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Australia Says 'Sorry' to Aborigines for Mistreatment

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Abstract: Prime Min Kevin Rudd makes comprehensive and moving apology for past wrongs to Australia's indigenous people and calls for bipartisan action to improve lives of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders; apology is particularly addressed to so-called Stolen Generations, tens of thousands of indigenous children who were removed, sometimes forcibly, from their families in policy of assimilation that only ended in 1970s; for some, apology falls short because Rudd has ruled out setting up government funds to compensate victims for policies that led to Stolen Generations;

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd opened a new chapter in Australia's tortured relations with its indigenous peoples on Wednesday with a comprehensive and moving apology for past wrongs and a call for bipartisan action to improve the lives of Australia's Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

"The Parliament is today here assembled to deal with this unfinished business of the nation, to remove a great stain from the nation's soul, and in a true spirit of reconciliation to open a new chapter in the history of this great land, Australia," Mr. Rudd told Parliament.

This was "Government business, motion No. 1," the first act of Mr. Rudd's Labor government, which was sworn in Tuesday after a convincing electoral win over the 11-year administration of John Howard, who had for years refused to apologize for the misdeeds of past governments.

Mr. Rudd's apology was particularly addressed to the so-called Stolen Generations, the tens of thousands of indigenous children who were removed, sometimes forcibly, from their families in a policy of assimilation that only ended in the 1970s.

In some states it was part of a policy to "breed out the color," in the words of Cecil Cook, who held the title of chief protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory in the 1930s.

"We apologize especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country," Mr. Rudd said as hundreds of members of the Stolen Generations listened in the gallery, some with tears in their eyes. "For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry."

"To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry."

The 4-minute apology, and the 20-minute speech that followed, received a standing ovation both inside the chamber and from the hundreds gathered on the grounds of Parliament House in the capital, Canberra.

"I thought it was fantastic," said Kirstie Parker, the managing editor of the influential Aboriginal newspaper The Koori Mail.

She said that it was not just the apology that was important: Mr. Rudd recounted stories of the victims, Ms. Parker noted, bringing the reality of the misdeeds to light and publicly confronting those who deny what happened.

But for some people, Mr. Rudd's apology will not have gone far enough because he has ruled out setting up a government fund to compensate the victims of the policies that led to the Stolen Generations.

"There are many people who are saying that they must back this up with compensation," Ms. Parker said. "I get a distinct feeling among Aboriginal people that they feel that compensation is an absolute possibility, notwithstanding the prime minister's very vehement statement about not considering it."

The Howard government had refused to apologize, partially because it did not feel responsible for the misdeeds of past administrations, but also because it feared that the move could lead to sizable compensation claims.

Last year, a court in South Australia awarded 525,000 Australian dollars to Bruce Trevorrow, who was taken from his mother when he was a baby, for unlawful treatment and false imprisonment.

Mr. Howard's government had been criticized for an intervention in the Northern Territory that curtailed the rights of many indigenous communities, including quarantining half of welfare payments to ensure they were spent on food. Mr. Rudd's government has promised to review the intervention.

Mr. Rudd recognized that the apology itself was symbolic, and he asked the opposition to move beyond partisan politics.

Mr. Rudd suggested a "war cabinet" on indigenous policy led by himself and the opposition leader, Brendan Nelson of the Liberal Party. Mr. Nelson agreed.

And there are deep challenges. Many indigenous Australians live on the margins of society. Aboriginal life expectancy is 17 years shorter than for other Australians, indigenous unemployment runs three times the rate of the country as a whole and the incidence of crime and alcoholism is significantly higher in indigenous communities. Caption: PHOTO: A crowd outside Parliament listened to the apology read by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to the Aborigines of Australia.

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