‘Healing the heartbreak’?: the role of testimony in the Australian inquiry into the separation of Indigenous children from their families¹

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The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s (HREOC) inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families provided a forum for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and others to speak of their experiences of removal in a national public setting. The testimony provided to the inquiry fulfilled a number of functions and operated at a number of levels. The telling of individual stories of removal was important to Indigenous people in terms of representing their experience and contributed to a level of ownership of the inquiry by those who participated. David Frances, chairman of the Kimberley Stolen Generations Steering Committee, for example, explained that the report was important in telling the ‘true story’ of what happened to Indigenous people ‘because future generations will read it to understand what happened to us’.² In their work on Stolen Generations³ testimony, Rosanne Kennedy and Tikka Wilson point out that in the inquiry report, *Bringing Them Home*, testimony is used as evidence of the harms of removal, as part of the construction of a history of removal and as an address to the Australian community to solicit an active engagement from readers.⁴

1 Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia (ALSWA) 1996, *Telling Our Story: A report by the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia on the removal of Aboriginal children from their families in Western Australia*, July, Perth, p. v. I would like to thank Tim Rowse and Rosanne Kennedy for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

2 Letter from David Frances to Mick Dodson, 26 February 1997, held in the National Inquiry into the Removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children Papers (hereafter, Inquiry papers), National Archives of Australia (NAA), Chester Hill, New South Wales.

3 The term ‘Stolen Generations’, coined by historian Peter Read in 1981, is a political term used to describe the widespread removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families to be brought up in missions, institutions or foster and adoptive families. The term has since been used commonly in Australian politics.

4 Kennedy, Rosanne and Wilson, Tikka 2003, ‘Constructing shared histories: Stolen Generations testimony, narrative therapy and address’, in Rosanne Kennedy and Jill Bennett (eds), *World Memory: Personal trajectories in global time*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 120, 122.

In this article, I want to consider how testimony functioned throughout the inquiry to facilitate healing. At the beginning of the inquiry, the HREOC announced its aims to 'assist the healing process of those who have been affected...by past policies of assimilation' and to play a significant role in 'healing the nation' and to 'help prepare the way for reconciliation'.⁵ My analysis focuses on the practice of testimony as a personal and political tool engaged to heal individuals and the nation. The discussion draws on the international literature on victims of trauma and truth commissions and particularly ideas that testimony can achieve healing.⁶ I will also discuss the limits to the healing potential of testimony through the inquiry, including the implications of soliciting testimony from certain Indigenous witnesses. More broadly, I will consider how a focus on healing impacted on the achievement of other goals, including adequate forms of redress. I argue that processes of healing are more complicated and contingent than is recognised in the discourse of healing adopted by the inquiry.

Background to the inquiry

The Australian inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families followed years of political agitation by Indigenous organisations. From the early 1990s, Indigenous organisations including the National Secretariat for Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), Link-Up (New South Wales) and the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia (ALSWA) called for an inquiry into the damaging effects removal policies and practices had had on many Indigenous Australians' lives.⁷ The organisations were concerned that the harm suffered by Indigenous

5 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1997. *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from their Families*, Information Paper, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, p. 3; Ronald Wilson, quoted in 'Lack of funds threatens inquiry', *The Australian*, 30 January 1996.

6 While the Stolen Generations inquiry in Australia was not set up as a truth commission and differed in some important respects from other truth commissions, it adopted several elements in common with truth commissions, including its emphasis on rectifying past injustices, its collection of victims' testimonies and its aim to repair relationships between different groups of a nation-state. For a discussion of the central elements of truth commissions, see: Hayner, Priscilla 1994, 'Fifteen truth commissions—1974 to 1994: a comparative study', *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 597–655; Hayner, Priscilla 1996, 'Commissioning the truth: further research questions', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 19–29; Minow, Martha 1998, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing history after genocide and mass violence*, Beacon Press, Boston, pp. 52–90. I thank Robert Manne for pointing out reasons for distinguishing the work of the inquiry from other truth commissions, including that, in contrast with truth commissions held in other countries, in the Australian inquiry, the facts of the removal of Indigenous children from their families, the widespread negative impacts of such practices and the roles of victim and perpetrator through acts of removal were not widely accepted within the Australian community at the time of the inquiry and no perpetrators of specific acts of violence or injustice were called to speak before it.

7 The HREOC documented various policies and practices, instituted by state, territory and Commonwealth governments across Australia, which led to the separation of Indigenous children from their families between

people separated from their families was not widely known and had not been adequately recognised or appropriately redressed by governments and others involved in the implementation of removal policies. At the influential Going Home Conference held in Darwin by the Northern Territory Stolen Generations (NTSG) in 1994, which brought together more than 600 Indigenous people who had experienced removal and/or institutionalisation, the then Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Robert Tickner, announced that he would push for some form of inquiry.

On 2 August 1995, the Attorney-General, Michael Lavarch, issued revised terms of reference to the HREOC to trace the laws, practices and policies under which Aboriginal children were removed from their families by duress or by force and to trace their effects.⁸ With an allocated budget of \$1.5 million, the inquiry operated from December 1995 to April 1997, travelling to more than 32 Aboriginal communities, towns and regional centres and to every capital city across Australia. Some 535 of the 777 oral and written submissions received throughout the inquiry were from Indigenous witnesses who had experienced separation. The evidence of Indigenous organisations, government and church representatives, former mission staff, foster and adoptive parents and other professionals made up the other 242 submissions.

Healing and the inquiry

In articulating the aims of the inquiry—at the beginning and throughout the process—the HREOC defined the inquiry in terms of healing.⁹ Inquiry staff adopted the discourse of healing to explain what might be achieved through the inquiry and to engage governments and the wider community to support the inquiry and its eventual recommendations. There were two levels of healing promoted through the inquiry: healing the individual and healing the nation. The basis of the former involved the invocation of notions of trauma and recovery, and the latter notions of reconciliation.

One of the earliest expressions of healing as a goal of the inquiry was written in an information paper developed in the planning process to inform organisations and the public about the inquiry. The HREOC wrote:

1910 and the 1970s (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC] 1997, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, pp. 27–37).

8 The revised terms of reference included examining principles relevant to determining issues of compensation for people affected by separation.

9 The HREOC also identified a number of other goals for the inquiry, including justice, reparations and a shared history for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders affected by removal.

