We ask you now, reader, to put your mind, as a citizen of the Australian Commonwealth, to the facts presented in these pages. We ask you to study the problem, in the way that we present the case, from the Aborigines’ point of view. We do not ask for your charity; we do not ask you to study us as scientific-freaks. Above all, we do not ask for your “protection”. No, thanks! We have had 150 years of that! We ask only for justice, decency, and fair play. (Patten and Ferguson 3-4)

Jack Patten and William Ferguson’s above declaration on “Plain Speaking” in Aborigines Claim Citizenship Rights! A Statement of the Case for the Aborigines Progressive Association (1938), outlining Aboriginal Australians view of colonisation and the call for Aboriginal self-determinacy, will be my guiding framework in writing this paper. I ask you to study the problem, as it is presented, from the viewpoint of an Indigenous woman who seeks to understand how “sorry” has been uttered in political domains as a word divorced from the moral freight attached to a history of “degrading, humiliating and exterminating” Aboriginal Australians (Patten and Ferguson 11). I wish to argue that the Opposition leader’s utterance of “sorry” in his 13 February 2008 “We Are Sorry – Address to Parliament” was an indicator of the insidious ways in which colonisation has treated Aboriginal Australians as less than, not equal to, white Australians and to examine the ways in which this particular utterance of the word “sorry” is built on longstanding colonial frameworks that position ‘the Aborigine’ as peripheral in the representation of a national identity – a national identity that, as shown by the transcript of the apology, continues to romanticise settler values and ignore Indigenous rights. Nelson’s address tries to disassociate the word “sorry” from any moral attachment. The basis of his address is on constructing a national identity where all injustices are equal.

In offering this apology, let us not create one injustice in our attempts to address another. (Nelson)

All sorrys are equal, but some are more equal than others. Listening to Nelson’s address, words resembling those of Orwell’s ran through my head. The word “sorry” in relation to Indigenous Australians has taken on cultural, political, educational and economic proportions. The previous government’s refusal to utter the word was attached to the ways in which formations of rhetorically self-sufficient arguments of practicality, equality and justice “functioned to sustain and legitimate existing inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia” (Augoustinos, LeCouteur and Soyland 105). How then, I wondered as I nervously waited for Nelson to begin apologising, would he transform this inherited collective discursive practice of legitimised racism that upheld mainstream Australia’s social reality? The need for an apology, and the history of political refusal to give it, is not a simple classification of one event, one moment in history. The ‘act’ of removing children is not a singular, one-off event. The need to do, the justification and rationalisation of the doing and what that means now, the having done, as well as the
impact on those that were left behind, those that were taken, those that were born after, are all bound up in this particular “sorry”. Given that reluctance of the previous government to admit injustices were done and still exist, this utterance of the word “sorry” from the leader of the opposition precariously sat between freely offering it and reluctantly giving it. The above quote from Nelson, and its central concern of not performing any injustice towards mainstream Australia (“let us not” [my italics]) very definitely defines this sorry in relation to one particular injustice (the removing of Indigenous children) which therefore ignores the surrounding and complicit colonialist and racist attitudes, policies and practices that both institutionalised and perpetuated racism against Australia’s Indigenous peoples. This comment also clearly articulates the opposition’s concern that mainstream Australia not be offended by this act of offering the word “sorry”. Nelson’s address and the ways that it constructs what this “sorry” is for, what it isn’t for, and who it is for, continues to uphold and legitimate existing inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

From the very start of Nelson’s “We Are Sorry – Address to Parliament”, two specific clarifications were emphasised: the “sorry” was directed at a limited time period in history; and that there is an ‘us’ and a ‘them’. Nelson defines this distinction: “two cultures; one ancient, proud and celebrating its deep bond with this land for some 50,000 years. The other, no less proud, arrived here with little more than visionary hope deeply rooted in gritty determination to build an Australian nation.” This cultural division maintains colonising discourses that define and label, legitimate and exclude groups and communities. It draws from the binary oppositions of self and other, white and black, civilised and primitive. It maintains a divide between the two predominant ideas of history that this country struggles with and it silences those in that space in between, ignoring for example, the effects of colonisation and miscegenation in blurring the lines between ‘primitive’ and ‘civilised’. Although acknowledging that Indigenous Australians inhabited this land for a good few thousand decades before the proud, gritty, determined visionaries of a couple of hundred years ago, the “sorry” that is to be uttered is only in relation to “the first seven decades of the 20th century”. Nelson establishes from the outset that any forthcoming apology, on behalf of “us” – read as non-Indigenous Anglo-Australians – in reference to ‘them’ – “those Aboriginal people forcibly removed” – is only valid for the “period within which these events occurred [which] was one that defined and shaped Australia”. My reading of this sectioning of a period in Australia’s history is that while recognising that certain colonising actions were unjust, specifically in this instance the removal of Indigenous children, this period of time is also seen as influential and significant to the growth of the country. What this does is to allow the important colonial enterprise to subsume the unjust actions by the colonisers by other important colonial actions. Explicit in Nelson’s address is that this particular time frame saw the nation of Australia reach the heights of achievements and is a triumphant period – an approach which extends beyond taking the highs with the lows, and the good with the bad, towards overshadowing any minor ‘unfortunate’ mistakes that might have been made, ‘occasionally’, along the way. Throughout the address, there are continual reminders to the listeners that the “us” should not be placed at a disadvantage in the act of saying “sorry”: to do so would be to create injustice, whereas this “sorry” is strictly about attempting to “address another”.

