

Fifteen years on: The fraud of Australian parliament's "stolen generations" apology

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13 February 2023

Yesterday, as they did five years ago, politicians and indigenous representatives gathered for a breakfast event in Australia's parliamentary great hall to celebrate the anniversary of the Rudd Labor government's parliamentary "national apology" to the "stolen generations"—the many thousands of Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families between 1910 and 1970.

The following is an article published on the *World Socialist Web Site* exposing the hypocrisy and reactionary political agenda involved on the occasion of the similar event marking the 10th anniversary. Five years on, the record is even more damning.

As even the Albanese Labor government's latest annual "Closing the Gap" report admitted, critical targets regarding indigenous living and social conditions are "worsening," including adults in prison, suicides and the number of children in "out-of-home care," separated from their families.

Despite the political and media establishment's rhetoric that Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology constituted a historic turning point—just like the claims being made today for the Albanese government's proposed "Voice" constitutional referendum—the horrendous conditions endured by the vast majority of Aboriginal people have only deteriorated.

According to a 2020 report from the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Childcare, over 20,000 indigenous children were living in out-of-home care, more than double the number of about 9,000 a decade earlier. Five years ago, that figure was 17,000. Another "stolen generation" is being created, as a result of the oppressive social conditions and ongoing trauma.

As the WSWs has warned, the Voice would only perpetuate this social crisis, just as the "Closing the Gap" program itself has done since it was launched in 2008 following Rudd's apology. The purpose of the Voice is to further integrate a privileged and increasingly wealthy indigenous layer of agency CEOs, business entrepreneurs and academics, who have been groomed and prospered alongside this social misery, into the ruling capitalist class.

The Voice—an elite indigenous advisory body to be inserted into the 1901 Australian Constitution—would become part of the same capitalist state apparatus, now headed by the parliament and government, that was responsible for the destruction of traditional Aboriginal society by British and Australian capitalism, through massacres, dispossession and "assimilation," and for the ongoing impoverishment of the indigenous population, who are among the most vulnerable members of the entire working class as a whole.

Ten years on: The fraud of Australian parliament's "stolen generations" apology

Mike Head

17 February, 2018

Hypocrisy abounded inside Australia's parliamentary great hall this week when about 300 politicians and indigenous representatives gathered for a breakfast event to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the former Labor government's "national apology" to the "stolen generations" of Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their families.

Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who delivered the nationally-televised apology on the floor of the parliament in February 2008, was feted as a visionary who had offered an "historic statement" acknowledging the crimes committed against the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population since the British conquest of the continent in 1788.

One shocking statistic points to the monumental political fraud involved in the "apology" and its ongoing acclamation as a "landmark event." Today, more than 17,000 indigenous children are living in out-of-home care, compared with about 9,000 a decade ago. In other words, a new "stolen generation" is being created, with the numbers of children taken from their parents almost doubling in 10 years.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned on the day of the apology, it was a cynical ploy. Rudd's flowery rhetoric served a definite agenda for the then still-new Labor government—one of deepening the crimes committed by the Australian capitalist class and its political servants against the indigenous people, as part of an intensifying assault on the conditions of the working class as a whole.

"All those hailing the Rudd government's apology as a major advance are carrying out a monstrous deception," the Socialist Equality Party's statement explained. "There is an old maxim that when the ruling class apologises for past crimes, it is only in order to better commit those of the present. The record of the past 200 years demonstrates that the entire Australian ruling establishment is organically incapable of addressing the terrible conditions facing Aboriginal people."

The real aim of parliament's "sorry" resolution, the statement declared, was "to facilitate Labor's plan to draw in a layer of privileged indigenous leaders and utilise them to continue and deepen the policies of the former Howard government." The Labor government continued the Liberal-National Coalition's military-police intervention against Aboriginal communities across the Northern Territory, along with the arbitrary suspension of welfare payments to Aboriginal families.

The SEP warned that, in the name of maintaining Australia's "economic competitiveness," Rudd was poised to launch a no less ruthless attack on the social position of the entire working class. "Labor's economic agenda will inevitably hit the most vulnerable layers of the working class, including Aborigines, the hardest."

That warning has been vindicated. The past decade has seen a relentless assault on the jobs and conditions of the working class, producing a further massive transfer of wealth into the hands of the corporate elite and unprecedented levels of social inequality. Since the 2008 global financial

crisis, while profits and billionaires' fortunes have soared, working class wages and living standards have been driven down in Australia and internationally.