The holding of a national inquiry into the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children can, and should, provide an opportunity to assist the healing process of those who have been affected either directly or indirectly by past policies of assimilation...What this inquiry provides is an option to bring to light the anguish and suffering associated with being a victim of the actions of past governments, and to engage present governments in addressing the issues and suffering which affects peoples today.¹⁰

The inquiry process was to provide an opportunity for victims of removal policies to tell their stories. In documenting their suffering, the inquiry was meant to elicit an appropriate response from governments and the broader public to help heal the harms of removal. Ronald Wilson, HREOC president and co-chair of the inquiry, reiterated this sentiment at a briefing with Catholic agencies on 9 February 1996. Wilson explained that '[t]here is a healing role in the Inquiry in telling, hearing and acting on the stories' of Indigenous witnesses.¹¹

The influence of Indigenous organisations, such as Link-Up,¹² ALSWA and SNAICC—all of whom were represented on the inquiry's Indigenous Advisory Council, discussed below—influenced the inquiry process and its promotion of healing.¹³ These organisations emphasised the importance of healing for members of the Stolen Generations. For example, Link-Up saw a significant role for the inquiry in providing an 'opportunity for our people to tell their stories, recall their experiences and hopefully work towards a positive healing process'.¹⁴ In its submission to the inquiry, ALSWA explained that by expressing their pain as a result of removal policies and practices, Indigenous people provided an

10 HREOC, *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from their Families*, p. 3.

11 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Briefing notes, meeting with Catholic agencies, 9 February 1996, Inquiry papers, NAA.

12 Link-Up provides one of the strongest and most developed theories of healing in relation to members of the Stolen Generations with its adoption of notions of trauma and recovery to explain the impacts of removal and the needs of those who were removed. Rosanne Kennedy and Tikka Jan Wilson ('Constructing shared histories', pp. 119–39) provide an analysis of Link-Up's work in terms of its adoption of the discourses of trauma and recovery. See also Kennedy, Rosanne and Wilson, Tikka Jan 2001, Reading testimonies of the Stolen Generations: the search for a critical methodology, Unpublished manuscript; Link-Up (NSW) and Wilson, Tikka Jan 1997, *In the Best Interest of the Child? Stolen Children: Aboriginal pain/white shame*, Aboriginal History Monograph 4, Australian Centre for Indigenous History, Research School of Social Science, The Australian National University, Canberra.

13 A number of non-Indigenous organisations also expressed the need for healing for Indigenous people in their submissions to the inquiry. For example, law firm Phillips Fox, Victoria, wrote in its submission, 'It is our hope that the Inquiry will recognise the importance of a healing process, and will strongly recommend ways to start to break these cycles [of despair and destruction]. A clear message is that the victims of the assimilation policies of the past seek apologies and explanations' (1 February 1996, p. 8), held in Inquiry Archive, NAA. Also see: Letter from Bruce Grafton, Bishop, Anglican Church, to Jim Brooks, 4 April 1996, Inquiry papers, NAA.

14 Carol Kendall, Speech, Launch of the National Inquiry into the Removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, 2 August 1995, p. 1, Inquiry papers, NAA.

opportunity for non-Indigenous people 'to acknowledge an obligation and a resolve to come together with the Aboriginal community in effecting a genuine process of healing'.¹⁵ The discourse of healing, Minow points out, has developed through the popularisation of psychological ideas during the course of the twentieth century and the public exposure of the experiences of survivors of atrocities who themselves have emphasised the need for healing.¹⁶ As Bain Attwood has argued, the language of trauma has been crucial to the acceptance of the Stolen Generations' narrative at this time, 'when accounts of sexual abuse and incest—and trauma more generally—have been widely circulated and have commanded enormous audiences'.¹⁷

HREOC staff saw the inquiry, as well as contributing to individual healing, providing an opportunity for societal healing. In his address to the State Aboriginal Mental Health Conference in Perth on 21 November 1995, Wilson discussed this role for the inquiry in terms of 'healing the nation' as part of the Australian reconciliation process.¹⁸ After discussing the impacts of removal on Indigenous Australians—including a disproportionate incidence of mental illness among those who had experienced removal, and stressing first the importance of healing for Indigenous Australians—Wilson then linked national healing to reconciliation, through an honest acknowledgment of the past policies and practices of the removal of Indigenous children from their families by non-Indigenous Australia. Wilson explained:

While our primary focus must obviously be on the Indigenous people, non-Indigenous Australia is also both implicated in, and affected by these events...It is perfectly clear to me that there can be no reconciliation without honest confrontation of the past. And there can be no reconciliation unless non-Indigenous Australia is willing to honestly acknowledge the devastating effect of its past policies. Only then can we hope to heal this nation.¹⁹

By documenting Indigenous people's experiences of removal and the impacts such experiences still have on Indigenous people's lives today, the HREOC aimed to encourage 'awareness and acceptance of historical events and continuing

15 Buti, Toni (ed.) 1996, *After the Removal: A submission by the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia (Inc) to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, May, ALSWA, Perth, p. ii.

16 Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, p. 63.

17 Attwood, Bain 2000, 'A matter for history', *The Australian Financial Review*, 15 December 2000, p. 2.

18 Ronald Wilson was deputy chairman of the first Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation for a three-year term from 1991.

19 Wilson, Ronald 1995, *The national inquiry into the removal of Aboriginal children: healing the nation*, Speech to the State Aboriginal Mental Health Conference, Perth, 21 November 1995, pp. 4–5, Inquiry papers, NAA.

impacts’ by non-Indigenous Australians, and governments, and create an ‘acceptance of responsibility for current issues facing Indigenous people and the restitution of these issues’.²⁰

By affecting such acceptance and acknowledgment, HREOC staff, including Wilson, intended to mend the broader cultural harms—the misunderstandings and racism leading to mistreatment—associated by Indigenous Australians with past removal policies and practices and with their current treatment by non-Indigenous Australians. In his November 1995 address, Wilson explained:

In the past, when Indigenous people acted in ways which disrupted our concepts of normality, we labeled them unhygienic or in moral danger; today we label them criminal. Perhaps today, the State no longer removes such children to homes or mission schools. But nor, I am afraid to say does it perceive them as children in distress requiring assistance and support.²¹

In a planning document for the inquiry written in December 1995, the HREOC explained the effects of this mistreatment from an Indigenous perspective, writing: ‘The racial and cultural significance of this Inquiry, borne out by anger and hurt still carried by Indigenous peoples, must be given due justice if the healing and reconciliation processes are to continue.’²² Wilson clearly saw a role for the inquiry in dispelling cultural misunderstandings, stating: ‘In this Inquiry, we must do what we can both to heal old wounds, and to remove these racist assumptions.’²³

The Australian reconciliation process that underpinned Wilson’s statements on national healing promoted the idea that coming to terms with Indigenous history and experience were fundamental to the moral health of the nation. The 10-year Australian reconciliation process, instituted by the Hawke Government in 1991, was to provide ‘a tangible framework for a change in relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians’.²⁴ Enjoying wide community and cross-party support, the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991* set up a 25-member council of prominent Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to lead the reconciliation process. The reconciliation process aimed to facilitate

20 Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC), *Draft Document B: Planning documentation for the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal Children from their Families*, 15 December 1995, Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, Sydney, Inquiry papers, NAA.