By sectioning off a specific period in the history of colonised Australia, the assumption is that all that happened before 1910 and all that happened after 1970 are “sorry” free. This not only ignores the lead up to the official policy of removal, how it was sanctioned and the aftermath of removal as outlined in The Bringing Them Home Report (1997); it
also prevents Indigenous concepts of time from playing a legitimate and recognised role in the construct of both history and society. Aboriginal time is cyclical and moves around important events: those events that are most significant to an individual are held closer than those that are insignificant or mundane. Aleksandar Janca and Clothilde Bullen state that “time is perceived in relation to the socially sanctioned importance of events and is most often identified by stages in life or historic relevance of events” (41). The speech attempts to distinguish between moments and acts in history: firmly placing the act of removing children in a past society and as only one act of injustice amongst many acts of triumph. “Our generation does not own these actions, nor should it feel guilt for what was done in many, but not all cases, with the best of intentions” (Nelson). What was done is still being felt by Indigenous Australians today. And by differentiating between those that committed these actions and “our generation”, the address relies on a linear idea of time, to distance any wrongdoing from present day white Australians. What I struggle with here is that those wrongdoings continue to be felt according to Indigenous concepts of time and therefore these acts are not in a far away past but very much felt in the present.

The need to not own these actions further entrenches the idea of separateness between Indigenous Australia and non-Indigenous Australia. The fear of being guilty or at blame evokes notions of wrong and right and this address is at pains not to do that – not to lay blame or evoke shame. Nelson’s address is relying on a national identity that has historically silenced and marginalised Indigenous Australians. If there is no blame to be accepted, if there is no attached shame to be acknowledged (“great pride, but occasionally shame” (Nelson)) and dealt with, then national identity is implicitly one of “discovery”, peaceful settlement and progress. Where are the Aboriginal perspectives of history in this idea of a national identity – then and now? And does this mean that colonialism happened and is now over? State and territory actions upon, against and in exclusion of Indigenous Australians are not actions that can be positioned as past discriminations; they continue today and are a direct result of those that preceded them.

Throughout his address, Nelson emphasises the progressiveness of “today” and how that owes its success to the “past”: “In doing so, we reach from within ourselves to our past, those whose lives connect us to it and in deep understanding of its importance to our future”. By relying on a dichotomous approach – us and them, white and black, past and present – Nelson emphasises the distance between this generation of Australia and any momentary unjust actions in the past. The belief is that time moves on – away from the past and towards the future. That advancement, progression and civilisation are linear movements, all heading towards a more enlightened state. “We will be at our best today – and every day – if we pause to place ourselves in the shoes of others, imbued with the imaginative capacity to see this issue through their eyes with decency and respect”. But where is the recognition that today’s experiences, the results of what has been created by the past, are also attached to the need to offer an apology? Nelson’s “we” (Anglo-Australians) are being asked to stop and think about how “they” (Aborigines) might see things differently to the mainstream norm. The implication here also is that “they” – members of the Stolen Generations – must be prepared to understand the position white Australia is coming from, and acknowledge the good that white Australia has achieved.

Anglo-Australian pride and achievement is reinforced throughout the address as the basis on which our national identity is understood. Ignoring its exclusion and silencing
of the Indigenous Australians to whom his “sorry” is directed, Nelson perpetuates this ideology here in his address: “In brutally harsh conditions, from the small number of early British settlers our non Indigenous ancestors have given us a nation the envy of any in the world”. This gift of a nation where there was none before disregards the acts of invasion, segregation, protection and assimilation that characterise the colonisation of this nation. It also reverts to romanticised settler notions of triumph over great adversities – a notion that could just as easily be attached to Indigenous Australians yet Nelson specifically addresses “our non Indigenous ancestors”. He does add “But Aboriginal Australians made involuntary sacrifices, different but no less important, to make possible the economic and social development of our modern [my emphasis] Australia.” Indigenous Australians certainly made voluntary sacrifices, similar to and different from those made by non Indigenous Australians (Indigenous Australians also went to both World Wars and fought for this nation) and a great deal of “our modern” country’s economic success was achieved on the backs of Blackfellas (Taylor 9). But “involuntary sacrifices” is surely a contradiction in terms, either intellectually shoddy or breathtakingly disingenuous. To make a sacrifice is to do it voluntarily, to give something up for a greater good. “Involuntary sacrifices”, like “collateral damage” and other calculatedly cold-blooded euphemisms, conveniently covers up the question of who was doing what to whom – of who was sacrificed, and by whom.

