

Witnessing the Apology

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I drove to Canberra alight with anticipation. The stony-hearted policies of the past 11 years had been hard: seeing Indigenous organisations whose births I had witnessed being knee-capped, taken over, mainstreamed; the painful ‘historical denialism’ (Manne 2008:27). Those gains lost at the behest of Howard’s basically assimilationist agenda. Yet my exhibition *Proof: Portraits from the Movement 1978–2003* toured around the country from the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra in 2003 to 11 venues across four States and two countries, finishing up at the Museum of Sydney in 2008, and proved to be a rallying point for those for whom the Reconciliation agenda would never go away. For those growing pockets of resistance that could not be extinguished.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s new Labor Government prioritised the delivery of the Apology as its first act in office at the beginning of the new parliament. Rudd and Jenny Macklin (Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) had begun consulting Indigenous groups on the precise wording of the Apology immediately they gained office. I thought that the nation was now approaching a turning point. The questions were ‘Would the Apology be adequately expressed?’ and ‘How would it be received?’ All the power of language and clear sight were now called into service.

Some years ago I turned to Indigenous friends and asked, ‘Do you think you will ever be able to get past the anger and the pain?’ It seemed at that time an outrageous question. Their eyes widened: ‘I don’t know.’ The more that non-Indigenous friends discovered about this nation’s real histo-

ry, the more uncomfortable they became — not with me and this work I was committed to — but with themselves. I had long argued that every nation, including Australia, has a conflict history. Knowing can be painful, though not as painful as memory itself.

En route to Canberra, I stopped in Berrima — since my schooldays, a weathervane of the colonial mind. Here apprehension was evident. The woman working in a fine shop said to me, ‘I don’t know about this Apology’. She recounted how her husband’s grandfather had fallen in love with an Aboriginal woman and been turfed out of his family in disgrace. Pain shadowed so many hearts in how many families across the nation? ‘You might discover something for you in this’, I replied. ‘You’re such a nice woman’, she replied in the patronising language of artificial courtesy. She meant no harm, really; it’s just that she had thought this way for so long. Inflicted shame and personal regret create their own scars.

Arriving in Canberra I went straight to Parliament House to sort out the paperwork for my press pass. I had received letters of commission to photograph for a swag of fine publications. There were only ten photographers permitted to be present in the parliament when Kevin Rudd delivered the Apology; I was one of them. Later I went with my assistant, Robert, to check in with the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. A neat embankment of many tents was assembled, Benny Zabble’s Rainbow Chi Tent supplied free food — accepting donations, as he has done for so many years. A media tent and a meeting tent had been erected. As always, the Sacred Fire was alight and

smouldering, now in the late afternoon light. In the meeting tent Isabel Coe spoke out in anger. She spoke the same rhetoric I had been hearing since Kevin Gilbert committed the embassy to its central goal 30 years ago, calling for the recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty. Would people here be open to what was about to take place? I greeted old friends, we swapped news. It became immediately clear that I was not the only one present holding out hope towards the events of the coming days. Tolerance, as always, prevailed. Everyone always has a right to speak their point of view at the embassy.

For the following day, Rudd and Macklin had invited guests to the first Welcome to Country in the history of the Parliament of Australia, now on the eve of its 42nd sitting. In the Great Hall Indigenous guests sat with Members of Parliament (MPs) and their families to hear Matilda House, adorned in a regal possum-skin cloak, welcome all assembled onto Ngunnawal lands. It was a joyous affair, with dancers from the Torres Straight Islands and elsewhere, choreographed by Marilyn Miller. Speeches in reply to Matilda House were delivered by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, Brendan Nelson. Bob Brown and Theresa Rein sat with MPs in the front row on one side. Indigenous Elders and guests sat on the other. ‘Why had this respectful and pleasant event never happened in the parliament before?’ was the unspoken question of that morning.