21 Wilson, *The national inquiry into the removal of Aboriginal children*, p. 7.

22 HREOC, *Draft Document B*.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

24 Tickner, Robert 2001, *Taking a Stand: Land rights to reconciliation*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, New South Wales, p. 27.

mutual understanding within the Australian community of the unfair treatment experienced by Indigenous people and provide a way forward for relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia.

The process of reconciliation followed earlier calls for a treaty or negotiated settlement with Indigenous Australians based on the idea that the nation would remain diminished without the adequate acknowledgment of the ill treatment of Indigenous Australians. Tim Rowse documents the introduction of the concept of a treaty in the late 1970s in his book about Nugget Coombs, a prominent administrator and advocate in Indigenous affairs.²⁵ According to Rowse, Coombs' arguments for a treaty included that the unjust taking of land and the aggression meted out to Indigenous people affected the legitimacy and legality of Australian sovereignty. As Rowse explains, 'Coombs wanted to persuade non-Indigenous Australians that they badly needed a treaty because, without it, their nationhood was morally flawed and increasingly subject to hostile international scrutiny.'²⁶ The Hawke Government's promotion of 'reconciliation' was its alternative to implementing a treaty.²⁷

The argument for the importance to the moral health of the nation of acknowledging Australia's Indigenous past, as championed by Coombs, continued to be relevant to the reconciliation process. For example, delegates at the Australian Reconciliation Convention held in Melbourne in 1997 affirmed the statement: 'Reconciliation between Australia's Indigenous peoples and other Australians is central to the renewal of this nation as a harmonious and just society which lives out its ethos as a fair go for all; and until we achieve such a reconciliation the nation will remain diminished.'²⁸

In documenting the experiences and effects of removal on Indigenous Australians, the HREOC aimed to provide an opportunity for non-Indigenous Australia to recognise that removal policies and practices were harmful and wrong and to remedy the effects of removal in the name of reconciliation. As Jim Brooks explained: 'The Commission expects that the Inquiry will deal with much that is painful in relations between indigenous and non indigenous Australians, but that it offers an important opportunity to advance the process of reconciliation.'²⁹

25 Rowse, Tim 2000, *Obligated to be Difficult: Nugget Coombs' legacy in Indigenous affairs*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

26 Ibid., p. 178.

27 Michelle Grattan explained that the reconciliation process grew out of 'a failure to agree on grander gestures', such as a compact or treaty (Grattan, Michelle [ed.] 2000, *Reconciliation: Essays on Australian reconciliation*, Black Inc., Melbourne, p. 7).

28 Quoted in Tickner, *Taking a Stand*, p. 46.

29 Letter from Jim Brooks to Phillipe Allen, President, Tasmanian Council of Social Service, 8 November 1995, Inquiry papers, NAA.

Testimony and the inquiry

The HREOC went to great lengths to ensure Indigenous people would feel comfortable coming to the inquiry to tell their story. The inquiry included the significant involvement of Indigenous people, including Mick Dodson, the then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, as joint head of the inquiry; Indigenous women in every state as co-commissioners to provide a gender and racial balance among staff presiding over hearings; and an Indigenous Advisory Council, which was established to advise the commission throughout the inquiry. The inquiry also sought to provide a more flexible and sympathetic environment in which to hear the testimony of those who experienced removal by enacting a suppression order for the hearing process to ensure the confidentiality of these oral submissions, by holding hearings in private and less formal settings, such as buildings used by Indigenous organisations, and by not cross-examining witnesses. Before hearings had started, staff conducted research to help them 'work sensitively and appropriately' with people providing their testimony to the inquiry.³⁰ They looked, for example, to the work of the Survivors of the Shoah Foundation with Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, which they saw as having parallels with the inquiry.³¹

Despite adopting such methods to encourage Indigenous participation, before the hearings process had begun there was an understanding by commissioners that the number of individual stories of removal that the inquiry could hear would be limited. Organising and conducting hearings were resource-intensive processes and had to be limited due to the inquiry's inadequate funding. Commissioners also believed many stories had already been told in other forums and considered the need for hearing individual testimonies less important. Elizabeth Hastings, Commissioner for Disability Discrimination, asked 'if there was a way of setting up the Inquiry so that it would not be replaying the same stories'.³²

30 Letter from Elizabeth Moore to Toni Buti, 11 December 1995, Inquiry papers, NAA.

31 Ibid.; Letter from Elizabeth Moore to Eva Scheinberg, Regional Coordinator, Survivors of Shoah Foundation, Sydney, 11 December 1995, Inquiry papers, NAA. The Survivors of Shoah project, established by Steven Spielberg, documented on video individual stories of survivors of the Holocaust, including the impacts of these events. The interviews were conducted in people's homes and tailored to individual needs and circumstances to ensure survivors were as comfortable as possible to recount their stories (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 September 1995, p. 17).

32 Draft Notes, Meeting with SNAICC, 9 June 1995, Inquiry papers, NAA.

In a planning document, the HREOC's initial approach is explained:

A great deal of work has already been done by Indigenous communities and organisations to trace the stories and to put the pieces together. The Inquiry will not attempt to cover the same ground, but, it is hoped, will at last bring together the full picture...Information can be put to the Inquiry orally in hearings which will be held throughout the country. But hearings are expensive. They will necessarily be limited.³³

Indigenous organisations had already published research based on their collection of testimonies of Indigenous people affected by removal within their communities. Link-Up first published stories of Indigenous people who had contacted them to reunite with their families and communities in the 1989 book *The Lost Children*, edited by Coral Edwards and Peter Read.³⁴ The ALSWA published its book, *Telling Our Story*, based on hundreds of firsthand accounts of removal, in July 1995.³⁵ Because such work had already been done, the commission underestimated the number of Indigenous people who would want to tell their story before the inquiry.