In the attempt to construct a basis of equal contribution between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, as well as equal acts of struggle and triumphing, Nelson’s account of history and nation building draws from the positioning of the oppressors but tries to suppress any notion of racial oppression. It maintains the separateness of Indigenous experiences of colonisation from the colonisers themselves. His reiteration that these occasional acts of unjustness came from benevolent and charitable white Australians privileges non-Indigenous ways of knowing and doing over Indigenous ones and attempts to present them as untainted and innate as opposed to repressive, discriminatory and racist.

We honour those in our past who have suffered and all those who have made sacrifices for us by the way we live our lives and shape our nation. Today we recommit to do so – as one people. (Nelson)

The political need to identify as “one people” drives assimilation policies (the attitude at the very heart of removing Aboriginal children on the basis that they were Aboriginal and needed to be absorbed into one society of whites). By honouring everyone, and therefore taking the focus off any act of unjustness by non-Indigenous peoples on Indigenous peoples, Nelson’s narrative again upholds an idea of contemporary national identity that has not only romanticised the past but ignores the inequalities of the present day. He spends a good few hundred words reminding his listeners that white Australia deserves to maintain its hard won position. And there is no doubt he is talking to white Australia – his focus is on Western constructs of patriotism and success. He reverts to settler/colonial discourse to uphold ideas of equity and access:

These generations considered their responsibilities to their country and one another more important than their rights. They did not buy something until they had saved up for it and values were always more important than value. Living in considerably more difficult times, they had dreams for our nation but little money. Theirs was a mesh of values enshrined in God, King and Country and the belief in
something greater than yourself. Neglectful indifference to all they achieved while seeing their actions in the separations only, through the values of our comfortable, modern Australia, will be to diminish ourselves.

In “the separations only…” highlights Nelson’s colonial logic, which compartmentalises time, space, people and events and tries to disconnect one colonial act from another. The ideology, attitudes and policies that allowed the taking of Indigenous children were not separate from all other colonial and colonising acts and processes. The desire for a White Australia, a clear cut policy which was in existence at the same time as protection, removal and assimilation policies, cannot be disassociated from either the taking of children or the creation of this "comfortable, modern Australia” today. "Neglectful indifference to all they achieved” could aptly be applied to Indigenous peoples throughout Australian history – pre and post invasion. Where is the active acknowledgment of the denial of Indigenous rights so that “these generations [of non-Indigenous Australians could] consider their responsibilities to their country and one another more important than their rights”? Nelson adheres to the colonialist national narrative to focus on the “positive”, which Patrick Wolfe has argued in his critique of settler colonialism, is an attempt to mask disruptive moments that reveal the scope of state and national power over Aboriginal Australians (33).

After consistently reinforcing the colonial/settler narrative, Nelson’s address moves on to insert Indigenous Australians into a well-defined and confined space within a specific chapter of that narrative. His perfunctory overview of the first seven decades of the 20th century alludes to Protection Boards and Reserves, assimilation policies and Christianisation, all underlined with white benevolence. Having established the innocent, inherently humane and decent motivations of “white families”, he resorts to appropriating Indigenous people’s stories and experiences. In the retelling of these stories, two prominent themes in Nelson’s text become apparent. White fellas were only trying to help the poor Blackfella back then, and one need only glance at Aboriginal communities today to see that white fellas are only trying to help the poor Blackfella again.

It is reasonably argued that removal from squalor led to better lives – children fed, housed and educated for an adult world of [sic] which they could not have imagined. However, from my life as a family doctor and knowing the impact of my own father’s removal from his unmarried teenaged mother, not knowing who you are is the source of deep, scarring sorrows the real meaning of which can be known only to those who have endured it. No one should bring a sense of moral superiority to this debate in seeking to diminish the view that good was being sought to be done. (Nelson)

A sense of moral superiority is what motivates colonisation: it is what motivated the enforced removal of children. The reference to “removal from squalor” is somewhat reminiscent of the 1909 Aborigines Protection Act. Act No. 25, 1909, section 11(1) which states:

The board may, in accordance with and subject to the provisions of the Apprentices Act, 1901, by indenture bind or cause to be bound the child of any aborigine, or the neglected child of any person
Neglect was often defined as simply being Aboriginal. The representation that being removed would lead to a better life relies on Western attitudes about society and culture. It dismisses any notion of Indigenous rights to be Indigenous and defines a better life according to how white society views it. Throughout most of the 1900s, Aboriginal children that were removed to experience this better life were trained in positions of servants. Nelson’s inclusion of his own personal experience as a non-Indigenous Australian who has experienced loss and sorrow sustains his textual purpose to reduce human experiences to a common ground, an equal footing – to make all injustices equal. And he finishes the paragraph off with the subtle reminder that this “sorry” is only for “those” Aboriginal Australians that were removed in the first seven decades of last century.

