THE LAUNCH OF 'IN DENIAL
The Stolen Generations and the Right'
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Paul Keating was invited to launch the first edition of *Quarterly Essay* and within the edition, Robert Manne's essay, *In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right*. In this address Paul Keating mocks the Howard government and its media apologists for their stigmatisation of 'elites' and of alleged political correctness while controlling all the agencies of government with virtual free rein in the media. He also underlines the important message in Robert Manne's essay: that the Australian Right was willing to condone the racism inherent in the Stolen Generation policies rather than confront the basic ethical issues and the terrible things done to indigenous people.

A couple of important things are happening here today.

First, any time a new forum for public debate in this country opens up—rather than closes down—it is a cause for celebration.

So I'm happy to be in a position to congratulate the publisher, Morry Schwartz, the editor Peter Craven and all the other people associated with the *Quarterly Essay* on this, the launch of its first edition.

Out here, on the edge of Asia, a long way from major markets and natural groupings, ideas are all that Australia has to garner a position in the scheme of things and to shield it from the harsher winds of globalisation.

Not military might, or a large population, or unique resources; simply ideas.

Ideas are what will sustain our democracy and drive our economy into new areas as we cope with the transforming impact of economic globalisation and the information revolution.

In these circumstances you should think we would want to search out ideas and nurture them carefully. But instead we have a government which is hollowing out the education system, cutting back on R&D and trying to close down our national debate.

You might remember that John Howard used to claim that the election of his government would release the nation from the thrall of intellectual terror in which he claimed it had been held by me and the Labor government. The years when free speech was suppressed by squads of ALP Thought Police and terrified conservatives whimpered in darkened corners. That was the reason, you will recall,

that Mr Howard found it necessary to let Pauline Hanson spout her bile unchallenged in the national Parliament.

But apparently—as it turns out—it can't have been me at all.

Because, according to the government and its allies on the Right, now five years on, the nation remains bound down by these powerful and mysterious fetters.

Is there anything in contemporary Australian life more outrageous than the sight of the most powerful figures of Australian conservatism cloaking their well-nourished frames in the rags of the powerless? The men who control the national government, who declaim from the opinion columns of every newspaper, who stack each government-controlled board in the land, who draw their funding from the largest corporations in the country, claiming to be the victims of a conspiracy to silence them?

Is there anything more absurd than the Minister for Workplace Relations whining about the power of the 'elites', when what he is really complaining about is that some people disagree with his brand of politics?

If new ideas are to grow, they need topsoil packed with nutrients, and there's precious little of it around in Australia at the moment.

The radio shock jocks set the political agenda. Television news trivialises itself with its ten-second grabs. The ABC exhausts itself in a frenzy of pre-emptive self-censorship at the behest of the most partisan administration we've ever seen. Magazines wallow in the shallows of celebrity obsession. Even the serious print media seldom allows opinion articles to go longer than 800 words.

In this environment, the creation of a forum for the expansive and unhurried expression of ideas, which can then be debated, also at length, is one the Australian public badly needs and deserves. I hope the *Quarterly Essay* will be embraced by readers of all political beliefs and that it will explain, provoke and inspire for a long time to come. It's a bold thing to take on a new publishing venture of this sort and we owe a debt of gratitude to Morry Schwartz for his courage.

The magazine has made a very good start with the second of the important things we are celebrating today: Robert Manne's essay *In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right.*

I have admired Robert's writing, but I've never read him with the familiar comfort of the reader who knows that he will always agree with the author. Robert doesn't deliver identikit responses. That is one of the things about him that infuriated his former *Quadrant* colleagues. He couldn't be relied on to buy the full package.

But his readers have always known that, whether you agree with him or not, he will be addressing the largest issues facing our society, and always with clarity and rigour.

All these qualities are evident in this important essay. It is a work of both the head and the heart. It is carefully researched and powerfully expressed. It needs to be widely read. It addresses the way in which members of a powerful network on the Right of Australian political life combined to undermine with distortion, omission, overstatement and lies, the history and experience of indigenous Australians first set out in *Bringing Them Home*, the report by Sir Ronald Wilson and Mick Dodson into the removal of thousands of Aboriginal children from their families over the course of the twentieth century.

But the essay ranges beyond the questions of the Stolen Generations. It looks at the roots and consequences of what Robert correctly sees as a wider cultural war over the meaning of Aboriginal dispossession.

One of the most depressing things to emerge from this work is Robert's account of how the Right in Australia—or at least this tightly networked part of it—when forced to choose between their ingrained philosophical hostility to a strong and intrusive role for the state and the defence of overtly racist policies, chose the latter.

Characters like McGuinness, Akerman, Devine and Bolt who can usually be relied on to recycle tedious British Tory clichés about the 'Nanny State' or homilies about the sanctity of the family, find themselves preferring to defend a terrible example of government-instituted social engineering designed to change the genetic make-up of Australia rather than acknowledge the extent of suffering caused by racist policies.

It's important to understand this: this is ground on which they themselves have chosen to fight their cultural battle.

What is it about this part of the Australian Right? What drives this secret terror, this fear of difference? This willingness to condone racism rather than acknowledge that, whatever the variety of motivations involved, a terrible thing was done to large numbers of our fellow Australians, not in the distant past but in a way that still affects many of them now?

When the Labor government in the early 1990s began to address issues like reconciliation, the need for an Australian republic and cultural issues, the Liberals in opposition thundered that these were 'distractions'. Sideshows. Not part of the real challenges facing Australia.

These challenges, we belatedly discovered, turned out in the Coalition's mind to have been a ham-fisted effort to implement a 1970s-style consumption tax that John Howard heard about 25 years ago and never forgot.