The commission also received advice from other Indigenous groups that enough research had already been done and that what they needed were outcomes rather than to relay their stories. The NTSG, for example, argued in October 1995 that 'Aboriginal people have undergone many years of "investigation" and now require tangible outcomes rather than the commissioning of further academic research'.³⁶ The HREOC's position, set out in a December 1995 information paper, reflected such views: 'Many Indigenous people are tired of being researched and do not consider it to be a cost-effective use of Indigenous monies.'³⁷ The Northern Territory group also disagreed that talking before the inquiry would help their members heal. In a letter to the inquiry, their views were explained: 'Stolen Generations members do not wish to place their individual suffering and distress on public display...the business of the Inquiry Tribunal should be to assess the problems of the Stolen Generations group as a whole, rather

33 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1995, *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children—About the inquiry*, Information Sheet No. 1, Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, Sydney, Inquiry papers, NAA.

34 Edwards, Coral and Read, Peter (eds) 1989, *The Lost Children: Thirteen Australians taken from their Aboriginal families tell of the struggle to find their natural parents*, Doubleday, Sydney.

35 ALSWA, *Telling Our Story*.

36 Letter from Wes Miller, Director, Katherine Regional Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, to Ronald Wilson, 24 October 1995, Inquiry papers, NAA.

37 HREOC, *Planning Document B*.

than investigate specific case histories.’³⁸ Wilson agreed, arguing at a meeting with Indigenous Advisory Council members in November 1995 that ‘the job of the Inquiry would be to establish the effects of removal and to...make recommendations to government to ease some of those effects rather than hear everyone’s story’.³⁹ Such views neatly resolved the inquiry’s problem of limited resources for hearings.

Members of the Indigenous Advisory Council, however, had a different view. As Nigel D’Souza, a SNAICC representative on the council, pointed out, ‘not all stories had been heard’ and ‘[p]eople would want to talk on an individual basis and that regardless of the collective situation, not all have the same experiences’.⁴⁰ Kendall and McNaughton, Link-Up members on the council, explained that ‘knowledge of what happened to individuals is essential for understanding by non-Aboriginal people and it is the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be heard’.⁴¹ Link-Up and SNAICC were angry that the commission would be unable to hear the stories of all those who wanted to participate in the inquiry. Dodson agreed, suggesting in a memorandum to Wilson that ‘the Inquiry provides an opportunity for recording [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] experiences’ and ‘[t]he success of the Inquiry will depend in part on the Inquiry’s capacity to hear those stories’.⁴²

Once the hearings process began, the importance to Indigenous witnesses of giving their testimonies became obvious to inquiry staff. Wilson, for example, recounts one of his own experiences:

I mean the most vivid picture I retain of the process was one woman, she had the blackest face that I’d ever seen, jet black, and she came in and took a seat and we were only the two of us sitting at the small table, about three feet apart, and I just cast my eyes down, waited for her to start talking and she didn’t say anything for what seemed an age, quite a long time, and I looked up and tears were coursing down this black ebony face and they were shining. It was such a sight and it wasn’t until she was able to dry those tears that she really could tell her story. And after about an hour of talking, her face was still stained where the tears

38 Letter from Wes Miller to Ronald Wilson, 24 October 1995, Inquiry papers, NAA. The view that the inquiry was not the appropriate forum to hear Stolen Generations’ stories was reiterated by the Northern Territory group throughout the inquiry. For example, in March 1996, they wrote: ‘The exercise of healing is one that is private and most effectively done within communities by those who have survived those policies’ (Stolen Generations Reference Group, Northern Territory 1996, *Proposal to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation from Stolen Generations, NT*, 29 March 1996, p. 2, Inquiry papers, NAA).

39 HREOC, Notes, Indigenous Advisory Council meeting, 7 November 1995, Inquiry papers, NAA.

40 Ibid., p. 3.

41 Email from Jim Brooks to Mick Dodson and Ronald Wilson, Subject: Link-Up, 9 November 1995, Inquiry papers, NAA.

42 Memorandum from Mick Dodson to Ronald Wilson, 20 October 1995, Inquiry papers, NAA.

had been, she gave a warm smile, she got up to go, and said I feel better. Which I thought was a lovely testimony to the value of telling the stories. And if it had been a formal process she'd never have spoken.⁴³

Through his experiences at hearings, Wilson became a strong advocate of the healing potential of storytelling. Wilson explained:

[I]t's been recognised that the way to healing is through telling the story...[T]he worst thing would be if they never had an opportunity of drawing out those memories, and if they're bad memories then it's healing to get it off your chest. If they're good memories then it can leave you with a good feeling. So I'm very persuaded in the value of storytelling.⁴⁴

The evidence of psychiatrists and other health professionals, as expert witnesses to the inquiry, also supported the view that an opportunity to tell their story was crucial for many people affected by removal. For example, after describing the traumatic effects of separation in her oral submission, Professor Marie Bashir, child, adolescent and family psychiatrist and Director of the Centre for Mental Health, argued that 'there are many people who actually have a clinical need to talk about' their experiences of removal.⁴⁵

By February 1996, the inquiry's management committee, including commissioners and the inquiry secretary, acknowledged that 'there is a great demand from individuals to have their stories heard and it is essential that the Commission handle these stories with sensitivity as well as feed the issues they raise into the evaluation and report writing process'.⁴⁶ Because of its limited resources, the HREOC did, however, rely on Indigenous organisations to collect additional testimonies, support witnesses and provide other assistance during the course of the inquiry. Without this help, the inquiry would not have had the reach that it did. Still, the HREOC was unable to accommodate all those wishing to participate because of its limited resources and timetable. In its final report, the HREOC recommended that governments fund a further process to record and preserve the stories of Indigenous people affected by forcible removal in acknowledgment that many stories had not been heard.⁴⁷

43 Ronald Wilson, Interview with Rebecca Devitt, Perth, 9 March 2004.

44 Wilson, Interview, 9 March 2004.

45 Transcript of proceedings, Sydney, 2 July 1996, Inquiry papers, NAA.

46 HREOC, Notes, Management Committee meeting, 6 February 1996, p. 5, Inquiry papers, NAA.

47 HREOC, *Bringing Them Home*: Recommendation 1, p. 22. The National Library of Australia was subsequently funded by the Australian Government to collect and record a wide range of accounts of the separation of Indigenous children from their families through the *Bringing Them Home* Oral History Project.