At the Tent Embassy over 1000 people had assembled to march to the parliament. A stage had been set up and chairs for the elderly provided on the grassy embankment. Even the police in the distance wore friendly faces. These considerate and co-operative accommodations were new, most welcome and, on reflection, slightly amusing. How capricious human beings can be? On the stage, Barbara Shaw from Alice Springs announced that she and her family had raised \$40000 to bring her countrymen and women from the central lands to be present here, personally to protest the Northern Territory intervention laws now wrecking havoc in their communities. Speaker after speaker affirmed that they felt humiliated at having their welfare payments indiscriminately quarantined. Back to ‘dog tags and rations’ days! They felt that their communities were being invaded, once again. How could the suspension

of the Racial Discrimination Act be acceptable to anyone? Speaker after speaker argued the same concerns. Would these community workers, whose voices were raised here, be heard in the parliament — would they be consulted on the way ahead? Buses from all over the country had brought members of the Stolen Generations to be present for this historic event. As always, there were non-Indigenous supporters who had come because they felt they had to be there, each with their desire to support Indigenous peoples and to be present for this seminal moment in our shared histories.

On the morning of 13 February we arrived at the parliament early to collect our press passes. We carted our camera gear and equipment to the media room. We ten photographers were given our final instructions: during the delivery of the Apology we could photograph through spaces in the back wall of the gallery. When people rose to applaud, two by two we could race forward to photograph from the steps of the front row of the galleries. We were under instruction from the Keepers of the Rod. One bad move and you’re out, we were told. Mervyn Bishop and I winked at each other from behind our cameras.

To a hushed and attentive house, the Prime Minister rose to deliver the Apology. As he read, sadness and regret surrounded all of us. Some people sobbed quietly in the gallery. Where ever I looked through my lens, familiar faces were sombre, sad. Eyes were focused inwards throughout the galleries and in the House. No one moved at all, so intense was the attention to every word now spoken by Kevin Rudd (2008) on behalf of the government to each one of us, to the nation.

The nation is demanding of its political leadership to take us forward. Decency, human decency, universal human decency, demands that the nation now step forward to right an historical wrong. That is what we are doing in this place today...

We, the parliaments of the nation, are ultimately responsible, not those who gave effect to our laws. And the problem lay with the laws themselves. As has been said of settler societies elsewhere, we are the bearers of many blessings from our ancestors; therefore we must also be the bearer of their burdens as well.

Therefore, for our nation, the course of action is clear...that is, to deal now with what has become one of the darkest chapters in Australia's history. In doing so, we are doing more than contending with the facts, the evidence and the often rancorous public debate. In doing so, we are also wrestling with our own soul.

This is not, as some would argue, a black-armband view of history; it is just the truth: the cold, confronting, uncomfortable truth — facing it, dealing with it, moving on from it. Until we fully confront that truth, there will always be a shadow hanging over us and our future as a fully united and fully reconciled people. It is time to reconcile. It is time to recognise the injustices of the past. It is time to say sorry. It is time to move forward together.

To the stolen generations, I say the following: as Prime Minister of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the government of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the parliament of Australia, I am sorry. I offer you this apology without qualification. We apologise for the hurt, the pain and suffering that we, the parliament, have caused you by the laws that previous parliaments have enacted. We apologise for the indignity, the degradation and the humiliation these laws embodied. We offer this apology to the mothers, the fathers, the brothers, the sisters, the families and the communities whose lives were ripped apart by the actions of successive governments under successive parliaments. In making this apology, I would also like to speak personally to the members of the stolen generations and their families: to those here today, so many of you; to those listening across the nation — from Yuendumu, in the central west of the Northern Territory, to Yabara, in North Queensland, and to Pitjantjatjara in South Australia...

Rudd (2008) concluded thus:

Let us turn this page together: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, government and opposition, Commonwealth and state, and write this new chapter in our nation's story together. First Australians, First Fleeters, and those who first took the oath of allegiance just a few weeks ago. Let's grasp

this opportunity to craft a new future for this great land: Australia. I commend the motion to the House.

The House and its guests rose to their feet as one. The applause was thunderous. We photographers raced into our positions. Both sides of the House now stood in support of the motion. In the galleries arms now rose in applause, tear-stained faces everywhere gradually relaxed into something new, one by one, each in their own time. My eyes were on the gallery and on the people on the floor. How to frame the complex emotions of this moment without intrusion? Every second now was crucial. I admit I heard little of the Leader of the Opposition's reply. He lost me after his first belligerent sentence. This was no time for petty point-scoring. Either you were up for what was on offer or you were not. My eyes roamed the chamber. This sense of unease was not mine alone. After small and polite applause he was done. The leaders, Labor and Liberal, and the Minister for Indigenous Affairs were on the move. They walked around the outer rim of the chamber, past the Whitlams, the Hawkes and Paul Keating, past Sir William Deane and Lady Wilson, to the members of the Stolen Generations seated opposite them as distinguished guests throughout the proceedings on high-backed chairs on the floor of the House. There were warm handshakes for the Elder men and an embrace for each of the Elder women. Bob Randall stood quietly; tears flowed or were kept at bay among some of the Elder women around the MPs. The gallery applauded again with enthusiasm and appreciation. Now a new mood was arising — one of palpable relief. We all walked with a lighter step as we left the chamber.

