. They are not, in the final analysis, the product of the policies of this or that set of capitalist politicians, but are an expression of the fact that the capitalist system, having exhausted its contribution to mankind's advance,

is now the greatest threat to humanity itself.

This is the historical context of the political struggles waged by our party. Our work is not carried out with test tubes in a laboratory, but it is no less scientific. It consists in the difficult and protracted struggle to develop the perspective and program for the working class to resolve the “horrendous problems” created by the historical crisis and decay of the global capitalist system, and to meet the challenges of the socialist reorganisation of society.

This is the basis of our approach to the issues confronting Aboriginal people. Their oppression is not the outcome of a policy, which can be corrected if only the right measures are discovered, but is grounded in the very structures of the Australian capitalist economy as it has developed over the past 220 years. The destruction of Aboriginal society—the clearing of the indigenous population from the land, starting with the genocide in Tasmania—was a product of the development of the pastoral industry and the establishment of private ownership in land.

For decades thereafter, Aboriginal people provided cheap labour in rural and regional areas, while being denied democratic and political rights. Successive generations of so-called “half-caste” children were taken by the state as part of a program aimed at “breeding out the colour”—in line with the White Australia policy that formed one of the essential ideological foundations of the Australian capitalist state when it was established in 1901.

The 1967 referendum, and the promises of reform at the time, were bound up with changes in the global position of Australian capitalism.

The final demise of the British Empire, and the economic rise of Japan, along with the growing economic importance of the Asian region as a whole, necessitated certain policy changes by the Australian ruling elites. In particular, they were obliged to scrap the overtly racist White Australia policy.

They also had to try and assuage a growing political movement among Aboriginal people—that drew strength from the civil rights movement in the United States—as well as among youth and the broader labour movement.

Since then there have been many false dawns of a “new beginning”. They range from promises of land rights under the Whitlam Labor government, to the passing of the Racial Discrimination Act and the Northern Territory Land Rights Act, to the various pledges of the Hawke Labor government, the Mabo decision on land title in 1992, the Redfern speech of then Prime Minister Paul Keating in 1992, followed by various calls for “reconciliation.”

Meanwhile all the social statistics tell the same story: the life expectancy of Aboriginal people is at least 17 years less than the national average; infant mortality rates are many times higher than the national average; Aborigines comprise 22 percent of the prison population, while making up just 2.4 percent of the total population. At the same time unemployment, alcoholism, drug abuse and violence—clear expressions of deep-going social dislocation and distress—afflict many Aboriginal communities and families.

You maintain that we are wrong to “forecast no real change in the problems confronting Aboriginal people.” But that is precisely what more than 200 years of history demonstrates. You oppose our program as not being realistic. But the height of unreality is to suggest that somehow a program of social reform will now, all of a sudden, be enacted.

You take us to task for criticising the Rudd government because its policies have “not been fully assimilated nor implemented”—as if the incoming Labor government were some unknown political phenomenon, and not the product of the historical evolution of the Labor Party over more than 100 years.

As for the claim that our assessment of the Rudd government is simply “ideologically based” and therefore unsound, let us first of all note that the Labor Party voted for the Howard government’s Northern Territory

military-police intervention when in opposition, and has pledged to continue it in government. Moreover, it has made clear that it wants to proceed on Aboriginal policy on the basis of bipartisan agreement with the Liberals.

It was in this context that we explained the purpose of the apology and “Sorry Day”. As far as the government was concerned, it wanted to break with the Howard government’s record on this particular question, and in that way win the support of indigenous community leaders for its policies.

At the same time, the government hopes its apology will win it support from the liberal “left”, who were largely critical of Rudd’s “me-tooism” and “bear hug politics” in relation to Howard’s policies during the election campaign. They want to bring these social layers into the fold and utilise them to isolate and suppress the opposition to the government that is sure to develop among Aborigines and the working class as a whole. Your letter indicates that this policy may be enjoying some success ... at least for the moment.

“Sorry Day” was undoubtedly “lauded by the vast majority of Australians”, just as the overwhelming majority of the electorate voted for the 1967 referendum in the expectation that real social change would follow. But those hopes proved to be illusions.

It is surely time to address reality. As far as the immediate policies arising from “Sorry Day” are concerned, the government has declared it will initiate a housing program, to be implemented by a “war cabinet” headed by Rudd and Opposition leader Brendan Nelson.

Even if one were to grant that some measures may improve housing in particular areas, would this bring about real change? How can there be lasting advances without decent and well-paid jobs, genuine education and training, the provision of high quality, well-staffed health and social services? In other words, once one begins to examine the real situation, it becomes clear that nothing less than the “complete reorganisation of society from top to bottom” is required.

Can such a reorganisation be carried out within the framework of the profit system? You write of a “committed Labor Party in Government.” Committed to what? Not to the needs, interests and aspirations of working people, but to the requirements of the capitalist economy. And those requirements are in direct conflict, not only with the needs of Aboriginal people but with the working class as a whole.

The apology was not the first item on the agenda of the incoming Labor government. That place was occupied by the setting up of a “razor gang” committed to cutting social spending. This will result, to use the governments own words, in real “pain.”

The problems confronting Aboriginal people will not be solved by this or any other Labor government. They can only be overcome as part of a political struggle waged by the entire working class—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike—for an international socialist program. Such a fight poses great difficulties and challenges. But it is scientifically grounded, in contrast to the delusion that some kind of reformist agenda—bringing real and lasting progress—can be developed within the framework of the current economic and social order.

Regards,  
Nick Beams



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