Testimony as a tool for individual healing

In its attempts to progress healing through hearing the testimonies of people who had experienced removal, the HREOC adopted certain psychological understandings of the effects of trauma on the individual and accepted ways to heal that trauma. These included psychological theories that traumatic experiences did not simply pass with time but continued to have emotional consequences and that talking about these experiences could alleviate some of that suffering.⁴⁸ Through its testimonial practice, the inquiry affirmed the assumption that talking about the experience of separation, in a sympathetic and official setting that enabled the validation of the victims' stories, facilitated healing.

The idea that speaking about trauma has a healing effect on the individual has developed internationally through the work of therapists working with survivors of political torture, who have found developing and revising testimony useful therapeutic tools. As Sangster argues, the use of testimony in these contexts has a 'critical advantage over other forms of therapy in that it directly links personal trauma with its origins in political oppression'.⁴⁹ The acknowledgment of the political basis to the harm experienced by individuals allows individual and societal healing, by providing an avenue to identify the reasons behind particular acts resulting in harm, and a basis to condemn the actions and to look for ways to ensure they do not happen again. The assumption that the act of speaking about trauma in a setting such as the inquiry facilitates healing is supported by its similarities to private therapy. Tina Rosenberg finds parallels with the collection of testimony by truth commissions and the private therapeutic process, including the emphasis on the healing value of victims telling their story; having that story validated and officially acknowledged; providing an opportunity for understanding the broader political significance of their experience; and reintegrating the 'narrative of atrocity into their whole life stories'.⁵⁰

While the experience of speaking before truth commissions has aspects similar to private therapy, the differences between private therapy and participating in a process such as the inquiry cannot be overstated. As Brandon Hamber argues, the ability of such inquiries to provide the necessary support to remedy the 'myriad...psychological needs' of individuals who have suffered human rights

48 Hamber, Brandon 2003, 'Does the truth heal? A psychological perspective on political strategies for dealing with the legacy of political violence', in Nigel Biggar (ed.), *Burying the Past: Making peace and doing justice after civil conflict*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC, p. 158.

49 Sangster, Kirsty 1999, 'Looking the beast in the eye: how truth commissions come to terms with pain', *Arena Magazine*, vol. 39 (February–March), p. 45.

50 Cited in Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, p. 62.

abuses is bound to be insufficient.⁵¹ Hamber goes on to say that the optimism accompanying the ability of truth commissions to facilitate healing encourages the 'drawing of simplistic conclusions about trauma and its treatment (typified by the notion of post-traumatic stress disorder)' and the healing of victims 'portrayed as a linear task requiring only particular interventions such as counseling and public testimony to ensure resolution'.⁵² The inquiry's claims to facilitate healing, underpinned by simplistic theories of trauma and recovery, and the rehabilitation of victims through public testimony and counselling, can be read in these terms. In the light of such criticisms, others have argued a more modest claim—that truth commissions can have a cathartic effect or provide 'therapeutic moments' and that public testimony is often a first step in a more protracted and involved healing process.⁵³

Individual healing through the inquiry

Anecdotal evidence from the inquiry supported the claim that it provided opportunities for healing moments or the beginning of healing for some witnesses. Feedback from an Indigenous witness who gave her testimony before Commissioner Dodson confirmed this:

I never had the chance to thank you personally for hearing my evidence...To have a fellow Indigenous Australian listen to my story and to be comfortable knowing that you understand, made it easy for me to express all of my pain and suffering...There is some good news I would like to pass on to you. Everyone I have spoken to has said it is like the world has been lifted off their shoulders, because at last we have been heard. For me I have grown stronger and now am able to move forward. You have played a significant part in my journey back, you are always in my thoughts and I shall never forget what you have done for me.⁵⁴

After expressing some reservations about the inquiry, an Indigenous witness from South Australia spoke with inquiry staff to say that the experience of talking as a family group was a 'helpful and healing' experience, and that the family was planning to get back together shortly to build on that experience.⁵⁵ The inquiry became a catalyst for a number of community and family reunions

51 Hamber, 'Does the truth heal?', pp. 160–1.

52 Ibid., p. 168.

53 Hayner, 'Commissioning the truth', p. 19; Nigel D'Souza, Interview with Rebecca Devitt, Melbourne, 24 February 2004; Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, p. 70. Hamber, 'Does the truth heal?', p. 158.

54 Email from Jim Brooks to Jim Wright, ATSIC Commissioner, NSW East, 14 February 1997, Inquiry papers, NAA.

55 Email from Jim Brooks to Commissioners, 22 March 1996, Inquiry papers, NAA.

in which people could work through their grief. Link-Up, for example, reported that people were 'getting together as part of the healing process' and these gatherings provided opportunities for working through personal and community grief.⁵⁶

Opportunities for healing provided by the inquiry were, however, limited by the lack of continuing support for witnesses to overcome their experiences of trauma. As Joyleen Koolmatrie, an Indigenous psychologist who provided counselling assistance to witnesses before the inquiry, observed, 'while there appeared to be a palpable sense of relief (and this was expressed verbally by some)' after giving their testimony, 'there were also unresolved issues that were painful and that needed ongoing counseling'.⁵⁷ Inquiry staff members were also concerned about the emotional impacts for Indigenous witnesses of telling their stories.⁵⁸ Marjorie Thorpe, a co-commissioner of the inquiry, explained that 'sometimes people were telling their stories for the first time and hadn't recognised within themselves how that unresolved issue was going to affect them'.⁵⁹

The concern about the possible damaging effects of giving testimony before the inquiry was supported by the negative impacts this appeared to have on some witnesses. Toni Buti, senior lawyer with the ALSWA, explained that in Western Australia 'there were a couple of stories where people after, whether it was because they came out and told their story or not, but they certainly went downhill after'.⁶⁰ A dramatic example of Buti's point was the death by suicide of Robert Riley, a prominent Australian Indigenous activist who had been removed from his mother as a 6-month old and sent to Sister Kate's Home—a well-known Indigenous children's home in Perth, Western Australia.⁶¹ As Executive Officer of the ALSWA, Riley had been lobbying governments to recognise the trauma of removal. As mentioned, the ALSWA conducted its own inquiry, collecting hundreds of stories of Indigenous people who were removed, to put pressure on governments to provide appropriate forms of redress. At the launch of the final report of that inquiry, Riley told his own story of being removed, and for the first time, talked publicly about sexual abuse he had suffered while living

56 HREOC, Notes from meeting with Link-Up: Michael Stewart, Carol Kendall, Lola McNaughton and Tom Whelan, May 1996, Inquiry papers, NAA.

