



## **The Hon. Kevin Rudd MP**

### **Reconciliation SA Breakfast on the Fifth Anniversary of the Apology to the Stolen Generations.**

#### **The Apology – 5 Years On**

13 February 2013

Adelaide Convention Centre, Adelaide

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Thank you for those very warm, South Australian words of welcome.

It's good to be back here in this wonderful part of Australia.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the first Australians on whose land we meet and whose cultures we celebrate as the oldest continuing culture in human history.

I acknowledge in particular the members of the Stolen Generation. Those whose lives have been indelibly affected by the atrocity of that experience.

I acknowledge others who are here representing various levels of Government. To Ian, my good friend and newly appointed Minister. I've known this bloke for the better part of 20 years. He's a good man and you are well served by having him as the Minister responsible for this important portfolio.

To the Leader of the State Opposition, I acknowledge your presence here this morning as well, as the business of reconciliation transcends any political divide in this country.

Mention was made just now of that day 5 years ago.

I've met some people here this morning who I last met at the Apology. I just met and spent some time with Aunty Martha from up near Lake Eyre. And she has some photographs from that morning.

It was an important morning.

I remember asking the Minister the previous day this question: "When the Stolen Generation representatives come to Parliament, where are they coming in?" To which the answer was, "Well they're coming in like people normally do, through the public entrance."

My response was that I think it's their day. It's a very special day. I want them to come through the ceremonial entrance where we meet foreign Heads of Government and foreign Heads of State.

And so they did.

It was a nervous few moments.

It was one of those strange, Canberra February mornings where the Canberra weather gods had already declared "summer's over" and there was a bit of a mist around.

And as Stolen Generation members arrived at the Ministerial forecourt leading to the ceremonial entrance which is adjacent to the Prime Minister's office, there was this terrible, terribly long pause as Therese, my wife, and I stood there. Members of the Stolen Generation were 100 metres removed with no one quite understanding what the protocol is for such occasions. So having been bought up in the Queensland school of protocol which, as you know, is a contradiction in terms, I yelled out, "Aye, come on over, come to our place."

And there it began.

And the tears flowed.

Five years later the tears continue to flow.

I said to Aunty Martha before, there was an elderly Aboriginal woman who I remember particularly that morning who I embraced. I gave her a big kiss on the cheek and said, "Come through this way, I'll look after you and show you where to go." And she told Therese afterwards, this would be a woman in her 70s, that I was the first white fella ever to give her a kiss.

That hurt.

It should never have been the case.

I met also someone here this morning who found out only last year that her mum was one of the Stolen Generation. Her mum is alive and she's 93.

And so the story continues.

And someone else I met here this morning introduced herself by saying, "I'm third generation, Stolen Generation."

The depth and the breadth and, frankly, the dimensions of pain which has riveted its way through families over so many decades is something which white fellas like myself can understand, but never understand. Because it was not my experience.

People often ask me, "How did you prepare for the Apology?" To which my answer, honestly, is, "I read the briefs, then threw them in the bin." Wonderfully executed, beautifully drafted, bureaucratic briefs. But sterile.

I could only begin to think about what it was like to be a member of the Stolen Generation when I sat down with a lady I refer to in the speech, Nanna Nungala Fejo and spent the better part of the morning, very unusually for a politician, shutting up and just listening.

And I just listened to her tell this story with great humour and great grace.

This was only a few days before the Apology. Not a word had been written.

It was only then that I could go back to the Prime Minister's study in The Lodge and take out a pen and begin.

Begin writing.

I didn't finish writing until ten to nine that morning. The Apology began at 9. In fact after I greeted you, Aunty Martha, I hadn't finished the speech. That was at 8:30. You held me up.

I remember Anthony Albanese, the Leader of Government Business, coming in at 8:45.

Efficient.

Effective.

First day of the Parliament.

He looked at me and said, "Ok mate, off we go." And he looked at me and said, "Gosh, you haven't finished it yet!"

"Well it's got to be right, mate. It's got to be right."

By right, I mean not just the words have to be right but, for any apology to be effective, whether it's in your lives as human beings dealing with other human beings in your family or in your neighbourhood or in your community around the world, if you're going to reconcile with somebody, the words have to be real.

Not made up.

Not perfected.

