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The Apologies of Australia, Canada and the United States to Historically Subjugated Peoples: On argumentation, reconciliation, and forgiveness

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ABSTRACT: In 2008, the governments of Australia and Canada apologized to indigenous peoples of each respective country for past wrongs, while the United States House of Representatives offered an apology to African peoples and their descendants for slavery. This paper conducts a comparative analysis of the three national moments to explore the capacities for language-based argumentation to invite forgiveness, mitigate historical social injustices, and promote inter-cultural accord that weaves temporal sinews of reconciliation.

KEYWORDS: apology, Australia, Canada, discourse, forgiveness, reconciliation, United States, trust

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the governments of three nations in succession apologized for a history of mistreatment of subjugated populations. The Australian apology, led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and passed by both houses of parliament, was extended to the Stolen Generations for the removal of children of Australian and Torres Strait Islander descent from their families by the Australian and State government agencies and church missions, endorsed by successive government legislation and authority. The Canadian

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government's apology, delivered by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in Parliament, addressed the practice of forced assimilation as exemplified by the residential schools system. The United States apologies took the form of non-binding congressional resolutions; the first, to native Americans and Alaskans for depredations suffered at the hands of the federal government; and, the second to African American citizens for slavery and Jim Crow laws leaving a legacy of segregation. The apologies took different institutional forms in varied political contexts. Nevertheless each featured arguments justifying public recognition of wrongdoing between governments and subjugated peoples and each sought to construct a threshold to cross in moving robustly toward reconciliation.

Argumentation appears to have positive, if limited, capacities to both constitute and generate cross-cultural appreciation and understanding. In the context of a historic moment wherein the potential for reconciliation is present, the question is one of "how to recollect the past in the name of making the future" (Doxtader 2003, p. 267). Robert Asen argues, "in both scholarly and popular assessments discourse is too often regarded as prefatory to genuine action" (2004, p. 207). The argument that discourse should be taken seriously is critical to an appreciation of the apology's potential remedial qualities. In and of itself the text is a vital recognition of historical injustices. But still more important is its potential to spark enhanced intra-national respect amongst all peoples of Australia, Canada, and the United States. Ideally, "as deliberation raises expectations that are feared or hoped for, public argument is a way to share in the construction of the future" (Goodnight 1982, para 1).

We consider the apology as public argument, trace several responses from the Aboriginal and Subjugated Peoples communities to the event of apology, then assess the role, and absence, of sufficient forums to sponsor a broader culture and discourse of forgiveness. Trudy Govier finds public acknowledgement of historical wrongdoing is crucial to facilitating cooperative relations, but that such apologies are often hard to come by. Still harder to find is bilateral agreement (2002, p. 147). In each case, we address three issues: First, the capacity for argument to motivate productive exchange between cultures by acknowledging wrongs of one group to another over time; second, the construction of a threshold where moves to greater parity and symmetry can stimulate mutually constructive interaction directed toward reconciliation; third, an examination of the limits to immediate forgiveness in the interests of sustaining broader public argument on the sincerity and commitments of redress. The cases studied unfolded in a rapid, historical sequence of redress; yet, each has its own somewhat unique national context and outcome. The paper proceeds to analyze acknowledgment, apology, and forgiveness in the sequences of moves toward initiating national reconciliation.

2. AUSTRALIA'S APOLOGY FOR THE STOLEN GENERATIONS

The formal apology given to the aboriginal people of Australia by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on 13 February, 2008, was one of the most anticipated events in Australia's political and socio-cultural history, widely regarded as an historic gesture of reconciliation (Schubert and Smiles 2008; Shoemaker 2008). Extensive national media coverage saw the event televised and broadcast live at official gatherings around the country, simultaneously watched by millions in Australia. The apology came 11 years

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after the tabling in Federal Parliament of the “Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families.” better known as the *Bringing Them Home* report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). The *Bringing Them Home* report officially recognized the gross violations of indigenous human rights continuing today to affect Indigenous people’s daily lives and recommended reparation and official apologies in Commonwealth and national reconciliatory processes (Wikipedia, *Bringing Them Home*; Kerin 2008).