57 Joyleen Koolmatrie, Written submission, September 1996, p. 3, Inquiry papers, NAA.

58 Letter from Elizabeth Moore, Senior Inquiry Officer, to Toni Buti, ALSWA, 11 December 1995, p. 1, Inquiry papers, NAA. The impact on those listening to the testimony of Indigenous witnesses was also an issue raised throughout the inquiry. See, for example: Link-Up 1996, *Interim Report to the Indigenous Advisory Council*, Teleconference, 21 February 1996, Inquiry papers, NAA.

59 Marjorie Thorpe, Interview with Rebecca Devitt, Melbourne, 24 February 2004.

60 Toni Buti, Interview with Rebecca Devitt, Perth, 8 March 2004.

61 Quentin Beresford documents Riley's life in his 2006 biography, *Rob Riley: An Aboriginal leader's quest for justice*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) *Four Corners* program 'Telling his story' (reported by Liz Jackson and aired on 15 July 1996) also detailed Riley's life and death.

at Sister Kate's.⁶² Riley had viewed the telling of his story as part of the healing process; however, he appeared to friends and others to experience difficulties in coming to terms with that disclosure and what had happened to him.⁶³

Before his death, Riley had booked himself into the psychiatric unit at Royal Perth Hospital and was diagnosed as suffering clinical depression. Riley spoke to friends about not knowing where he belonged, of being empty, exhausted and sad.⁶⁴ In his biography of Riley, Beresford notes several layers to Riley's depression, including: unresolved trauma as a result of the physical, emotional and sexual abuse he experienced at Sister Kate's; his inability to come to terms with his sense of loss; and his sense that, despite his years of activism, nothing had changed or was likely to change in Indigenous politics in Australia.⁶⁵ Beresford also points to personal problems as significant to Riley's mental state including drug use, the emotional demands of political disputes within the Aboriginal community and relationship problems. Riley committed suicide days before the HREOC inquiry was due to conduct its hearings in Perth. Beresford argues that Riley felt pressure to give evidence to the inquiry because of his political commitment to the issues, but he 'did not have the strength to face a new round; to keep re-opening the wounds'.⁶⁶ While a number of causes could be associated with mental illness suffered by members of the Stolen Generations, the experience of providing testimony to the inquiry, or in other forums, was perceived as having negative effects for some.

The constant call for more counselling resources by mental health professionals and inquiry staff illustrates the strength of their concern for individuals providing their story to the inquiry. As Jim Brooks, the inquiry's secretary, wrote:

The issue of availability of culturally appropriate mental health services for those affected by removal has emerged as an acute issue. Firstly, the very existence of this Inquiry has caused many people to think about issues and experiences previously unaddressed. Secondly, many of those who contribute to the Inquiry become distressed and require immediate and long term support. It seems that there is currently an extreme shortage of appropriate services, especially in rural and remote areas. We have heard anecdotally that the Inquiry's visit to Victoria last month

62 Riley had given his story as part of the ALSWA Stolen Generations project resulting in *Telling Our Story*. Riley's story is excerpted in ALSWA, *Telling Our Story*, pp. 109–16.

63 ABC, 'Telling his story', pp. 14–15.

64 Ibid., p. 15.

65 Beresford, *Rob Riley*, pp. 324–5, 327.

66 Ibid., p. 327.

sparked a rush on the already stretched resources of the Aboriginal Health Centre. The Commission is gravely concerned about the apparent lack of available, appropriate services.⁶⁷

The commission relied on state governments, Indigenous and other organisations to provide counselling support, arguing that it had neither the expertise nor the resources to provide this support itself. The commission did, however, make efforts to ensure such counselling was available through these other channels. Joyleen Koolmatrie was employed by the West Australian Government to provide support for participants who gave their stories at the hearings in Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra, Darwin and Alice Springs. In South Australia, the state government supported Link-Up to provide additional counselling services required throughout the inquiry process.⁶⁸ Still, the somewhat ad hoc counselling provided was thought by inquiry staff, Indigenous Advisory Council representatives and others as inadequate for the task of supporting what was for many an emotional and difficult process. The inability of the HREOC to provide a more systematic and comprehensive support service for witnesses can be seen to undermine, at least in part, the inquiry's public claims to effect healing for individual witnesses.

Indigenous organisations and HREOC staff were also concerned that the healing value of witnesses sharing their story through the inquiry would be diminished if the inquiry did not evoke an adequate response. The importance of an appropriate response to testimony for a person's healing is explained in the literature on truth commissions. Minow, for example, argues that '[a]cknowledgment by others of the victim's moral injuries is a central element of the healing process...Re-establishing a moral framework, in which wrongs are correctly named and condemned, is usually crucial to restoring the mental health of survivors'.⁶⁹ The inquiry raised expectations among witnesses that their needs would be appropriately responded to. As Buti explains in the West Australian context, 'there were problems because there were expectations of people who gave their stories that something would happen'.⁷⁰ Also Link-Up representatives expressed concern about the participation of Indigenous witnesses because of 'the fear that the Inquiry will achieve nothing' and that 'people will be opening themselves up'.⁷¹

67 Letter from Jim Brooks to Beverly Raphael, Department of Psychiatry, University of Queensland, 7 March 1996, Inquiry papers, NAA; Notes from Indigenous Advisory Council teleconference, 24 November 1995, Inquiry papers, NAA.

68 Letter from Richard Deyell, Chief Executive, Family and Community Services, to Syd Sparrow, Chairperson, Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement Inc., Adelaide, 23 February 1996, Inquiry papers, NAA; Email from National Inquiry Notebook to Ian Clyde, 15 May 1996; Email from Jim Brooks to Commissioners, 28 March 1996, Inquiry papers, NAA.

69 Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, p. 71.

