

AFTER THE APOLOGY

A year after Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised to the Stolen Generations, wounds remain WORDS CHANTAL ABITBOL

Stolen Generations member Patrick Tilmouth listened with satisfaction last February when newly elected Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd offered his landmark apology over the pain and suffering caused to him and other Aboriginals forcibly removed from their homes.

But a year on, Tilmouth says the Government has failed to turn the gesture into a commitment for change by resisting calls for compensation.

"I feel cheated again," says Tilmouth, 53, from Alice Springs, who was taken from his family when he was just eight months old.

"We've lost everything; we don't fit back where we come from. I'd like the Government to take some sort of notice."

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Demanding state and federal governments make good on the apology, Stolen Generations Victoria (SGV) recently released its *Unfinished Business* report, with 12 recommendations to address the needs of the Stolen Generations. It includes a national reparations scheme that would entail monetary compensation, funding for education, health and land, and assistance to return to ancestral lands.

The plan would be similar to the 2006 Stolen Generations Fund introduced in Tasmania – the



Gwenda Stanely and Rita Shillingworth listen to the apology in Canberra



Joan Baker listens in Sydney as the Government apologises



Crowds gather in Melbourne to hear Prime Minister Rudd say sorry

first state to allocate \$5 million as compensation.

"The apology was long overdue and very much appreciated, but there are still many issues that haven't been addressed," SGV chairperson Lyn Austin says. "Now we have to see real action."

Unfinished Business, written after 200 members of the Stolen Generations and their families were consulted, has sided against pushing for personal injury claims – such as in the case of South Australia's Bruce Trevorrow – calling it "too long, complex and emotionally destructive for the majority of members".

In 2007 Trevorrow became the first member of the Stolen Generations to successfully sue for compensation, receiving \$525,000. He has since died, and the South Australia Government is appealing the decision.

Austin says many of the report's requests echo the original 54 recommendations made in the *Bringing Them Home* report released more than 10 years ago after a national inquiry into the practice of removing children.

"Our members are dying and still nothing

has been done to ease their pain late in life," Austin points out.

CALLS QUASHED

So far, the Government has knocked back calls for compensation. Last February Democrat senator Andrew Bartlett proposed the Stolen Generations Compensation Bill, calling for about \$20,000 for each member, which the Senate rejected.

Months later, the Greens introduced a similar bill seeking a broader reparations package which

is currently tabled in Parliament.

A spokeswoman for Tanya Plibersek, acting

“We’ve lost everything. I’d like the Government to take some sort of notice”

minister for indigenous affairs, says the Rudd Government doesn't support a compensation fund. Instead it's developing a health plan intended to help close the 17-year gap in life expectancy between indigenous people and other Australians.

"The national apology built an important bridge and established respect so that we could move on. We have an ambitious agenda through our Closing the Gap policy," she said.

TIME IS RUNNING OUT

For many members of the Stolen Generations time is running out to receive justice, says Jackie Baxter, of Northern Territory Stolen Generations Alliance.

"Most of the people Rudd's apologised to are ready to die. A lot of people are paying for their own funerals in a pauper's grave," she says.

"How can you improve on their life other than compensating them and letting them die with dignity?"

Baxter says she would like the Government to follow through with the recommendations offered in the *Bringing Them Home* report.

She would also like to see a government-funded legacy project established to record members' oral histories.

"But most of all, I want the federal Government to come to the Northern Territory and talk to the Stolen Generations themselves to have some sort of dialogue."

Ultimately, she adds, no amount of money will ever right the wrongs of the past.

"You can't compensate for never having a mother or your brothers and sisters around you, or losing your language and cultural practices," she says. "Nothing is ever going to be compensated enough."



A SORRY TIMELINE

1910-1970: An estimated 10 to 33 per cent of Aboriginal children are forcibly removed from their families.

1997: *Bringing Them Home* report on the practice is released with 54 recommendations – including calls for reparations.

1997-2007: Then prime minister John Howard refuses to apologise to the Stolen Generations.

1998: On May 26 the first national Sorry Day is held as part of a campaign for an apology.

2008: On February 13 Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issues an official apology.