

Indigenous child removal rate risks 'second stolen generation', Kevin Rudd warns

On ninth anniversary of former PM's apology, Rudd urges government to place children with extended family or community if they need to be removed



Kevin Rudd hugs Indigenous guests after his apology to members of the stolen generations at Parliament House in Canberra on 13 February 2008.

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Kevin Rudd has warned Australia faces the risk of “a second stolen generation”, arguing government should set a new target of seeing 100% of Indigenous children placed with their extended family or community if they need to be removed.

In a speech delivered on the anniversary of Rudd’s 2008 apology to the stolen generations, and of the eve of the release of the annual Closing the Gap report, the former Labor prime minister said the existing targets needed to include a new metric on Indigenous child removal.

Rudd said the data pointed to a growing problem with Indigenous child removal. He said in 2006, 6,497 children were in out-of-home care nationally.

“Then there was the Little Children Are Sacred inquiry which increased the focus on Indigenous child welfare. By the end of June 2007 it had jumped by one-and-half thousand to 7,917,” Rudd said at the Australian National University on Monday evening.

“Since then, the number has grown by about an additional thousand kids a year, so that by mid 2015, the most recent year of recorded data, it stood at 15,432. And of those 15,432, 32.9% or 4,955 children were not placed in accordance with the 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.”

Rudd called for consideration of a new target. “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,” he said.

“What I am sure of is that 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.”

“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.”

The latest Closing the Gap report will be released in federal parliament on Tuesday.

Last year’s snapshot revealed varied progress across the seven education, employment and health targets, and no progress in raising the life expectancy of Indigenous people.

Indigenous adults are still likely to die 10 years earlier than other Australians. Last year’s report said the average life expectancy was 69 years for Indigenous men and 73 years for Indigenous women.

Two of the objectives were on track last year: the target to halve the gap in child mortality by 2018, and a target to improve Year 12 attainment by 2020.

Ahead of the release of the new snapshot, Turnbull paid tribute to Rudd’s apology in 2008.

“It was a remarkable and historic moment. The galleries were filled, overwhelmingly, with our first Australians. There was almost no room in the great hall,” the prime minister said.

“The area in front of parliament was a sea of humanity, expectation and support.

“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. It was an apology whose time had come.”

Turnbull said as well as recognising the challenges, it was important to validate the success stories.

He said there were great stories of achievement, “and we are looking at them here in this House”.

“The first Indigenous Australian to be a minister in a commonwealth government, Ken Wyatt, and Linda Burney ... the first Indigenous women to be a member of this House, and minister, of course, in the New South Wales government previously.

“So there are great positive stories to tell, and we have to be focused on them as well.”

The Labor leader, Bill Shorten, acknowledged successes, but said profound challenges remained on the road to reconciliation. He said the parliament needed to take hope from the resilience of Indigenous people.

“We should be taking hope from the resilience of Aboriginal people, drawing hope from the success of Aboriginal leadership, finding hope in the way that communities, locals, young people and their elders are tackling the problems they face, creating hope in a future where our first Australians have the first say in decisions which affect their lives – and with this hope, let us walk forward together in the spirit of the apology nine years ago today.”