70 Buti, Interview, 8 March 2004.

71 HREOC, Notes from meeting with Link-Up representatives, May 1996, Inquiry papers, NAA.

While the inquiry provided a sympathetic environment acknowledging the suffering of Indigenous people who experienced removal, the HREOC was unable to ensure the same reception from the broader community. In its response to the final report of the inquiry, a newly elected conservative Federal Government rejected several central recommendations, including a public apology and compensation for members of the Stolen Generations.⁷² In his speech after the launch of the report—at the Reconciliation Convention in Melbourne in May 1997—Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, famously refused to apologise on behalf of the nation. He maintained that people today should not 'be required to accept guilt or blame for past actions and policies over which they had no control'.⁷³ The government's refusal to provide official acknowledgment of the harms of removal undermined the Indigenous witnesses' testimonies and impacted on their healing. As the NTSG group explained, 'our Government's refusal to apologize and frankly acknowledge the past has damaged individual self-esteem'.⁷⁴ The government's refusal to apologise also impacted on the HREOC's ability to contribute to national healing.

Healing the nation

As introduced above, the HREOC viewed the acceptance and acknowledgment of the harms of removal by the wider Australian community as essential not only to further the reconciliation process, but to heal the nation of its unjust past. Similarly, truth commissions have been described as promoting reconciliation by developing a framework for a particular nation to deal with its past. Minow explains that '[a] truth commission is charged to produce a report that recounts the facts gathered, and render moral assessment...In so doing, it helps to frame the events in a new national narrative of acknowledgment, accountability, and civic virtues'.⁷⁵ The success or otherwise of such processes rests on their ability to achieve legitimacy in the broader society.

The HREOC continually attempted to engage the wider community to understand the experiences of Indigenous people forcibly removed and to garner support for the inquiry and its recommendations. The commission did this by adopting a media strategy, including the publication of a number of personal stories, to elicit interest in and educate the general community about the issues. By April 1996, Lorena Allam, the inquiry's media officer, assessed the media coverage as

72 The Coalition Government was elected on 2 March 1996.

73 John Howard, extracted speech in 'I am an optimist, but this optimism cannot be blind', *The Australian*, 27 May 1997, p. 4.

74 North Australian Stolen Generation Aboriginal Corporation (NASGAC) and Central Australian Stolen Generation and Families Aboriginal Corporation (CASGFAC) 2000, Submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee Inquiry into the Stolen Generations, 31 March 2000, p. 57.

75 Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, p. 78.

‘widespread and comprehensive’ and generally ‘positive and informed’.⁷⁶ Allam noted that ‘[p]hrases like “Stolen Generations” and “genocide” seem to have seeped into public consciousness’ and that ‘there is a growing awareness of what these things mean to Indigenous people’.⁷⁷ By July 1996, however, Wilson suggested the inquiry was finding it difficult convincing the non-Indigenous community

to understand that even where separation has meant growing up in a good home or institution with all the advantages of education and employment prospects, there remains a sadness and sense of loss from having been denied the joys of growing up in one’s own culture and surrounded by one’s own family, extended family and community.⁷⁸

Inquiry staff members were anxious that the final report gained a supportive reception. They encouraged the public to engage openly and compassionately with the report—which contained verbatim extracts of Indigenous witnesses’ testimonies—and its recommendations. The oft-quoted passage from the final report, *Bringing Them Home*, asks ‘the whole community to listen with an open heart and mind to the stories of what happened and, having listened and understood, commit itself to reconciliation’.⁷⁹

The ability of the inquiry to effect understanding and acknowledgment in the wider community was, however, limited. The inquiry report led some people to change their view of the past actions and future responsibilities of non-Indigenous Australians. Some people recognised their own implication in the harms suffered by Indigenous Australians who experienced removal. The outpouring of letters and acts of support for members of the Stolen Generations after the release of *Bringing Them Home*, as well as unprecedented participation in the reconciliation walks in 2000, showed the inquiry had some level of success in garnering support in the wider community.⁸⁰ For others, however, the stories of the Stolen Generations did not resonate in this way, and instead fed into earlier understandings or prejudices that Indigenous people received preferential treatment.⁸¹ Others rejected outright the claims of mistreatment and

76 Loreena Allam, Media briefing paper for Indigenous Advisory Council meeting, Sydney, 25–26 April 1996, p. 3, Inquiry papers, NAA.

77 Ibid.

78 Letter from Ronald Wilson to Lowitja O’Donoghue, Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, 16 July 1996, Inquiry papers, NAA.

79 Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC) 1997, *Bringing Them Home: A guide*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, p. 4.

80 For a discussion of non-Indigenous community responses to *Bringing Them Home*, see: Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC) 1999, *Social Justice Report 1998*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, Sydney, pp. 27–47.

81 Ibid.

injustice or otherwise denied the existence of a systematically racially motivated process of removing Indigenous children from their families and Indigenous cultural environments.⁸²

The inconsistent reception of the inquiry report and its recommendations reflected a range of opinions in the wider community on the removal of Indigenous children, and Indigenous issues more broadly. Public opinion polls gauging national support for an apology after the release of *Bringing Them Home*, for example, had conflicting results. Murray Goot and Tim Rowse analysed three such polls after the inquiry—one offering widespread support for an apology, one suggesting widespread opposition and a third poll providing a division of opinion.⁸³ As Goot and Rowse explain, the three polls 'revealed an unstable pattern of opinion, with contradictory potentials for political persuasion'.⁸⁴ In choosing not to apologise publicly, the Coalition Government supported sentiments in the community against accepting responsibility for the harms of removal policies and practices, rather than supporting those sympathetic to an apology.

A major criticism of the inquiry and its report was the focus on Indigenous Australians as victims of previous policies and practices of removal. The Federal Government, for example, argued that the report left out the views and experiences of field officers, welfare workers, missionaries and other groups associated with the implementation of removal policies.⁸⁵ Similarly, the focus on 'victimhood' of truth commissions has been criticised for providing a limited account of events and being antithetical to the achievement of justice. Jean Bathke Elshtain, for example, argues that 'claims to victimization carry special rhetorical resonance' in modern liberal culture, which in turn promote a politics of resentment and grievance seeking that can be antithetical to a full accounting of events, and a fuller form of justice.⁸⁶ As Minow has pointed out, a focus on the experiences of victims of abuses might deter the participation of those who do not see themselves in these terms, and 'may tilt the writing of history in terms of victimhood rather than rights in a democratic, political order'.⁸⁷ Indigenous

82 See, for example, Senator John Herron, Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Federal Government submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee Inquiry into the Stolen Generation, March 2000, p. 23.

83 The authors see these conflicting results, in part, in terms of the different information provided by pollsters to respondents to frame the question of whether the government should offer an apology (Goot, Murray and Rowse, Tim 2007, *Divided Nation? Indigenous Affairs and the Imagined Public*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, pp. 3–5).