They have to be real, first experience. Therefore, then as the Prime Minister of Australia but also as a white, Australian male, as someone whose forbears came here eight generations ago and therefore being part of European occupation of this country, I had an obligation as a white Australian male to tender an apology. Just as I had a responsibility then as a Prime Minister, being ultimately responsible for the nation's laws – both Commonwealth and State – to also tender an apology.

The words were important. And that was an important day.

I'm conscious though that the words of that Apology were one thing.

But what is the great miracle of the Apology?

Not that I wrote a speech, not that I stood up and delivered it and I managed to do so without dissolving into tears.

The miracle of the Apology was this: that our Aboriginal brothers and sisters accepted it.

That's the miracle of the Apology.

For had many of us European arrivals been treated the way our Indigenous brothers and sisters had been treated, not just for a few decades, but for a couple of centuries, I'm not so sure that, had that been me, I would have found it in my heart to say, "OK, apology accepted. Where do we go from here?"

So to you good members of the Stolen Generation and to all Indigenous Australians here today, and the families and communities that you represent, I would simply say this to you today, 5 years on: thank you for the grace with which you received the Apology.

I'm deeply conscious of the fact that this Apology is one part of a long history of reconciliation and attempts at reconciliation in this country.

Here in South Australia you began the process earlier than in fact anywhere else.

In 1966, when I had barely begun primary school and was just graduating to my first pair of shoes which in Queensland remained optional, there was a young Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the fair state of South Australia who introduced into the Parliament of South Australia a piece of legislation called the Aboriginal Lands Right Act. And he did so with the following words:

*This Bill takes a significant step forward the treatment of Aboriginal people not only in this State but in Australia. The Aboriginal people of this country are the only comparable Indigenous people who have been given no civic rights in their own lands. The Aboriginal Lands Trust proposal is an important measure not only from the*

*point of view of the development of Aborigines in South Australia, but from the point of view of the moral stature of the South Australian people as a whole.*

Of course that young man, that young Minister back in 1966, was your very own Don Dunstan.

Think about that – one year before the 1967 referendum.

Think about that – a decade before the Commonwealth Parliament legislated the Northern Territory Rights Act.

Think about that – a quarter of a century before the Native Title Act.

Think about it again – more than forty years before that young lad in short pants back then, later as Prime Minister of Australia, stood up to deliver the Apology to the first Australians and to the Stolen Generation in particular.

So on this great enterprise called Reconciliation, here in Adelaide, on this fifth anniversary of the Apology, I publicly salute the record, achievement and prophetic voice of one Don Dunstan.

*\*Applause\**

Five years on it is important to ask ourselves the basic ethical question: what has changed?

It's an important question.

As I said in the Apology itself, unless the words are accompanied by deeds, the Apology will be recorded in history as a flashy symbol, a sounding gong and nothing more.

As I reflect back therefore on what has been achieved, a number of things come to mind.

Firstly, it was no small thing to finally have all Australians conclude the time for the Apology had come.

Governments had prevaricated and some had refused altogether, but the idea and its time had come.

I've got to say to you though, as I stood up to deliver the Apology, I had no idea how it would be received by other Australians. No idea whatsoever.

And coming from the great State otherwise called The People's Republic of Queensland, the State which has almost been as progressive as yours – that's irony by the way – I was instinctively expecting a significant, indeed a racist, reaction.

What is really interesting is, despite the internal debates within the Federal Coalition at the time, despite what many had criticised as the content of Brendan Nelson's speech, he did offer bipartisan support.

I grabbed his hand in the House of Representatives, much to his surprise, and in a completely unprepared set of actions, said, "Ok mate, we're going off to formally pay our respects to the most senior representatives of the Indigenous community here in the Reps, and we're going to take this gift which they have formally presented to us and present it to the Speaker of the Parliament."

I thought once you had bipartisan support for the Apology, it was important to bottle it.

And that's what we did.

And the miracle of the Apology among white Australians was this.

I spoke to a family not long ago in Brisbane. As they drove back from Canberra that day to Brisbane, via the inland highway up the New England, they stopped at a country town, one of those great traditional cafes.

Lines of booths up by the side.

Hadn't been changed since 1936.

