

Australian Prime Minister apologises to “stolen generation”: rhetoric versus reality

Nick Beams
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If flowery phrases, pious sentiments and references to the terrible crimes and injustices committed against them were sufficient, then Aboriginal people in Australia could look forward to a bright future.

But the reality is that the “Sorry Resolution” presented to the Australian parliament today, apologising for the forced removal over decades of Aboriginal children from their parents, along with the speech delivered by Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, will do nothing to overcome the terrible social conditions confronted by indigenous communities. In fact, they will worsen.

The theme of Rudd’s speech, watched by a big crowd outside Parliament House and on large screens in venues across the country, was that it was necessary to confront and acknowledge the wrongs committed in the past in order to “move on”.

For many people watching, this would have been the first time that the shocking practices associated with the forced removals of indigenous children had come to their attention in such detail. And no doubt members of Aboriginal communities, the “stolen generations” and their descendants, drew strength from the acknowledgement in parliament of the brutalities they had endured as a result of public policy.

But nowhere in the prime minister’s speech was there any explanation of why, as the resolution stated, “the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments” had “inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians”.

Nor could there be, because the crimes committed against the “stolen generations” were not the result of mistaken policies, bad administration, lack of knowledge, or even outright racism. Rather, they were the product of the profit system, with its legal foundations in private ownership, which the

parliamentary system and all the parliamentary parties are committed, above all else, to continue defending.

The Australian capitalist-settler society established in 1788 was grounded on the private ownership of land. This is what brought it into head-on collision with the Aboriginal people who had inhabited the continent for the previous 40,000 years. They had to be cleared from the land by any means possible—shooting, poisoning and the introduction of diseases.

Once this task was accomplished—and the war against the Aboriginal people continued in some regions until well into the 20th century—the forced removal of children followed. It was carried out in tandem with the White Australia policy, which formed one of the central foundations for the federation of the six British colonies in 1901.

While the Aboriginal population was expected to “die out”, so-called “half-caste” children were removed from their parents in the expectation that over time, the colour would be “bred out”. In the words of the Northern Territory Protector of Natives, quoted by Rudd in his parliamentary speech: “The problem of our half-castes will be quickly eliminated by the complete disappearance of the black race, and the swift submergence of their progeny in the white...”

To probe the underlying causes of these policies would reveal the real social relations—based on class divisions—upon which capitalist society in Australia has always been based. It would also expose the claims of the “fair go” and “egalitarianism” that have been the stock-in-trade of capitalist politicians for more than a century. That is why no explanation appeared in Rudd’s speech.

On the contrary, he turned to these same founding myths in order to advance his new government’s agenda. Reconciliation, he declared, was a reflection of

a “core tenet of Australian society: the concept of a fair go for all”. The apology would be the first step toward laying claim to a future that “embraces all Australians” in which “all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country, Australia”.

Behind this rhetoric of “equality”, policies are being developed that will deepen the discriminatory assault on the social and economic position of Aboriginal people and their communities, and which will increasingly be used against other vulnerable and oppressed sections of the working class.

The Rudd government has already committed itself to continuing the so-called Northern Territory military intervention initiated by the Howard government. Among other things, this involved a suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act, to enable the introduction of discriminatory practices with regard to welfare payments to Aboriginal people, solely on the basis of race.

While Rudd denounced the former Howard government for its treatment of the “stolen generations” with a “stony stubborn and deafening silence for more than a decade”, his proposals at the conclusion of his speech made clear that the Labor government has embraced the central thrust of the Liberal government’s policies.

Noting that before the election he had called for a “war cabinet” on indigenous policy, Rudd proposed the formation of a joint policy committee to be headed by himself and the Liberal Party leader, Brendan Nelson, to implement a housing program.

The choice of words was significant, underlining both the coalitionism characterising Rudd’s policy agenda and the Labor government’s continuing use of the military against Northern Territory indigenous communities.

Before Rudd delivered his address, the WSWs received an e-mail from a reader disagreeing with yesterday’s SEP statement on the parliamentary apology, describing it as “a cynical attack on a newly-formed government” which “deserves an opportunity to demonstrate its agenda before being attacked”.

“The formal apology is a mandatory step in a new direction,” the reader continued, and represented the necessary “first step to ongoing reconciliation” and a

solution to the “devastating problems of the Aboriginal community in Australia.”

These views are no doubt shared to a greater or lesser degree by large numbers of ordinary people. There is an overwhelming sentiment that discrimination, oppression and the terrible social conditions afflicting large sections of the Aboriginal population must end. These were the same sentiments that led, more than 40 years ago, to mass support for the 1967 referendum, viewed at the time as a turning point that would see a major improvement in the social and economic position of Aboriginal people.

But facts must be squarely faced. More than 40 years on, the situation has only become worse. The formal apology is certainly a “step in a new direction” but not toward ending the oppression of Australia’s indigenous population. It is a step by the Rudd Labor government toward winning the support of, and utilising, a section of Aboriginal community leaders to implement its right-wing policies—something that would have been impossible without the formal repudiation of the Howard government’s position on the stolen generations.

The problems confronting Aboriginal people will not be resolved by this government, any more than they were resolved by governments in the past. They will simply assume new forms.

Only through the fight for a socialist perspective, carried forward by the working class as a whole—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike—and aimed at the reorganisation of society from top to bottom, replacing the capitalist system with a society based on human need, not private profit, can the centuries-old oppression of the Aboriginal people be overcome.



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