

What does the national apology mean 18 years later?

Reflections from Abby-Rose Cox

We are sorry. Those were the underpinning words of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations. It marked a significant moment in Australia's history – a moment of truth-telling in the dark past of this country.



In 2008, on the 13th of February, I still remember exactly where I was – the common room of my boarding school in Perth. I was in Year 12 and we were all waiting nervously for the prime minister of Australia to say the words which had been sought by many community members for a long time. Those who were part of the Stolen Generations showed up with strength and vulnerability to Parliament House, and those who couldn't travel, tuned in to their TVs to watch a significant moment in history, the acknowledgement of a very hurtful policy.

"We apologise for the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians. We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their Country." – prime minister Kevin Rudd, February 13, 2008

From the 1800s until the 1970s, government policies designed specifically for assimilation and the erasure of Indigenous identity, meant that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were forcibly removed from their families. These children are now known as the Stolen Generations. As a result of these policies, many Indigenous people grew up separated from their culture, language and kin, resulting in neglect, abandonment, abuse and lifelong trauma. For such a long time the impact of these policies was unrecognised and many Indigenous people felt denied of their truth. This landmark moment provided a platform for healing for some.

Some argue the apology was just words – how can words undo the harm that was caused? But for many people, like my grandmother, it was a symbolic acknowledgement of a history of grief and loss, and a display of accountability by the Australian government. It created a multitude of emotions, stimulating tears and sadness. It represented a starting point for a long journey of healing.

However, 18 years later the impacts of the racist policies which created the Stolen Generations continue: Indigenous Australians experience poorer health outcomes, higher rates of incarceration, and shorter life expectancies, and the effects of intergenerational trauma are still felt. The apology must now be seen as more than a historical milestone or a symbol – it must be used as a moral compass.

Abby-Rose Cox is a member of the Nimanburrr community with connections to Kija in the east Kimberley. Her experiences of teaching, primarily with Aboriginal youth, has been a driving force in pursuing a career in research. She completed her PhD looking at culturally-strong social and emotional wellbeing programs to support Aboriginal young people in schools and joined UWA as a postdoctoral researcher. Prior to this, Abby-Rose worked as the evaluation and research manager at the Kimberley Aboriginal Health Research Alliance in Broome. She is passionate about transforming research to ensure First Nations people are involved in every stage of the research journey. Currently, Abby-Rose is working as a research fellow at the Indigenous Futures Centre, looking at experiences of racism, with a vision to develop resources to support others to demonstrate warriorship in the face of racism.

Reflections from Zac Cox

The national apology was an emotional moment for all of us, especially for our old people – the ones who were forcibly removed and those, like our dearest grandmother, who never got to see their mothers or fathers again. They were denied the chance to experience the deep and crucial connection with their parents that every child needs.



For our grandmother, the connection was only to her mother – her father was a white man whose identity we are still yet to truly confirm. This represents another forgotten part of history which is too often dismissed or ignored. When I sit back and really think about it, it is devastatingly heartbreaking. It makes me feel physically sick to imagine something like that happening to my child now that I am a father.

What those old people went through is something an apology will never make up for or undo. The impacts didn't stop with them; they flowed through to their children and grandchildren, shaping lives and futures in ways still being felt today.

The apology was a stepping stone toward reconciling the horrific wrongs of the past with our present. These draconian measures were inflicted on a vulnerable and defenceless nation of people, whose worlds were changed forever, along with the lives of generations to come.

Reflecting on the anniversary of the apology – it was a start; it opened the door for meaningful dialogue and recognition of past wrongs. But recognition alone is not enough; real change only comes through action. In that sense, the failure of the Voice feels like a step backwards (but that is another issue for another time) – it doesn't erase the apology, but it does undermine its purpose. In my eyes, it feels as though we have not moved far from what the apology originally set out to achieve.

There is still a great deal of work to be done. Systemic change is essential if we are serious about Closing the Gap and supporting the true potential and inherent rights of this land's original peoples.

Only then can we move toward a genuinely unified country, one built on truth, respect, and justice.

Zac Cox is a Broome boy with connections to Nimanburrr people from the eastern Dampier Peninsula and Kija people from the central Kimberley. He grew up in Broome and spent most of his life there. He loves spending time with his friends and family, camping, hunting, fishing, and watching and playing sport. Zac has been involved with Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services (KAMS) in the social and emotional wellbeing space for some time now.



Mary Cox, grandmother of Zac, Jahved and Abby-Rose, and great grandmother of Ava and Ziggy (pictured).

Our conclusion

Remembering 'the apology' should challenge us to ask uncomfortable questions: are we listening to the voices of Australia's First Peoples? Are policies being developed

alongside First Nations peoples and communities?

Are we teaching this history honestly in our education systems, or still protecting national pride?

The anniversary of the

national apology should serve as a reminder of our shared responsibility for truth-telling, to acknowledge ongoing injustice, and to ensure the words "we are sorry" are matched by meaningful change.