After retelling the experience of one Indigenous person as told to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, he retells the experience of an Indigenous woman as told to a non-Indigenous man. The appropriate protocols concerning the re-using of Indigenous knowledge and intellectual copyright appeared to be absent in this address. Not only does the individual remain unacknowledged but the potential for misappropriating Indigenous experiences for non-Indigenous purposes is apparent. The insertion of the story dismisses the importance of the original act of telling, and the significance of the unspeakable through decades of silence. Felman presents the complexities of the survivor’s tale: “the victim’s story has to overcome not just the silence of the dead but the indelible coercive power of the oppressor’s terrifying, brutal silencing of the surviving, and the inherent speechless silence of the living in the face of an unthinkable, unknowable, ungraspable event” (227). In telling this story Nelson unravelled the foundation of equality he had attempted to resurrect. And his indication towards current happenings in the Northern Territory only served to further highlight the inequities that Indigenous peoples continue to face, resist and surpass. Nelson’s statement that “separation was then, and remains today, a painful but necessary part of public policy in the protection of children” is another reminder of the “indelible coercive power of the oppressor’s terrifying” potential to repeat history.

The final unmasking of the hypocritical and contested nature of Nelson’s national ideology and narrative is in his telling of the “facts” – the statistics concerning Indigenous life expectancy, Indigenous infant mortality rates, “diabetes, kidney disease, hospitalisation of women from assault, imprisonment, overcrowding, educational underperformance and unemployment”. These statistics are a result not of what Nelson terms “existential aimlessness” (immediately preceding paragraph) but of colonisation – theft of land, oppression, abuse, discrimination, and lack of any rights whether citizenship or Aboriginal. These contemporary experiences of Indigenous peoples are the direct linear result of the last two hundred years of white nation building.
The address is concluded with mention of Neville Bonner, portrayed here as the perfect example of what reading, writing, expressing yourself with dignity and treating people with decency and courtesy can achieve. Bonner is presented as the ‘ideal’ Blackfella, a product of the assimilation period: he could read and write and was dignified, decent and courteous (and, coincidentally, Liberal). The inclusion of this reference to Bonner in the address may hint at the “My best friend is an Aborigine” syndrome (Heiss 71), but it also provides a discursive example to the listener of the ways in which ‘equalness’ is suggested, assumed, privileged or denied. It is a reminder, in the same vein of Patten and Ferguson’s fights for rights, that what is equal has always been apparent to the colonised.

Nelson quotes Bonner’s words that “[unjust hardships] can only be changed when people of non Aboriginal extraction are prepared to listen, to hear what Aboriginal people are saying and then work with us to achieve those ends”. The need for non-Indigenous Australians to listen, to be shaken out of their complacent equalness appears to have gone unheard. Fiumara, in her philosophy of listening, states: “at this point the opportunity is offered for becoming aware that the compulsion to win is due less to the intrinsic difficulty of the situation than to inhibitions induced by a non-listening language that prevents us from seeing that which would otherwise be clear” (198). It is this compulsion to win, or to at least not be seen to be losing that contributes to the unequalness of this particular “sorry” and the need to construct an equal footing. This particular utterance of sorry does not come from an acknowledged place of difference and its attached history of colonisation; instead it strives to create a foundation based on a lack of anyone being positioned on the high moral ground. It is an irony that pervades the address considering it was the coloniser’s belief in his/her moral superiority that took the first child to begin with.

Nelson’s address attempts to construct the utterance of “sorry”, and its intended meaning in this specific context, on ‘equal’ ground: his representation is that we are all Australians, “us” and ‘them’ combined, “we” all suffered and made sacrifices; “we” all deserve respect and equal acknowledgment of the contribution “we” all made to this “enviable” nation. And therein lies the unequalness, the inequality, the injustice, of this particular “sorry”. This particular “sorry” is born from and maintains the structures, policies, discourses and language that led to the taking of Indigenous children in the first place. In his attempt to create a “sorry” that drew equally from the “charitable” as well as the “misjudged” deeds of white Australia, Nelson’s “We Are Sorry – Address to Parliament” increased the experiences of inequality. Chow writes that in the politics of admittance the equal depends on “acceptance by permission … and yet, being ‘admitted’ is never simply a matter of possessing the right permit, for validation and
acknowledgment must also be present for admittance to be complete” (36-37).

References