Since the 1997 tabling of *Bringing Them Home*, the dogmatic stance of the incumbent Prime Minister John Howard to refrain from saying sorry to the Stolen Generations stimulated public debate and controversy about the reconciliation processes with respect to issues on historical truth or representation—including arguments over the nature and extent of removals, determination of genocide, and acknowledgement, social responsibility and reparation for past wrongs. John Howard’s personal statement of regret passed by federal parliament in August 1999 notably omitted the words *sorry* and *compensation* (Kerin 2008). Furthermore, his statement shunned the notion of trans-generational responsibility:

[...] for the overwhelming majority of the current generations of Australians, there was no personal involvement of them or of their parents and to say to them that they are personally responsible and that they should feel a sense of shame about those events, is to visit upon them an unreasonable penalty and an injustice.

Others have contested that Howard’s denial of apology was motivated principally by concerns with compensation claims if an apology were to ever be regarded as an admission of liability, a confession in the judicial system (Rose 2008). Human rights advocates and indigenous spokespeople consistently demanded an apology as a first step in the reconciliation dialogue, not only as a healing gesture but also as a strategy for establishing among non-indigenous Australians clear understanding of the issues of the history of oppression (Mellor, Bretherton & Firth 2007).

Formal apologies from the Commonwealth Government and most state parliaments of Australia occurred between 1997 and 2008. Perhaps, the stance of the Howard federal government paradoxically facilitated steps towards a goal of national reconciliation by agitating public discourse that promoted awareness and discussion of past wrongs, helping to foster preliminary cooperation and trust between White and Black Australians which then ultimately permitted widespread support of an apology.

The emotional impact of the apology on the indigenous communities reflected their enormous relief in receiving the long overdue acknowledgement of past wrongs inflicted upon their people, supported by the display of genuine sincerity and shared expectation of mutual respect by both White and Black Australia. “I never imagined I would ever see the day” said Sally Fitzpatrick, co-chair, National Sorry Day Committee. The response of White Australia reflected a nation’s rather reluctant relief at realizing its delayed maturity to accept responsibility for past wrongs, as guilt and remorse embedded in the past came to effect a trans-generational co-operation necessary for genuine reconciliation. Mick Dodson, co-chairman of Reconciliation Australia, reflected on the implications of the apology for all Australians: “It allows us to move forward with honesty, an acceptance of shame about parts of our history and with courage, pride, maturity and hope” (Schubert & Smiles 2008).

Furthermore, upheld in public sentiment was the essential duty of co-operation and peoples “working effectively together.” which Govier contends are fundamental to the sustainability of reconciliation (Govier 2002, p. 144). Comments from the former governor-general Sir William Deane illustrated the significance of the apology’s moment for creating the spiritual impetus necessary to drive practical aspects of reconciliation and “start doing something” (Peatling & Irvine 2008). The apology in Australia marked a watershed in negotiations between White and Black Australians on matters of reconciliation, opening up opportunities for dialogue and argument with new directions and emphases.

However, if mutually constructive interaction directed towards reconciliation is reliant on greater parity and symmetry between White and Black Australia, then Australian political and cultural contexts need circumspect examination. Racial intolerance has marked Australian society and politics for the last 150 years. The White Australia Policy in its earlier manifest has even been cited as an original impetus for the South African Apartheid System (Wikipedia, White Australia Policy; Limb 1999). Alexis Wright, the multi-award winning Indigenous Australian novelist, writes about the tenet of public fear fundamentally contained in the Australian socio-political experience (Wright 2008). Shoemaker cites Wright’s recent novel, *Carpentaria*, when referring to the “transformational positivism” that is requisite for people to become, as Wright proposes, “instruments of possibility” in shaping a more robust future (Shoemaker 2008). Until then, it seems potential bigotry is likely to permeate practical aspects of reconciliation and prevent the narrowing of the socio-economic gap between Indigenous Australians and the rest of the population. Mixed responses to Rudd’s apology reflected a concern with preventing once and for all the inequity associated with discriminatory practices that prevail even in reconciliation efforts. Greens leader Bob Brown said “it was embarrassing for Parliament to ask for the apology to be accepted without reparations” (Schubert & Smiles 2008) and Australian lawyer, activist and Cape York Indigenous leader Noel Pearson summed up sentiment when he wrote: ‘blackfellas will get the words, the whitefellas keep the money’ (McQuire 2008).

Apology establishes a platform for commencing the reconciliation process, and many saw Rudd’s apology as “laying the paving stones towards conciliation” (*The Canberra Times*, Australia, February 15, 2008). Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission president John van Doussa specified the urgency for eliminating the gap between the life advantages of non-indigenous and indigenous Australians, with particular priority given to addressing the pressing issues of health, housing, education, and employment (*The New Zealand Herald*, February 13, 2008). Yet, the divide between symbolic and practical aspects of reconciliation is presently enduring in Australia a dialogue of negotiated forgiveness, so that in Australia’s current context forgiveness and reconciliation may be “somewhat more distant than proximate” in the aftermath of apology (Mellor, Bretherton & Firth 2007, p. 31).

