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## NEXT?

*We have had sufficient audacity of faith to advance a pathway to that future, with arms extended rather than with fists still clenched. So let us seize the day. Let it not become a moment of mere sentimental reflection.* Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.  
Apology to Indigenous Australians, 13 February 2008

I reached across the table to the tall dark handsome young man on the other side of the mosaic we were working on, at the Aboriginal Embassy.

“Sorry” I said. He smiled and took my hand.

“New world,” I said. His hold on my hand strengthened and stayed. He smiled and said, “Yes.”

“Where are you from?” I asked. “Moree,” he said.

“Moree is a hard place,” I said.

“Yes, Moree is a very hard place. That's why I'm here in Canberra,” he said.

The Shoalhaven is a hard place too.

- Hard for indigenous people trapped in poverty and in the shellacked wisdoms of generations of imposed policies of welfare, or shell-backed with ingrained hatred or despair.
- Hard for those people who, in the words of Barack Obama, “would seek, under whatever flag or slogan or sacred text, a certainty and simplification that justifies cruelty towards those not like us.”
- Hard for all decent people who hesitate to know where to start on an intractable issue, to know whom to embrace, what way to express regard or care, how to act in any concrete way.

In the Prime Minister's wonderful, urgent and necessary speech to the parliament on 13 February there are, alas, seeds of new problems. He said:

Let us resolve today to begin with the little children, a fitting place to start on this day of apology for the stolen generations. Let us resolve over the next five years to have every indigenous four-year-old in a remote Aboriginal community enrolled in and attending a proper early childhood education centre ...

Who has determined this priority, what is this word 'proper'? I asked this question on Radio National a year ago:

“What happens if you dump a national literacy test on kids like this [in remote communities]? How can it respect the fact that they arrive at school to learn English (as most likely a third language), to learn our world view as so contrary to their own deeply-rooted sense of country, of symbol, of meaning.”

Why didn't the Prime Minister say: “we will change school systems to support and respect all cultures, especially indigenous culture, so that when a tiny child comes to school it is meaningful and supportive of the core of their lives and does not demand rejection of culture and assimilation to another man's good design”? Didn't he know in some places they still are told not to speak their own languages in schools? Didn't he think about it? Didn't he know that the best and brightest out there can go off to secondary boarding schools and often run home, just weeks later?

The focus of the rhetoric, in any case, was still on remote communities, not on the young man from Moree or the Koori woman in Shoalhaven who said to me half a year ago: “I am sick of hearing about all these remote communities, don't they see what we face?”

The Prime Minister went on to say “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. “ We wait to see how indigenous people are to be represented, to have elected representatives. Locally, we need to be sensitive to what Aboriginal people want. Even a very materially generous white man, late at night – indeed last night, as I write this – can say: “What our [Koori] friends have to learn is...” Sorry mate, no, start again please.

In just the immediate region of Nowra there are four different Koori mobs: Jerrinja at Orient Point, the mixed-origin population in Nowra, Wreck Bay and Injagunji in Tomerong. They evade the sight of most. How are these communities to work out their differences among themselves and among themselves, the Koori people, and to have “.. *sufficient audacity of faith to advance a pathway to [the] future?*” How are they enabled to have the audacity, courage, hope, space and time to find strength together... rather than be called into political offices and told how the white world knows the best, how the white world will intervene—with either smiles, schools or police.

When people campaign to keep Huskisson unchanged are they aware of the grand irony? Have they read Auntie Jean's words:

“The history of Wreck Bay is that Aboriginal fishing families that lived around Huskisson were getting more fish than the other local fishermen and there were such mutterings and complaints about that that our people were brought out to Wreck Bay, and a school was established there. [Note again the first imposed priority: “Let us resolve today to begin with the little children.”] It was a government policy to move the Aboriginal families.”<sup>1</sup>

Sorry about losing your home brother...

Sorry not enough? Take it to the Land and Environment Court maybe, brother? Sorry. Can't.

On 12 February The Australian reported that “the Prime Minister ... was confident the apology would not trigger a frenzy of litigation.” How soon does he say this after, in his poll victory speech on 24 November, heaping praise on Bernie Banton for his courageous fight for compensation for asbestos victims. It seems a popular wisdom to suggest that the dispossessed lack financial wisdom, waste their money, are unfit for personal compensation benefits and should accept nobly the expertly designed community projects proposed by the enlightened successful. In Sweden Kylie's swimsuit is auctioned to buy cows for women in Asia. Some people know how to spend wisely.

Clack, clack, clack go the dominoes of decency. Can we, for a moment, take all our dominoes and cards off the table and ask this Aboriginal man and that Aboriginal woman if they would like time to explain their world, their needs, first of all to each other, to us later if they wish, with some expectation of a future different?

Aboriginal Australia exists here in the Shoalhaven, there will indeed be more of it with a gaol and the following families coming to Nowra. Aboriginal Australia exists around us in depressed and traumatised lives, in a raped civilisation, a denied Dreamtime. It will not become detraumatized or given place or space by hastening the assimilation of small children, any more now than in the past.

To all Koori friends we say “Sorry” and say “Have audacious courage, faith and hope. Work it out brothers and sisters, tell each other your dreams, your fears, your needs and jokes. Take your time, this is too urgent to bugger up. Tell us when you want us to come up your road to learn your understanding.” To Gubba [white] readers we ask: find a dark hand, shake it, mean it.

*...we see our indigenous brothers and sisters with fresh eyes, with new eyes, and we have our minds wide open as to how we might tackle, together, the great practical challenges that Indigenous Australia faces in the future. Let us turn this page together: indigenous and non-indigenous Australians...* Kevin Rudd, 13 February 2008

1 Jean Carter “A Big Dose of Social Justice.” *Steppin' Out and Speakin' Up*” Older Women's Network, 2003, p 57.