

Rudd warns against a second 'stolen generation' by default

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Former prime minister Kevin Rudd has warned against the creation of a second “stolen generation” by default, on the eve of Malcolm Turnbull’s release of the 2017 Closing the Gap report on Tuesday.

Rudd called for more to be done to halt the increasing number of Indigenous children being removed from their families, and to ensure that those who had to be removed were placed appropriately.

In 2006, 6,497 Aboriginal children were in out-of-home care nationally. By mid-2015, the most recent data, this had risen to 15,432.

“We cannot simply stand back and let the numbers of indigenous children being removed grow year by year, without other options being tested within the wider indigenous community,” Rudd said in a speech marking the ninth anniversary of his national apology to the stolen generation.

“We do not want another generation of young Aboriginal children unnecessarily separated from their culture. We do not want to see the emergence of a second stolen generation, not by design, but by default.”

Among the long term trends shown in the 2017 Closing the Gap report are:

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significant improvements in the proportion of indigenous 20-24 year olds achieving year 12 or the equivalent

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no employment gap between indigenous and other Australians with tertiary qualifications

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improvements in health, with a significant decline in mortality rates, greater access to anti-natal care, reduced rates of smoking, reduction in mortality from chronic diseases and declining infant mortality

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improving reading and numeracy

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a significant increase in indigenous female employment over the longer term

But the government acknowledges there is insufficient national progress in Closing the Gap.

Marking Monday's anniversary of the apology, Turnbull told parliament that Rudd in particular had apologised for the policies that removed children from their families, communities and country.

"It's an apology that today we reaffirm and it's an apology that has echoed through the years and will echo for centuries to come," he said.

Looking ahead, "we know that acknowledgement is the seed from which hope and healing are sown."

"In that spirit we acknowledge the enormous strength and resilience of our First Australians who have overcome and are overcoming the disadvantage that was woven into their lives by policies like that."

"We acknowledge the mums and dads, the grandparents, the aunties and uncles, brothers and sisters who strove against overwhelming odds to find their lost children."

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“And we acknowledge the suffering of those little children crying for their mothers and their fathers and the warm embrace of kin.”

“We acknowledge the disruption to culture, the loss of language, the destruction of community, and above all we acknowledge the lifetime heartache that’s been endured by each child and each parent who suffered and continued to suffer,” Turnbull said.

“To all those families ... we acknowledge that you’re suffering cannot be healed by words alone, and so we commit ourselves again to address the disadvantage that has stemmed from those past policies.”

Rudd said the removal of any Aboriginal child must be a last resort.

Describing the numbers of removals as “chilling”, he said 32.9% of the 15,432 removed were not placed in accordance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle.

“That is, no Indigenous organisation was consulted, no extended family carer was found, no community carer was found. These kids were taken away.”

This was a difficult, delicate and complex area, he said, but “what is patently clear is that the focus across the board is not on early intervention. It is not based on prevention, obviating the need for a family to be broken up.”

“And when the removal of a child must occur, we also know that a third of such cases occur without recourse to a local indigenous community organisation to identify alternative placement options within the wider family, clan, or culture.”

Rudd acknowledged some work by the states was underway but called for commitment to a target.

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“Let’s see 100% of Indigenous kids placed within their wider family or indigenous community in accordance with the provisions of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle.”

“Let’s see the number of kids needing to be removed drop for the first time in a decade.”

“Let’s live up to the promise I made in the apology that this would never ever happen again.”

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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