Despite the highly publicized coverage of the national apology, it is argued that most non-indigenous Australians have scant realization or acknowledgement of “the extent of the devastation that White settlers and their descendants inflicted on Aboriginal people” (Mellor, Bretherton & Firth 2007, p. 14). Greer (2008) and also Mellon, Bretherton and Firth (2007) demand that non-indigenous Australians be pushed beyond their comfort zones to listen to indigenous stories and so trigger the necessary force to

stimulate genuine moves towards reconciliation. Yet, forgiveness is wrought with complexities. Lowitja O'Donohue, a prominent indigenous voice and member of the stolen generation, finds an apology essential but forgiveness is difficult and futile for those no longer alive today (Johnston 2008).

3. CANADA'S APOLOGY FOR THE INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS SYSTEM

In contrast to the Australian case, the Canadian federal government did supplement its apology with financial reparations to residential school survivors and their descendants. Yet the symbolic power of apology was the same: promotion of awareness of past wrongs, and fostering of shared expectation of mutual respect. In each national case, there was understanding that political and cultural contexts, not least institutionalized racism, demanded acknowledgement. These are no simple tasks.

In October 2008, Harry LaForme resigned as chair of Canada's Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC]. Justifying his decision, LaForme stated that while his commissioners wished to focus primarily on documenting historical evidence, he desired rather to foster reconciliation between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians. The TRC's mandate accommodates both projects. Its task is to create a historical account of the residential schools, promote healing and encourage reconciliation (CBC 2008). LaForme's resignation underscores the fragility of reconciliation efforts.

The apology's context precedes Canadian confederation (1867). Ten years earlier, the British government passed the Gradual Civilization Act with the explicit purpose of assimilating aboriginal peoples into British colonial society. Harper acknowledged that government actions were often "based on the assumption that aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior."

Approximately 150,000 aboriginal children attended Canada's 130 residential schools before 1996 when the last federally run Gordon Residential School closed in Saskatchewan (Assembly 2008a). On June 11, 2008, the Canadian government apologized to indigenous peoples for this system, recognizing that the Indian residential schools policy "has had a lasting and damaging impact on aboriginal culture, heritage and language." Prime Minister Harper put the statement directly: "The government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly" (Harper 2008). The federal government thus signalled an effort to redefine the relationship between First Nations peoples and non-aboriginal Canadians.

Yet in light of the long context of discrimination, and following Harper's claim that the TRC was intended to be the tangible "cornerstone of the settlement agreement" (Harper 2008), how important was the apology itself? Normative standards of trust are crucial to any society's functioning. In this specific case, historical memory and current socio-economic disparities mean that constructive work (the apology) was required to build trust that formed the grounds for future reconciliation efforts. Intimating this goal, Prime Minister Harper claimed that establishment of the TRC would be:

[A] positive step in forging a new relationship between aboriginal peoples and other Canadians, a relationship based on the knowledge of our shared history, a respect for each other and a desire to move forward together with a renewed understanding that strong families, strong communities and

vibrant cultures and traditions will contribute to a stronger Canada for all of us. (Harper 2008)

With the apology in the public domain, the barrier of formal recognition of difference was dismantled and efforts toward a common future could begin.

Initial responses to the apology from aboriginal leaders were positive. Assembly of First Nations Chief Phil Fontaine declared, “This apology can, I believe, be viewed as a sincere attempt to heal past wounds” (Assembly 2008b), and stated, “We must now capture a new spirit and vision to meet the challenges of the future [...] We still have to struggle, but now we are in this together” (2008). This optimism was echoed by Inuit leader Mary Simon, who avowed, “a new day has dawned.” and ex-residential school student Willie Blackwater who stated, “If I am able to forgive my perpetrator, I can forgive Canada” (O’Neill and Dalrymple 2008).