Morning tea was being served in the hall of the parliament and the adjacent garden. I headed for the garden, better light, the prospect of meeting friends — sharing a cigarette. All my old habits from years of marches, victories and struggle. I greeted old friends. Linda Burney MP — her face stained with tears — 'That we have lived to see this', we marvelled to each other. Professor Marcia Langton smiled as we greeted each other. This was a satisfying and memorable day.

I soon found myself with people from the Stolen Generations Alliance. Some had travelled from the far north of Western Australia. Stories

were being shared, before radio and television media attention generally alighted on Christine King and her mother, Nanna Fejo, when the Prime Minister arrived to sit with her. It was a staged photo opportunity yet the mood was completely genuine and warm. I waved my left hand in the air to beckon the Prime Minister's face towards me. He smiled genially. When he rose to leave, there was a hug for Christine and her mother. He caught my eye as he was leaving. 'Thank you', I said softly. My job almost done, tears flowed down my face. I was comforted by friends nearby. Relief, personal and profound, soon made way for joy. The concert was about to start on the large stage set up on the lawn in front of the parliament. Leah Purcell opened the celebratory show with a powerful a cappella song composed for her great-grandmother, whose photograph she proudly wore around her neck. I missed Pat Dodson's address to the National Press Club. I went there later in the afternoon to raise a jar to him and to the events of this day.

What a joy to hear many wise voices, culturally informed voices, again on our national stage. One sensed immediately that the mood of the nation had changed. On television screens across the nation, in public squares, schools, viewed at home, we had all participated in a seminal catharsis in our personal and national narrative. Sharing the emotional truths of our personal histories had the power to awaken in 'us' a sense of 'we'

in all our cultural diversity. It is the meta narrative of who we all are — what it means to be an Australian.

Walter Benjamin (1969) wrote, 'As Proust begins his life story with awakening, so must every work of history begin with awakening, indeed it must be concerned with nothing else'. History, then, is about awakening. It is also about temporary blindness and how we regain our sight.

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Juno Gemes is a photographer and researcher. *Proof: Portraits from the Movement 1978–2003* was exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery in 2003. It toured 11 venues around Australia, and to the Kluge–Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia in 2006, and finished at the Museum of Sydney, 3 March 2008. In 2006 Juno Gemes showed *Proof* on DVD at the Centre for Media, Culture and History of New York University, accompanied by a presentation 'Proof Chronicles — The visual poetics of cultural advocacy'.

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Darren from the Aboriginal Tent Embassy carries the Sacred Fire in a *coolamon* as he leads a march to the parliament to protest the Northern Territory intervention laws



The Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, and Leader of the Opposition, Brendan Nelson, assist Ngunnawal Elder Matilda House to don her possum-skin cloak at the end of the ceremony



To an attentive House of Representatives and guests, Kevin Rudd delivers the Apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples for past laws that have caused them intense suffering



In the gallery of the national parliament, Linda Burney, MLA, and other Labor MPs from the New South Wales Parliament witness the Apology



Both sides of the House of Representatives — Labor and Liberal — solemnly stand in support of the Apology motion



Past Labor leaders Paul Keating and Bob Hawke (with his wife, Blanche D'Alpuget) listen to the Apology from the chamber of the parliament



Members of the Stolen Generations (from left, Netta Cahill, Lorna Cubillo and Valerie Day) comfort each other after the reading of the Apology



Kevin Rudd, Jenny Macklin and Brendan Nelson meet members of the Stolen Generations in parliament



In the crowded gallery, Indigenous and non-Indigenous guests applaud the passing of the motion



Kevin Rudd with Nanna Fejo and Rosemary Parfitt at morning tea in the parliament garden