And they walked in, a pretty conservative part of New South Wales. At about lunchtime the crowd was gathered to get their pies and peas and whatever else, their floaters. And to a person, to a man and to a woman, those in the cafe stood up and applauded these Indigenous Australians, driving back and stopping temporarily in their town.

So I think one thing that's been achieved is that some of the hardest of hardened in white Australia I think were finally, finally broken.

The other thing which I think happened and which very few people in this country were conscious of, including me, was that with the Apology, as we looked around the world, I don't think many of us realised that the world was also watching.

As I then travelled across Europe, Asia and the United States I was literally bowled over by the number of Heads of Government around the world who had watched it live.

You see, the funny thing is this: you know how we Australians see ourselves as this great land of the fair go? We've always seen ourselves that way – that Jack is always as good as his master. All that sort of thing. We in the Labor movement believe these things particularly deeply. Particularly seriously.

The rest of the world knew that image as well, but in their mind they had something lurking back there which they could never quite sort out or understand about these fun-loving,

freedom-loving, fair go Australians – why Indigenous Australians, still, in the 21st century are being treated as second and third class citizens.

It has always remained, I believe, a shadow on this country's global standing.

And the world looked and said, “Good god, these guys have finally woken up.” They have finally woken up.

That I think is a second change which has been achieved. As we campaigned around the world to become members of the United Nations Security Council in recent years, the Apology was bought up time and time again, across Africa, across Latin America, across Asia and across Europe.

The third thing from the Apology is the change in Aboriginal Australia itself. Some said to me, “Surely an apology is simply a symbolic and emotional statement?”

Well, I can understand that criticism. But if you have wronged somebody in your personal life, in your family or beyond, you can't simply one day walk in the door and say, “Ok, what are we going to do today?”

There is some emotional business to transact.

You have to go to that person, acknowledge what you have done wrong to them, and apologise.

That's not a symbol. That's actually a transaction of something profound and deeply emotional which is part of our lives.

So when people legitimately asked then what has changed in a material sense because of the Apology, a whole program of Closing the Gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal life expectancy, education, opportunities, health opportunities, housing and employment frankly was always going to be held back until we'd done this fundamental business of constructing the bridge of reconciliation through the Apology.

Something I've found is my Aboriginal brothers and sisters around the country with hands outstretched to me because we had stretched out our hands to them as well.

The Apology, therefore, was something of a leap of faith. Not knowing how white Australia, Indigenous Australia or the world for that matter was going to react.

But five years on the core question remains what about the practical objectives we set for ourselves with Closing the Gap.

I think there are probably three pillars to the business of reconciliation.

Number one, the emotional business of the Apology and, when we say emotional, I emphasise again it is not therefore by definition trivial; it is fundamental.

Second, is the business of the laws of the nation. Laws have been enacted concerning Aboriginal land rights but the important law is being debated in the nation's capital today on constitutional recognition of the first Australians.

It is to me unbelievable that here we are in the year 2013 and we still do not in our foundational legal document recognise the fact that the concept of *terra nullius* was a nonsense.

And is a nonsense.

And will forever be a nonsense.

That when we came nearly 200 years ago, a twinkle in the eye of God and time and space, that for tens of thousands of years before that Indigenous Australians had made this vast continent their home.

And surely, it is not beyond our wit and wisdom as a people to finally reflect that in the foundational, constitutional document of the nation.

And so when the Prime Minister speaks on this today in Canberra and on the unanimous recommendation of the Select Joint Committee on the Constitutional Recognition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, she will conclude the debate on the Act of Recognition Bill. The Bill that I am advised will pass through the House of Representatives. I am also advised, and I hope my advice is correct, with unanimous support.

And so while I am here today with you celebrating this fifth anniversary, let us reflect on what the Prime Minister is doing and what others are doing in the Parliament of the Nation in passing this Act of national legislature.

The Apology is the first pillar of reconciliation.

The laws of our nation are the second pillar, including its foundation, the constitution.

The third, and I return to this thing again as I draw my remarks to a close, is Closing the Gap.

If you read the Apology statement the last third deals with these specific objective: how do we close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous opportunity and outcome in this country in the key things that matter?

In early childhood education.

In literacy and numeracy achievements in our schools.

In year 12 retention rates.

In health outcomes for Indigenous children.