The appalling social situation confronting Australia's indigenous people—whether in working-class suburbs, regional towns or remote townships—is one of the sharpest features of a broader impoverishment. In the past, children were “separated” as part of a drive to “assimilate” them, with the expectation that the indigenous population would disappear. Today's “stolen generation” is part of a wider social blight, bound up with the impact of grinding poverty on families living under immense stress. According to the Australian Institute of Family Studies, 46,448 children overall were placed in state care nationally in 2016, up by 17 percent from 39,621 in 2012.

A similar stark pattern can be seen in the soaring numbers of prisoners, indigenous and non-indigenous, in Australia's jails. Aboriginal people have been the worst-affected victims of escalating police harassment, “law and order” campaigns, harsher bail and sentencing laws and the imprisonment of people with mental health and drug problems who cannot obtain decent treatment because of woefully inadequate services.

Last year, adult indigenous incarceration rates reached an all-time high of 2,346 people per 100,000. This was more than 10 times the national average, which also rose dramatically, from 187.2 in 2014 to 216.2 in the third quarter of 2017. The overall incarceration rate has more than trebled since the 1980s, the same period in which the earlier Labor governments of Hawke and Keating, in partnership with the trade unions, began the wholesale pro-market restructuring of the economy.

Another shocking indicator is the rising suicide rate. Between 2007 and 2011, the rate of suicide for indigenous children 14 years old and younger was 1.2 per 100,000—six times the rate for non-indigenous children. For Aboriginal youth aged 15 to 24 years, the suicide rate was a horrifying 42 per 100,000, compared to 8 per 100,000 for non-Aboriginal youth.

This is also part of a wider trend. Nationally, there were 2,864 deaths from intentional self-harm in 2014—up from about 2,100 in 2005, with steep increases among children and young women. Suicides occurred at a rate of 12 per 100,000 people in 2014—up by 20 percent from about 10 per 100,000 in 2005.

None of these revealing indicators of social polarisation has ever been included in the narrow “targets” in the annual “closing the gap” reports that the Rudd government and the state and territory governments launched with much fanfare after the 2008 apology. To do so would further expose the phoney character of “closing the gap,” which supposedly aimed to achieve “equality” in social indicators for indigenous and non-indigenous people by 2030.

According to this week's ten-year anniversary “closing the gap” report, only three of the seven official targets are on track (child mortality, Year 12 attainment and a watered-down measure for early childhood education). The remaining targets—for life expectancy, employment, school attendance, and reading and numeracy—are so “off track” that the federal and state governments, Liberal-National and Labor alike, are proposing to “refresh” the program, that is, drop such targets.

Employment levels among indigenous workers have fallen since 2008, especially in remote areas. By 2016, the indigenous employment rate fell to just 46.6 percent. Likewise, the life expectancy gap—estimated at almost 11 years in 2009—has widened by about seven months.

While these “gaps” reflect terrible impoverishment among many indigenous people, they also form part of the growing class divide between the poorest half of society and the wealthiest 10 percent, which now includes a cultivated layer of indigenous business owners, academics and bureaucrats.

This social polarisation will only intensify. In releasing the damning 10-year “closing the gap” results, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced a “renewed approach”—an Indigenous Business Sector

Strategy. This is a “suite of initiatives to ensure sustainable economic success for Indigenous owned-and-run businesses.” He boasted of already awarding contracts worth \$1 billion to indigenous businesses in two-and-a-half years.

The new strategy would include an Indigenous Grants Policy, which involves handing over basic services to “indigenous owned and controlled organisations,” in line with the increasing privatisation of all health, disability, employment and other public services.

“As part of our commitment to do things ‘with,’ not ‘to,’ we engaged some 200 Indigenous businessmen and women from across the country to develop the Indigenous Business Sector Strategy,” Turnbull declared in a speech.

The enrichment of a small, select band of indigenous capitalists will be at the direct expense of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, youth and poor, with all the profits being extracted by exploiting their labour power, decimating their basic services and enforcing their social misery.

Such is the rapacious class logic of capitalism. The capitalist-settler society established in 1788 was grounded on the private ownership of land, for the generation of profit. The Aboriginal people who had inhabited the continent for tens of thousands of years were cleared from the land by any means possible—shooting and poisoning as well as the ravages of disease.

As the WWS stated 10 years ago, “responsibility for the oppression of the Aboriginal people lies not with ‘whites’ but with the capitalist profit system, and it is impossible to overcome this centuries-old oppression within the framework of the present social order. To genuinely redress the historic injustices perpetrated against the indigenous people of Australia requires nothing less than the abolition of the system of property relations that gave rise to, and continues to perpetuate, these injustices. Society must be reorganised from top to bottom on socialist and genuinely democratic lines, ensuring that the basic needs of all are met.”

The statement called for the development of a unified mass political movement of the working class—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike—based on a socialist and internationalist perspective. Today that task has never been more necessary.

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