

JOHN BOND AND THE JOURNEY OF HEALING



John Bond is the Secretary of the National Sorry Day Committee. He tells the story of the vital people-led initiatives to overcome the violence which endures in the lives of Australia's 'stolen generations'

'For 150 years until the 1970s, many thousands of Aboriginal children were removed from their families to be raised in institutions, or fostered or adopted by non-indigenous families. The aim was to assimilate Aboriginal Australians into the dominant culture. The outcome was tragic. In 1995 the Federal Government agreed to set up an inquiry into this practice. To chair it they chose a former high court judge, **Sir Ronald Wilson** – or Sir Ron, as he preferred to be known. By the time his inquiry reported in 1997 however, an election had brought in the Government of John Howard. Their view was that Aboriginal interests had won too many concessions thanks to an undue sense of guilt among white Australians, and they took steps to 'swing the pendulum back'. Then Wilson's report, ***Bringing Them Home***, landed on their desk. Its 680 pages told in heart-rending detail of the agony endured by Aboriginals as a result of the forced removal policies.



For eight months the Government made no official response except to say that there would be no apology, and no compensation would be paid. The Australian community responded differently. *Bringing Them Home* sold in far greater numbers than any comparable report. Sir Ron spoke all over the country. 'I was a hard-boiled lawyer, and this inquiry changed me,' he told an overflowing audience at Old Parliament House in Canberra, 'If it can change me, it can change our nation.'

All State and Territory Governments, and many churches, held ceremonies to hear from representatives of their Aboriginal communities and to ask forgiveness. Eventually the Federal Government announced it would make available \$63 million over 4 years for counselling and family reunion services – a grossly inadequate sum to meet the need. They ignored most of the report's recommendations, including that a Sorry Day be held.

Sorry Day

A Sorry Day could be a significant step towards healing, Sir Ron believed. Could it be held on a community basis? He invited about 30 of us, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to meet and consider this question. We decided to try.

When we announced that a Sorry Day would be held on 26 May 1998, the response amazed us. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians met to plan. One person had the idea of creating ***Sorry Books***. Soon several thousand books were in circulation, and a million people wrote messages, many telling of personal experiences prompting them to contribute. On that day it was commemorated by thousands of events. Universities, government



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departments, local councils, churches held gatherings to hear from stolen generations people. Over half of the national TV news that evening was devoted to Sorry Day.

The stolen generations were deeply moved by Sorry Day happening. For the first time, they felt that the Australian community understood what they had gone through. Now the way was open towards healing. From across the country they met together. Out of their discussions came a decision to launch a '*Journey of Healing*'.



The Journey of Healing offers every Australian the chance to be part of this healing. Hundreds of events take place each year, bringing together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, at which members of the stolen generations speak. People who have felt alienated for years are experiencing the welcome of their communities. People who were hopeless, angry, despairing, now feel life is worth living.

Val's Healing

One of those who has found new life is a Sydney woman, **Val Linow**. In 2000, the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation* arranged a walk across the Sydney Harbour Bridge for all who wanted to show their support for reconciliation. Many of the stolen generations walked behind a banner proclaiming the Journey of Healing. But Val phoned me angrily to say that after all she had been through, there was no possibility of healing for her, and she would only walk with us if we got rid of the banner.

She told me her story, a tragic tale of cruelty and abuse ever since she was removed from her family at the age of two. I understood why she felt as she did. But she decided that, though she could not walk with us, she would still go on the Bridge.

A quarter of a million people walked. Some paid for a skywriting plane, which wrote 'Sorry' in the sky.

That night Val phoned me. '*I went on the walk,*' she said. '*I looked at the thousands of people who had come. I looked up at the word "Sorry" in the sky. Suddenly,*' she said, '*tears began to pour down my cheeks. I have found healing.*' Today she is active in the Journey of Healing in Sydney.



There is still much to be done to heal this deep wound. Many of the stolen generations have launched out on their own journey of healing. Many have yet to launch out. The more we continue and expand the work of healing – at community and Government level – the more will the stolen generations be enabled to make their full, unique contribution to our national life. We are committed to continuing the Journey of Healing until the *Bringing Them Home* report is implemented wholeheartedly, by Government and community alike.'

Sources and more information

Journey of Healing www.alphalink.com.au/~rez/Journey

HREOC: *Bringing Them Home* report www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/stolen_children