84 Ibid., p. 9.

85 Herron, Federal Government submission, p. 23.

86 Bathke Elshtain, Jean 2003, 'Politics and forgiveness', in Nigel Biggar (ed.), *Burying the Past: Making peace and doing justice after civil conflict*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC, p. 49.

87 Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, pp. 69, 80.

groups such as the ALSWA and the NTSG argued that the inquiry's emphasis on victims meant those who had positive experiences of removal or who viewed themselves as survivors rather than victims of past removal practices were not represented.⁸⁸ In its successful efforts to ensure the participation of Indigenous witnesses negatively affected by removal, the inquiry left itself open to such criticisms. The counterargument is that without this emphasis on and sensitivity towards the victims of removal practices Indigenous people might have been less inclined to participate and opportunities for assisting the healing process for some, and documenting these experiences, would have been lost.

Another criticism of the focus on victimhood of forums such as the inquiry involves difficulties with targeting forms of redress. Marie Smyth describes difficulties associated with what she terms 'cultures of victimhood' in which harm done to one member of a group is 'perceived as a harm to every member of that community'.⁸⁹ This in turn, Smyth argues, affects issues of response in that there is no 'coherent and manageable group' to ensure that resources and the development of social policy are appropriately targeted—an issue that can create further grievance in such communities.⁹⁰ These issues arose in the aftermath of the inquiry, which found not one Indigenous Australian had been unaffected by removal. The NTSG argued that the inquiry 'became too wide, straying from the central focus of an inquiry into children forcibly removed to dealing with the entire Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island community' and that this in turn affected the targeting of services.⁹¹ The Federal Government also dismissed inquiry recommendations for a reparations tribunal, including monetary compensation, arguing the impossibility of accurately determining the numbers of Indigenous people affected by removal.⁹²

Conclusion

Ultimately, the inquiry's goals to facilitate individual and national healing were overly ambitious. As I have argued, healing the nation—contingent on non-Indigenous Australians accepting the stories of Indigenous witnesses and a responsibility to redress the injustices of former policies and practices—was

88 ALSWA, *Telling Our Story*, p. 58; Jacqui Katona, speech given at the National Press Club, Canberra, 13 February 1996, p. 12, Inquiry papers, NAA.

89 Smyth, Marie 2003, 'Putting the past in its place: issues of victimhood and reconciliation in Northern Ireland's peace process', in Nigel Biggar (ed.), *Burying the Past: Making peace and doing justice after civil conflict*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC, p. 126.

90 Ibid., pp. 127–8.

91 NASGAC and CASGFAC, Submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee Inquiry into the Stolen Generations, p. 12.

92 Herron, Federal Government submission, pp. 2, 13–18.

challenged by certain prevailing attitudes towards Indigenous Australians and by a government that did not accept that those policies were wrong. Healing individual trauma is also a more complex task, with the testimony and limited counselling offered through the inquiry process providing relief for some witnesses but appearing to have negative impacts on others. Without adequate research into the longer-term effects of providing testimony to the inquiry it is impossible to determine whether this experience contributed to any permanent improvement in participants' wellbeing. Nevertheless, the inquiry contributed to an acknowledgment of the personal pain suffered by Indigenous people because of removal practices, bringing the issues of Indigenous child removal to widespread public attention. It also brought additional resources for some needed services in counselling, and for linking Stolen Generations' members back to their families and communities.

The work of the inquiry in effecting individual and national healing was renewed on 13 February 2008 when the new Labor Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, acted on his election commitment to offer an official apology to the Stolen Generations.⁹³ The Prime Minister delivered the apology, arguing that 'it is time to recognise the injustices of the past' and 'put right this most outrageous of wrongs'.⁹⁴ Rudd called on Australians to 'fully confront the truth' so we can become 'a fully united and fully reconciled people'.⁹⁵ The apology provided some relief in the campaign for the Stolen Generations, providing, as it did, recognition of the 'deliberate and calculated' policies of forcible removal to deal with 'the problem' of Aboriginality and the pain and suffering removal practices caused. The emotional importance of the apology to Indigenous Australians was significant. Many stories published in the media of Indigenous responses to the apology illustrated the relief they felt. For example, Cathy Freeman, former athlete and Olympic gold medallist, whose mother was a member of the Stolen Generations, explained that for her family, the apology 'allows some kind of healing and forgiveness to take place where there is less anger and bitterness in the hearts of people. It takes away the pain.'⁹⁶ Michael McLeod, a Stolen Generations member, said he was moved by the apology, explaining: 'I never expected to hear that in my lifetime. Personally, this is part of my healing process—just the recognition on that level.'⁹⁷ After the apology, Mick Dodson said, 'I am inspired by this apology as an act of true reconciliation towards indigenous Australia.'⁹⁸ Public opinion polls conducted by *The Australian* newspaper before

93 The Rudd Labor Government was elected on 26 November 2007.

94 Kevin Rudd, speech to Parliament, 13 February 2008, printed in *The Australian*, 14 February 2008, p. 2.

95 Ibid.

96 *The Australian*, 9–10 February 2008, p. 1.

97 *The Australian*, 13 February 2008, p. 4.

98 In an online poll published in *The Australian* on 13 February 2008 (p. 4) before the apology, 34 per cent of respondents thought the apology would not help and 20 per cent thought it would not help very much towards achieving reconciliation. The results of a second poll after the apology, published in *The Australian*

and after the apology also indicated a significant increase in support for the apology in the wider community.⁹⁹ Still, more than one year on, the questions of whether the apology will lead to longer-term improvements in health outcomes for Indigenous people or whether it has created a more reconciled Australia continue to be asked.¹⁰⁰ As I have illustrated in this article, achieving individual and national healing is a complicated and long-term process.

(19 February 2008, pp. 1–2), indicated that 44 per cent of Australians supported the apology and 25 per cent somewhat supported it. Although different questions were asked in each of the polls, the second poll did seem to indicate greater enthusiasm for the apology in the wider community.

99 Schubert, Misha and Smiles, Sarah 2008, 'Sorry. We'll never let it happen again', *The Age*, 13 February 2008, p. 1, accessed 28 May 2008, <<http://www.theage.com.au/cgi-bin/common/popupPrintArticle>>

100 See, for example, Peatling, Stephanie 2009, 'PM checks targets a year after apology', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 February 2009, p. 5.