



National Apology to Stolen Generations

How do we right the wrongs?

As a child I had no mother's arms to hold me. No father to lead me into the world. Us taken away kids only had each other. All of us damaged and too young to know what to do. We had strangers standing over us... Many of us grew hard and tough. Others were explosive and angry. A lot grew up just struggling to cope at all. They found their peace in other institutions or alcohol. Most of us learnt to occupy a small space and avoid anything that looked like trouble. We had few ideas about relationships. No one showed us how to be lovers or parents. How to feel safe loving someone when that risked them being taken away and leaving us alone again.

Alec Kruger, Alone on the Soaks

On 13 February 2008, in the National Apology to Stolen Generations the Prime Minister of Australia said:

Decency, human decency, universal human decency, demands that the nation now step forward to right an historical wrong.

In 2019, Mr Richard Weston, the chief executive of the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) said:

Removing Indigenous children from their family typically also meant removing the child from their culture and their Country. It happened in the Stolen Generations and it is happening with kids today, that they will come away struggling to know who they are and where they fit.

A landmark report, *The Family Matters* published in October 2019 by SNAICC presents an ever-emerging crisis for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) children.

ATSI children are

- being removed from their families at an ever increasing and alarming rate. In 2017 there were 17,664 ATSI children in out of home care compared to 9,070 in 2008.
- 37.3% of the total out-of-home care population, but only 5.5% of the total population of children in Australia.
- now 10.2 times more likely to be removed from their families than non-ATSI children.
- Seven more times likely to be on permanent care orders, often away from country and community, until the age of 18.

Consider these facts:

- The data projects that if we don't address the rates of removal, the number of ATSI children being removed from family will double again within the next 10 years.
- In 2017-18, only 17% of child protection funding was invested in support services for children and their families, while 83% was invested in child protection services and out-of-home care.
- Despite significant state and federal government commitments to increase the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled child and family support organisations, the actual investment remains limited.
- Without substantial efforts to refocus policy and investment in prevention and early intervention family support services, these alarming statistics will continue to rise.



In the face of these statistics “human decency” calls our nation to right the wrongs. The current situation is complex. Many ATSI children are suffering and live in communities with high levels of drug and alcohol abuse and violence. There are many indicators that communities are in distress. The crisis, and often reasonable response, is to remove children. However, if children are not returned safely to their home, culture and community within a short period of time restoration and reunification generally does not happen.

----- *Continue reading from the Sisters of Saint Joseph website below*

For many reasons it is difficult for traumatised children, who are placed in out of home care, to maintain a stable placement. To minimise the instability of multiple placements in out of home care there are ongoing conversations for “permanent care” orders for all children. Some jurisdictions have excluded ATSI children from being removed “permanently” as the intergenerational traumatic impact of stolen generations is now recognised. We have learnt that removing children permanently from their kin and country will embed trauma in any culture for generations. Human connections are central to survival. Now in all jurisdictions across Australia the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Placement Principles are in our legislation. In Child Protection Australia (AIHW) 2017-18 (p. 54) we are told that, “The purpose of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle is to ensure Indigenous children remain connected to their family, community, culture, and country. The core elements include prevention, partnership, placement, participation, and connection.” This same document goes on to say that the principles are only partially implemented in every jurisdiction. Tragically, in 2018, in the Northern Territory 65% of ATSI children, in out of home care, were placed with non-ATSI caregivers or in non-ATSI residential care. Even with strong policies, legislative safeguards and good intentions we know that many ATSI children do not retain their connection to culture, country and family. We are being called, as a nation, to a massive focus on prevention, early intervention family support services combined with attitudinal and operational changes in our dominant culture.

A different response to this national catastrophe can be found in ATSI culture. Can we make the leap from a Western individualistic worldview to an ATSI worldview where life is understood in a more holistic, integrated and a relational way? A relational framework will enable us to acknowledge and face the complex difficulties faced by individuals, families, and our whole society. An individualistic perspective tends to blame and shame the individual for their difficulties.

Family, culture and community cannot be thrown away like rubbish. After an investigation of abuse of a child, a policeman involved, said to members of a community that the perpetrator would be put “in jail and the key will be thrown away.” An Aboriginal Elder responded by saying, “we don’t throw people away like rubbish”. I was shocked, as a woman I knew to be grace filled and wise, appeared to be siding with a perpetrator. With the benefit of hindsight, and some more years ministry in the care and protection of children, I have come to believe we all need to listen to the ancient wisdom of Aboriginal people. How do we as a nation reclaim that spacious place where restorative justice and redemption is possible and ultimately heal the open and weeping wounds in our society? We need to heed our prophets at our nations peril!

Whilst we cannot ever be complacent with the care and safety of children, as we have in the past, we need to go beyond “rescuing” children from their families, culture and communities. How do we put systems in place where ATSI children are safe and secure whilst retaining their connections to their family, country, culture and community? Our own legislation, in every Australian jurisdiction, requires us to adhere to these connections for ATSI children. Ongoing poverty, discrimination, racism, dislocation and removal of children disrupt healing in any culture.



ATSI communities themselves are taking action to protect their children and preserve family and community life. The Bourke "Just Invest" initiative is impressive in its attempt to prevent incarceration of young Aboriginal boys. In Fitzroy Crossing the communities are taking extraordinary steps to care for, and protect their children. They are developing local solutions to address drug and alcohol misuse, gambling and violence in townships across the Kimberley.

In Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry, 2012, there were recommendations for bold policy and legislative reform. Subsequently, there have been some courageous policy changes including statutory child protection powers have recently been devolved to Aboriginal community controlled agencies. Victoria also now has an Aboriginal Decision Making Initiative in their Child Protection Department's policies and procedures.

The removal of the consent of family, and the voice of their community cannot help any child as, we now know, even in families and communities where there is abuse and neglect, parents and communities, want the best for their children and if given the chance are strong advocates for them.

How do we enable more community-controlled organisations to both initiate and develop their own response to the crisis?

Another way in which we may decrease the numbers of intergenerational removal of ATSI children is to re-distribute the wealth of our country to ensure our First Peoples have adequate resources to provide for themselves? Abuse is perpetrated by us as a nation when we continue to have unfair and sometimes cruel policies and then blame and punish people for their predicament. One example of communities being discriminated against, by government policy, is the cashless welfare card being rolled out in many ATSI communities. None of us would heal and thrive when living with the shame of stigma combined with the hardship of abject poverty!

The trauma informed conversations that are missing or not promoted in many of our institutions, structures and systems include;

***'We care for you, and it is important for all of us, for you
to know who you are,
to know who you belong to,
to know where you are going,
to know that you matter,
and when you express pain,
for us to hear and tend to where life is hurting you?'***

Ancient cultures and evolutionary knowledge now tells us that the most basic expression of everyone's being is goodness and love and we all connected as one. Let's undo patterns of separation in our many hierarchies of inequality and exclusion, and reclaim love and compassion as a force for transformation in our lives and in our social and political movements. The abuse of power is rife in many of our systems, structures and institutions. The solutions we have now are not working for our vulnerable children, their families and communities and our great nation. When GOODNESS, COMPASSION and LOVE in each of us is enabled and fostered we will change everything!



We are part of a whole, called by us "Universe." We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest — a kind of optical delusion of our consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Albert Einstein 1950

The final word for this reflection is from Aboriginal Elder, Richard Western, who challenges us to:

Put an end to legal orders for permanent care and adoption for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and replace this by a focus on supporting their connections to kin, culture and community.

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