Once the Howard Government realised that, inconveniently for them, issues like reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians would not simply disappear, it set about redefining the problem. Ministers began to claim that what was wrong was that Labor and the bleeding hearts had focused on the wrong things—questions of confronting historical wrongs. Instead of these irrelevant, emotional issues, we should have been talking about practical matters. It was all about economics and could be fixed with a bit of money and a few tough administrators.

The Howard government's use of this favoured word 'practical' repays careful study.

We've had John Howard's 'practical reconciliation'—which means marginalising any version of history acknowledging past injustice as 'black armband' and therefore 'impractical' and doing everything possible to avoid confronting moral issues of indigenous dispossession.

And Alexander Downer's 'practical regionalism', which suggested that while it was OK to make a buck out of Asia, we should avoid 'emotional' regionalism—in other words, coming to grips with the deeper issues of Australia's relations with the region around us.

Then recently we had the Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration adding her own helpful proposal for 'practical multiculturalism', which she defined in culinary terms as the rest of us enjoying the occasional plate of Chinese take-away.

As I said on another occasion, the Howard government uses the word 'practical' like an anti-matter particle designed to obliterate the noun it's meant to describe.

But, of course, questions about how we define ourselves as a community and how we confront basic ethical issues are not, and never were, distractions. Mr Howard and his colleagues have been reminded of the fact every day.

The distraction comes when we fail to address them, when we avert our eyes from these core moral issues of national responsibility and pretend we can shuffle towards the future without acknowledging the truth of our past. That is what impedes our ability to move forward as a nation.

And none of these issues is more central than addressing the place in our society of indigenous Australians.

No-one denies that physical problems—health, housing, education, employment—are important to reconciliation. Certainly not me. It was the theme of the first speech I made as Prime Minister about Aboriginal issues, just a few weeks after taking over the job.

In February 1992 I told the inaugural meeting of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation that one of the big changes I wanted to see as Prime Minister was change in the status of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders:

I believe — in fact I'm quite certain — that the best way to improve relations between Aboriginal Australians and non-Aboriginal Australians and the best way to provide a basis for reconciliation is to close the gap in living conditions. At present the gap is huge. It has to be closed — in the end it has to be diminished to the point where no-one can point to someone and say the reason for that person's poverty, or illness, or alcoholism is that he or she is Aboriginal.

That remains true. But reconciliation must be about more than living standards. It has to begin, as I said later in 1992 at Redfern, with an act of recognition.

Recognition that the European settlement of this continent, from which we have all drawn huge benefits, came at a terrible cost to Aboriginal Australians. Acknowledgement that we failed to adequately recognise what was done and, with some noble exceptions, to make the most basic human response and enter into the hearts and minds of indigenous Australians. We failed to ask—how would I feel if this were done to me?

That 'failure to imagine' is what pervades each page of Robert Manne's account. He points out that probably the most important issue that Bringing Them Home has to teach is how 'almost no-one was able to see through the kind of racism which could make it seem that tearing Aboriginal children from their mothers and communities was a natural, even noble, act.'

The question of why that was continues to haunt us today.

It began with the lie of terra nullius.

When the High Court made its great and just decision in the Mabo case in June 1992 my government decided that we had to face the issue and to develop what became the native title legislation. I often think there was nothing better we did as a government.

I certainly never did anything more difficult. But the important things are always the hardest. And until we confronted the original lie that this was a continent of no-one, I don't think we had any chance of coming to terms with the history that followed.

There's nothing I regret more about losing office than losing responsibility for reconciliation and native title and other Aboriginal issues. We would have made such a difference.

For indigenous Australians, the lies have continued. The denial of the frontier massacres. The denial of the experiences of the stolen generations, supported by the government's submission to the Senate enquiry. And all pumped out into the public debate by the network of right-wing polemicists that Robert describes.

You could see John Howard at it again during the week on Paul Kelly's *Centenary of Federation* documentary on the ABC, refusing all invitations to apologise because 'I don't believe in apologising for something for which I was not personally responsible'.

As if that was ever the question. Or the issue.

John Howard says: I will not take responsibility for something I did not actually do. But I will bask in the reflected glory of things I didn't do; I will be a grateful heir to things I didn't do. I will, in other words, be very selective about my history.

But despite the past—and aspects of the present—I'm optimistic about the future.

One reason for this is an important point Robert makes in his essay.

He describes *Bringing Them Home* as a process, not just a conclusion. The same thing was true of the native title legislation and of the struggle over the Howard government's disgraceful decision to legislate away the rights of Aboriginal people recognised by the High Court in the Wik case.

No meaner thing was done by a Commonwealth government to a dependent and vulnerable constituency.

But one reason why Aboriginal people can assert their interests more confidently and look with greater hope to the future is that these processes have strengthened the indigenous community and have led to the emergence of a quite remarkable group of indigenous leaders in this country, including, of course, Lowitja O'Donoghue.

These different processes have given a new energy to debate inside the indigenous community. And that is where much of it has to take place.

But not all of it.

At the end of my speech in Redfern in 1992 I emphasised that it wasn't my intention to impress guilt upon present generations of Australians for the actions of the past, but rather to acknowledge that we now share a responsibility to put an end to the suffering.

I said that:

"Down the years, there has been no shortage of guilt, but it has not produced the responses we need. Guilt is not a very constructive emotion. I think what we need to do is open our hearts a bit."

And that's the second reason for my optimism. I think hearts are opening. We see it in the powerful, spontaneous support for reconciliation right across the Australian community.

We see it, too, in the determination of writers like Robert Manne never again to let the distortions and untruths stand unchallenged.

I'm proud to launch the *Quarterly Essay* and Robert Manne's I*n Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right.*