

## EDITORIAL

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Not long ago, many of us turned to face a new millennium, hopeful for change, eager for reforms, and committed to laying the foundations for a brighter, more altruistic future. Sadly, it seems that not even the big issues—war, famine, the environment—have been tackled with any great determination. It makes me think that the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was not a ‘turn’ at all, but rather a downward slide into immorality, and will be remembered as a time when even the most humble human sentiments—even the act of saying ‘sorry’—were exploited and debased.

The apology delivered by the Australian Prime Minister on 13 February 2008 to the Aboriginal community initially struck me as insincere and contrived. I asked myself, ‘Is it just another whitewash? Is it a sensational display guaranteeing a place in the history books?’ In hindsight, my first reaction may have been overly cynical; it was certainly a personal and subjective response. But I still can’t help feeling that the words somehow lacked substance—more a temporary emotional band-aid than a profound resolution.

I question the moral acceptability of one person apologising on behalf of an entire nation. I question the delivery of the speech, its content and what it stands for. And I question the way decades of abuse were reduced into a neat package, only to be swept away in a fleeting moment of grandeur. Can a gesture carry any true weight and credibility for the individuals in a society when the sum of their involvement amounts to little more than watching a television screen or reading the news? Can an apology be considered appropriate if it is delivered by a person the majority of the people have never met, reciting a scripted speech on their behalf—a speech they have taken no part in constructing and have no idea of its contents, and in many cases care little more about than the financial significance that may result from its dissemination? It was a collective apology by a self-elected proxy.

A collective apology may be possible in a true democracy where a meeting is open to all citizens, particularly those directly involved, with the intention of coming to an agreement on the terms—not only of the verbal exchange but what the apology actually stands for, including what was perpetrated, who was responsible, and what actions will be carried out now and in the future as compensation for past and future transgressions of those terms. But a gesture by a self-elected proxy, on behalf of a much broader group, without adequate and appropriate consultation, is questionable. And the vagueness in which blame was laid, in the most general manner, on non-specific, previous governments and laws—rather than individuals—is also highly questionable.

Grave assumptions are often carried along in the tide of grand gestures. Does ‘sorry’ equate to an ethical resolution? I think not: it may be fair to say that it is morally acceptable to apologise, but an apology is a social courtesy and should never be misconstrued as a solution or a guarantee of social or political reform. But I sense that our *collective* ‘sorry’ has been intended and interpreted by many as just that: an end, once and for all, to an embarrassing and often horrendous unethical past. I lost track, not only of how many times the word ‘sorry’ was used, but how many times a metaphor for a clean start was invoked: “a new page”, “a new chapter”, “a new future”. Ultimately, the day was intended “to remove a great stain from the nation’s soul”.

Noticeably, the *collective* ‘sorry’ was swiftly implemented by a newly elected prime minister and his newly appointed government before any connection could be established in the Australian psyche between the accused (the crimes of past governments and their laws) and those being



exonerated (the new kids on the block and the nation it now represented). Laying blame on a faceless non-specific group of past governments and ill-formed laws is akin to chasing ghosts, and unlikely to achieve any long term benefits for the victims. The ‘sorry’ speech effectively absolved the perpetrators, dispersed guilt, and shifted responsibility.

If any doubt exists regarding the intentions of current and previous Australian governments and the people they represent then the speech delivered on the same day by the leader of the opposition, Brendan Nelson, was even more transparent than his counterpart’s, and, sadly, it was perhaps more honest. We should not forget that the leader of the opposition represents almost half of Australia’s voters. The significance of the truly symbolic gesture as many Aboriginal Australians turned their backs on Nelson, was outstandingly poignant. In his defence of previous governments; in his emphasis on “unintended consequences”; in his mention of the difficulties now facing remote Aboriginal communities, without fully explaining the causes; in his attempt to compare the deaths of countless Aboriginals to the sacrifices made by Australian soldiers, claiming them as something necessary to the growth of the nation; in the embarrassment that he caused many Aboriginals by even mentioning such matters; in doing those things, he epitomised the ignorance and disregard often shown to Aboriginals by colonists. I believe that the 2008 ‘sorry’ speeches will not only come to stand as a testament of our ability to add insult to injury, but they will be an expression of how little we understand the first Australians.