In infant mortality rates and in life expectancy, longevity.

If you read the Apology Statement it lays out six of these. In clear cut terms. In timelines by which they are to be achieved.

The other thing I did was commit my successors to an annual Closing the Gap statement to the National Parliament requiring the Prime Minister of the day to assemble the data and to report on whether these targets have been met or not.

To celebrate our successes but equally importantly, honestly to admit where we have failed so that we can regroup as a nation, as a community and as a country, Commonwealth, States and Local Government and attend to this foundational business of the nation.

The good news is that against those targets we have set we are either meeting or on track to meet four or five of those six.

One example: early childhood education. In 2008 I said that by 2013 every Indigenous four-year-old in this country will have access to universal early childhood education in the country. Not just in urban centres, not just in regional centres but in remote communities as well.

This year, we deliver on that target.

With the others, the picture is improving but still with a huge distance to travel.

The one where we are failing at present is with literacy and numeracy. Where the data for years 3, 5, 7 and 9 collected nationally through the NAPLAN system which we, the Australian Government, also established, shows that we are barely maintaining where we were before and in some cases falling back.

In the spirit of the openness of the Apology we must equally, openly recognise where we are failing, regroup and work out what to do next.

I spoke about this in some detail at a breakfast like this at the State Government House in Sydney last week.

Today I want to add one thing to those observations.

The future of our nation lies in the education of its people. That is why three of those six targets concerning Closing the Gap deal with education of Indigenous Australians.

Getting the littlies when they are little.

Making sure that kids know how to read and write; to add up and take away.

To make sure that they are leaving year 12 with year 12 retention rates and university admission levels comparable to any other Australian.

And then, off to vocational education and training and to university itself.

But my message here today in Adelaide is that the next frontier in Closing the Gap is universities.

We must as a nation see the same number of Indigenous kids at our universities proportional to their size and population of Australia and at present they are not.

Aboriginal Australians represent some 2.5 per cent of our national population. The Indigenous participation at universities is barely at 1.2/1.3 per cent – about half.

We need to make up the difference.

And when I am talking about making up the difference, I am talking about adding something in the order of another ten thousand Indigenous students to the nation's universities.

Why is this important?

You know as well as I know that futures are made often, but not always, through leadership delivered by the skills and the love of learning and the ability to think and the ability to lead driven through the experiences at our universities of our nation.

I'm the kid who's a product of the Whitlam revolution.

Neither of my parents ever got much past primary school.

Really.

Rural Queensland.

Rural Australia.

Whitlam made it possible for the likes of me to go to university.

But a couple of generations after Gough let me tell you our ambition must be for Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islander Australians to be in our universities in equal numbers. For it not to be something exotic. It has to be something mainstream.

So my humble suggestion today as the bloke who authored the first six of these Closing the Gap targets is that we should think now about adding a seventh. And that is a Closing the Gap target that says that we as Australians will achieve the same representation in our universities for Aboriginal Australians that is the case now for non-Aboriginal Australians. And that means doubling where it is today.

\*Applause\*

Someone said the timeline to do that is as long as 2030. I find that excessively pessimistic, though that is in an expert report delivered by the Government last year. I think we should be able to bring it forward.

But more importantly, bring its responsibilities into our universities, to our Vice-Chancellors as part of their compact with the Commonwealth Government of the time.

If we set ourselves these targets, if we are committed to their realisation then, guess what folks, we as a nation are smart enough to get there.

And my dream for the future of this nation is that we see this army of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates about our leading universities across all the disciplines, entering into leading positions right across the professions of this nation.

And, for the rest of the Closing the Gap targets, becoming leaders in their own communities across the nation to turning concepts into reality.

Turning targets into reality.

That is why this university achievement and aspiration and target I believe are so important.

So folks, there you have it five years on.

An apology.

The laws of the nation.

Closing the Gap in education in our universities.

This is the stuff of what I believe reconciliation and its long term journey are about.

We as a nation have in our soul some very good spirits. We are a nation committed to values of freedom, of a fair go, of creativity, of enterprise and of inclusion.

That's who we are as Australians.

And we'll be marked in the pages on the pages of history about whether we can close this chapter successfully or not.

The reconciliation of all Australians including our first Australians.

I thank you.