



# 'Words are cheap': ten years on, Mparntwe fears another Stolen Generation

By Amy Thomas  
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(1 Comment)

Ten years on from the Rudd government's apology to the Stolen Generations, there's a sense of history repeating in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). Marking the day, Aboriginal people and supporters gathered on the church lawns in the town's main mall to honour and remember their stolen loved ones.

Arrernte woman Sylvia Purrurle Neale is seventy-four years old, and a poet. She brought along photographs of her mother and father, Jessie Neale (nee Wong) and John Benjamin Neale, to place among a commemorative circle of loved ones, adorned with candles and flags in Aboriginal colours.

'It's still a very raw thing for people to talk about,' Sylvia says. 'Over there you'll see a photograph of my Mum and my Dad, one from the centre and one from the Top End, both who were taken away. And still if you ask me to tell you the story, or my sister, Jennifer and Ruby, we find it hard to talk about and we always have ... the effect of taking the children away from their families, it's horrendous, and it stays with them, generation after generation.'





Sylvia Purrurle Neale's parents (via Rollback Action Group)

When Rudd apologised, he resolved that 'the injustices of the past must never, never happen again' and promised 'a future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed.'

He spoke ten years after the *Bringing Them Home* report explained that by taking thousands of children from their families by force, the Australian state had done great harm to Aboriginal people, and had produced the contemporary alienation and poverty experienced by people whose family ties, culture and language had been undermined. The report emphasised the need for Aboriginal self-determination to avoid a repetition of history.

Around Mparntwe, hundreds of children were stolen and taken to compounds like The Bungalow and Jay Creek. Writing about the conditions at the Bungalow in 1937, then Minister of the Interior John McEwan wrote, 'I know many stock breeders who would not dream of crowding their stock in the way that these half-caste children are huddled.'

It wasn't until 1964 that the absolute right to take away children was repealed in law, and not until 1983 that the 'family placement principle' – the idea that Aboriginal children should be cared for by members of their family and cultural group – was entered in legislation.

*Meanjin* recently published an essay by former Labor Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin, celebrating her role in the apology and urging us all to 're-commit to dealing honestly with our past. Let's tell the truth.'

But it was the truth about the recent past that was glaringly absent from Macklin's piece. As Indigenous Affairs minister, she was responsible for stripping away what self-determination existed in the town camps and remote communities of the Northern Territory through the Intervention (originally known as the Northern Territory Emergency Response). 'Rather than learn from their mistakes, governments seem determined to repeat them,' observes Sylvia.

The Intervention's promise to improve the lives of children and young people in remote Aboriginal communities has resulted in exactly the opposite, and now children are being taken away at a rate *higher than during the Stolen*

CHILDREN ARE BEING TAKEN AWAY AT A RATE HIGHER THAN DURING THE STOLEN

Generations. The Intervention era has produced a three-fold increase in children in out-of-home-care in the NT. Despite making up less than three per cent of the population nationally, Aboriginal children account for a third of those in the child protection system.

Paddy Gibson has written elsewhere about how deliberate this policy approach has been, arguing that the 'mass forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families under the Northern Territory Intervention was planned, budgeted for, and executed under the leadership of Rudd and Macklin.'

In fact, the devastation wrecked during the Intervention era has brought about another apology in the NT – that of the Chief Minister, Michael Gunner, who apologised in late 2017 after the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory uncovered systemic mistreatment of children. The Commission found that many of the young people in prison, suffering inside places like the infamous Don Dale detention centre near Darwin, had been in out-of-home care – taken for their own 'protection', they ended up brutalised behind bars, facing tear gas, spit hoods, and solitary confinement.

Speaking in the NT parliament, Gunner said: 'It will live as a stain on the Northern Territory reputation. For this I am sorry. But more than this, I'm sorry for the stories that live in the children we failed.'

And yet, for all their apologies, both the federal and NT governments seem to be actively disregarding the bulk of the recommendations from the most recent Royal Commission. Just last week, the Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory condemned the Gunner government for undertaking a recruitment drive of foster carers at a Defence expo: 'This decision is insensitive and inconsistent with the recommendations from the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory and the NT Government's commitment to increasing Aboriginal Foster and Kinship Carers.'

Local traditional owner of Mparntwe, Margaret Furber, was taken from her family at the age of eight. 'It was heartbreaking because my brother and sister were taken from Alice to Crocker Island, and they were only two and four,' she says. 'Another sister was stolen straight from the hospital.'

For Margaret, there is much that's familiar today. 'Kids are being placed with non-Aboriginal families. Why aren't they looking at the Aboriginal families, and their connections, and their extended families?' she asks. 'This is what they did years ago. We had family, we could have gone to family, but they just removed us put us in care.'

Rarely do child protection workers understand the importance of cultural obligations, visiting country, or allowing extended family to play a role in raising children – both the *Bringing Them Home* report and the recent Royal Commission found that children are sometimes removed because of this racist ignorance and misunderstanding. The most commonly cited reason for removal – neglect – places the blame for poverty and low living standards on Aboriginal

people. But, as Sylvia argues, 'it's the underfunding of housing, infrastructure and the general problems of disempowerment that is the real neglect.'



Sylvia Purrule Neale addressing the commemoration event (via Rollback Action Group)

Only through the battle for land rights and self-determination that marked the end of the Protection era did Aboriginal people gain some control over their lives in the NT. But much of that has now been taken away. The BasicsCard controls day-to-day life and makes it harder for families to provide for themselves, while proper waged jobs are scarce after the abolition of the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) and its most recent replacement by a hyper-exploitative work-for-the-dole program, CDP. Aboriginal people fought for control of the Alice Springs town camps in the late 1970s, and for adequate government housing and infrastructure. But Tangentyere Council, who runs eighteen camps, was forced by Macklin to sign over the camps to government leases during the Intervention.

The assimilationist ideas that drove the Stolen Generation still live on in Aboriginal affairs, Sylvia says. 'The attitudes of paternalism, integration and assimilation have been the cornerstone of Australian colonisation. They began the minute the colonisers stepped onto the ground, and they continue.'

Doreen Carrol (nee McCormack) is a Western Arrernte woman. Many members of her family were stolen and taken to St Mary's children's village. Speaking on the Apology's anniversary, she asks, 'They are saying sorry, but what's the sorry for? ... I'm so angry – that we are still talking about this today. It's going on forever.'

Despite the Apology, real justice – and the truth – are still elusive, says Sylvia,

'Even though we hoped that it would never happen again, it is happening. Words are cheap ... sorry should mean you'll never do it again.'

*With special thanks to Meret MacDonald for additional research.*

*Lead image: crop from Sylvia Purrule Neale addressing the commemoration event (via Rollback Action Group).*

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## Comments

**From Hilary Tyler on 19 February 2018 at 11.23 am**

Thankyou for this article. As you say, the stolen generations are continuing. The underlying causes of systemic oppression, enforced poverty, and the nonchalant everyday racism of the child welfare system need to be acknowledged by everyone.

***Reply***

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