Not all responses were charitable. As was the case in Australia, the apology was also interpreted as an attempt to obscure ongoing socio-economic asymmetries. Mary Simon, president of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, informed the Senate, “I believe that real and lasting forgiveness must be earned [and] will be forthcoming only when it is clear that government is willing to act.” Mohawk scholar Brant-Castellano argued that a transformation in Canadian society requires an end to Canadians’ “indifference to problems within native communities regarding access to safe drinking water, education, and health care” (Diebel 2008), while Rick Salutin asserted, “sincerity is cheap, compared, say, to the \$5-billion cost of the Kelowna Accord with aboriginals, which the apologetic Stephen Harper tore up, or to accelerating the glacial land-claims process” (2008). Sincerity was here deemed insufficient to warrant acceptance, a prerequisite to the broader aim of forgiveness.

Corresponding public statements of forgiveness by First Nations citizens might achieve a symbolic completion to the exchange and strengthen the grounds for collaborative work towards an enriched common future. The question is, did the government open a space for robust dialogue or public acts of forgiveness? Writing in *The Globe and Mail*, author Erna Paris criticized the TRC for its unidirectional orientation: “There is [...] no mechanism for the residential school survivors to offer forgiveness, should they wish to do so” (2008). A danger of unilateral apologies is that the apologizing party may, in isolation, interpret the act as a final negation of collective guilt or blame. In this case, myths of Canada’s benevolent colonial history and contemporary status as equitable multicultural society may be left un-discussed despite persisting socio-economic inequities.

4. UNITED STATES CONGRESSIONAL APOLOGIES FOR MISTREATMENT OF NATIVE AMERICANS AND FOR SLAVERY

From time to time, the United States Congress has issued apologies to wronged peoples. In 1988, it offered reparation to Japanese-American citizens interred during World War II. In 1995, Congress recognized that the 1890s US sponsored coup dethroning Hawaiian queen Liliuokalani was illegal and wrong. In 2005, the Senate apologized for failing to pass anti-lynching laws. Even greater more pervasive wrongs awaited recognition. United States apologies to its native peoples and African-American descendants first came together as congressional resolutions in the winter of 2007. H. Res. 194 “apologizing for the enslavement and racial segregation of African-Americans” was introduced to the

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House of Representatives by James Cohen and eventually adopted in late July of 2008. S. J. Res. 4 acknowledged “a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the United States Government regarding Indian tribes” in offering an apology to “all Native Peoples of the United States.” It was adopted as a supplement to the Indian Health Care bill in February 2008. Whereas the Cohen resolution was the inspiration of a white candidate running against a black opponent in an African-American populated Memphis district, the Sam Brownback sponsored resolution was the product of a longer term commitment on the part of the Kansas Senator. Neither bill gained national press attention, both resolutions were non-binding and adopted by voice vote. Both apologies were directed at wronged peoples, but the Indian nations and former slaves were addressed different needs for acknowledgment and found alternative routes of reconciliation.

The purpose of Res. 4 was to “acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill conceived policies” by the United States government and to offer an apology to all Native Peoples. In the “Whereas” clauses was embedded a story which found these peoples to be native stewards who for “millennia honored, protected, and stewarded” the land. European settlement is described as a fall into violence, wars where treaties were settled only to be broken, forced removal, massacre, and appropriation of land. The present “severe social ills” and “economic troubles” are held in part as a legacy of these policies. Despite such treatment, the resolution asks it be recognized that Native Americans have protected this land serving in the military during wartime. As Brownback summed the need for redress:

For too much of our history, Federal-Tribal relations have been marked by broken treaties, mistreatment, and dishonorable dealings. I believe it is time we worked to restore these relationships to good health.

The acknowledgement and apology itself has two sections. The first apologizes and expresses regrets and with broad, religious resonance counsels that in so acknowledging wrongs we move toward “a brighter future where all the people of this land live reconciled as brothers and sisters, and harmoniously steward and protect this land together.” The second section provides a disclaimer. “Thing in this Joint Resolution (1) authorizes or supports any claim against the United States; or (2) serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States.” Moral and legal arguments do not play on the same court, it seems. Legal contention is still an open means of consequential discussion as to what is owed to whom, whereas the moral high ground is staked out by recognizing for scrupulously legitimate treatment of nations overseen by the American state.

Unlike in Australia and in Canada, national media coverage of the resolution was thin to nearly non-existent. Reported reception was mixed. “Tribes are ambivalent about the resolution because they believe that lawmakers continue to make policies that are harmful to Indian Country.” Under-funding of “critical Indian programs in health, housing and education” was the immediate issue. Supporters of the joint resolution see it as an opportunity to acknowledge past abuses and to move toward reconciliation. Joe Shirley Jr., President of the Navajo Nation said, “Sometimes a metaphorical clean slate is needed to build a better foundation for the future of relations between Native Nations and

the United States” (Friends Committee). Thus, the apology strengthened controversy over justice and federal policy.