It would be fair to say that we have the right to forgive for the injustices that happen to ourselves, but the ‘sorry’ speech was an attempt to forgive and intervene for the injustices to others. I don’t think we would normally accept such a suggestion of resolution without a lawful trial, a trial that is fair and agreed upon by all concerned. If the German people and indeed millions of others around the world had accepted the demise of Hitler as an end to the atrocities, and if the legacy of the crimes perpetrated by so many had been ignored, it would have been considered morally unacceptable. There is an innate flaw in the assumption that a single proxy

can stand in for an entire nation. In such a suggestion the lines between dictator, orator, and representative are blurred: it is inappropriate to attempt to hold accountable, for intentional human injustices, a vague number of faceless, misguided officials and their laws, and there can be no significance to an apology without the deliberate accord and subsequent actions and commitment of the individuals being represented.

Now that the emotion surrounding the gesture has settled, I’m wondering if others have begun to see the words as disturbingly hollow. Will we see any real action or change? There may be some token legal gratification, in terms of rights, land, compensation; but how can there be any long term spiritual healing if the apology is token rather than absolute? For me, there is a clear difference between accepting blame and merely expressing sympathy. If all that remains after emotions have returned to normal is, ‘I’m sorry for the acts of previous governments’, then it is a hoodwink and morally indecent, an acquittal in disguise—freeing an entire nation from responsibility and guilt. The result being that all individuals, both the perpetrators and the victims, are dislocated from a connection to the events and the situation and dispossessed of their rights. And that could be interpreted as nothing more than the same deceptive manipulation administered by colonisers over the colonised for centuries.

I remember a discussion many years ago with my migrant grandfather. He said, ‘We were made Australians virtually overnight, so we could do the work that others refused to do. It was a nation obsessed with building an identity: historians were frantically writing the history books. Or were they erasing history?’ He was never quite sure. He went on to tell me about a day at school, when he was quite young. He asked his history teacher, “What was here before the British arrived?” “Nothing,” she replied. Her response marked the beginning of an emptiness he never quite filled. He



said to me, ‘Now I’m here and the Indigenous nobodies are here, a few of them, and *none* of us feel like we belong.’

A peculiar sense of pride can develop among settlers, often continuing through subsequent generations as the need to claim and to justify strengthens. It is difficult to accept that any invader really believes their intrusion is for the good of the colonised. But perhaps such arrogance is triggered as a defence mechanism: the truth, too challenging, too fearful; the emotional investment required to accept responsibility and to face the shame and guilt is replaced by standoffishness and denial. There is safety in the shared moral and political values that society offers, particularly the sense of a shared past—even if those values are wrong and the history tainted. To doubt a shared history, to question accepted beliefs, poses a threat to the comfort of commonality. So there is trepidation and resistance.

But if saying ‘sorry’ is constrained by political, social, and emotional objectives, how is one to ask forgiveness and expect it to be effective? Perhaps it is not our right to ask. Some things come without asking; they



come from action. What is imperative is that reform occurs on an individual level, that the identities of the perpetrators, past and present, are established and that they stand accountable for their actions; that the victims are acknowledged and allowed to express their grief; and that each individual in the nation, understands, accepts, and learns from the wrongs of the past and actively pursues and implements change. Such actions are not only ethically correct, they offer the best chance for any real spiritual healing and growth. Moral

justice through the acceptance of responsibility on an individual level is the best hope for any significant and effective reconciliation.

So where would I begin if I wanted to atone for any crime or any sense of guilt? How do I accept responsibility if an apology on my behalf amounts to nothing more than a hollow refrain? I can’t give back a stolen history;

I can’t pay the rightful landowners the rent I now pay to a landlord or as mortgage my bank demands without relent. I could offer love and respect, and I could promise equality, and I could announce my appreciation and gratitude for the tolerance I have been shown. That at least I can do. And I could ask permission to stay in a country and on the land that was once the land of somebody else’s ancestors, often taken dishonestly. And because I refuse to turn a blind eye to the plight that the Indigenous people have been subjected to, both now and in the past, I can offer my support and my personal confession and stand ready to be judged, not by my law but by theirs.

So instead of participating in exoneration by proxy, and being relieved of moral responsibility, I would rather make my own declaration. That is my moral and ethical duty, and my right. I would like a chance to offer, in honesty, my confession, and to pledge my loyalty to the Indigenous people of this country and to the land on which we now both live. And I am prepared to be judged by the Indigenous people of this country, the first Australians. I would like to ask for the right to stay and to live on this land, the land of the traditional owners, the Bunurong and Wurundjeri people. And I ask for the opportunity to receive forgiveness and to atone for any wrongs I may have committed or that my ancestors may have committed against the Indigenous people of this country, and I am prepared to live in respect to their rights and to live as an equal alongside the Indigenous people whose ancestors lived on this land before my ancestors arrived.

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