H. Res. 4 followed a similar pattern. The purpose of the resolution was to apologize “for the enslavement and racial segregation of African-Americans.” The “Whereas” clauses narrate, first, a story of brutal, integral, early American injustice; then follow up with a story of the Jim Crow period as slavery by another name. Thus, the House became resolved to “acknowledge the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery and Jim Crow,” to apologize for the wrongs committed, and 3. commit to “rectify the linger consequences” and to stop human rights violation in the future.

Tennessee Representative Steve Cohen supported the case by shaming Congress which after 246 years of knowing the misdeeds of that institution had yet to apologize. Virginia, North Carolina, Florida and Alabama had already adopted such measures. Should the U.S. Congress have less “moral authority?” he wondered. Indeed, he observed that Congress had unanimously encouraged the Japanese government to apologize for its “use of Chinese women,” and over twenty years ago had apologized to Japanese Americans. Could we offer no less to African American citizens? “This is a symbolic resolution,” he admitted,

but hopefully it will begin a dialogue where people will open their hearts and their minds to the problems that face this country from racism that exists...on both sides and which must end if we are to go forward [...] (Steve Cohen H7226).

Responses to the apology were ambivalent. Jay Leno suggested by way of humor and Chad Dion Lassiter by way of teaching that after all these years an apology is really too late. Julie Armstrong a psychologist dubbed this the first step, but a meaningless one unless it was followed by discussion in the schools. Barbara Lee called it as simple as Psychology 101: “if you hurt somebody and don’t say, ‘I’m sorry,’ ‘how can you move on?’” Eighty-year old black Memphis resident Jacqueline Reid said of Cohen, turning over his election-timing resolution,

It doesn't matter why he did it [...] I’m only concerned that someone who considers themselves a lobbyist for the people had the courage to submit something that should have been done a long time ago (Fears).

The apology raised again the long standing reparations debate (Masci 2001), but that fall the move toward a time of reconciliation was made by the American public in the strong support of the Democratic presidential candidate, Barack Obama.

5. CONCLUSION

Australia, Canada and the U.S. all exemplify what Robert Manne labels settler societies; each nation’s history entails primarily unidirectional harm by a colonizing people on indigenous inhabitants (Govier 2006, p. 21-2). The U.S. case differs in a key respect in that African-Americans were not indigenous but were, rather, forcibly imported as slave labor. Yet each national case is similar in that aboriginals and African-Americans alike suffered great injustices at the hands of official national policies. In each context, we

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might recall Trudy Govier's observation that the word 'reconciliation' can be misleading in that it suggest that relations between two groups were once ideal (or 'conciled'). But if we believe that trust may be created where previously absent, historical practice and memory may be threaded into a new narrative. Here, dialogue is critical.

Not all apologies require or invite forgiveness to be successful (Govier 2006, p. 13). As argued clearly by Govier, reconciliation and forgiveness are not intrinsically related. However, acknowledgment of wrongdoing does bolster to a process of reconciliation. Forgiveness may be withheld, conditionally granted, or incrementally achieved. Such alternatives invite argument. Indeed, the act of apology may engender debate which is not possible without an agreement to go forward. Erik Doxtader claims that "Reconciliation's goals are less self-evident goods than a provocation to argue about who does and ought to have the power to define and judge the form and quality of human relationships" (2003, p. 277). The power to forgive does not require condoning, excusing, or forgetting (Govier 2002, p. viii), but exchange over timeliness, meaning, or conditions of acceptance test sincerity and provide extended trust-negotiating that may engender powerful reconciliation.

The apologies reviewed so far seem to leave the process less open than it should be. Modern media pander to larger audiences. So, space and time for discussion of serious issues that reflect wrong failed to be engaged, or once engaged, not sustained. Do the governments have a responsibility to ensure adequate media representation of First Nations voices? By what channels may forgiveness (or more broadly, responses in general) be communicated? Constituting substantially disenfranchised groups, aboriginal peoples have limited access to forms of mass publicity. While new technologies have led to enhanced political efficacy of previously separate indigenous groups (Abele and Rodin 2007), the prominence of First Nations groups' voices remains minor relative to that of governmental sources. Weyeneth argues, "There are few final judgments in history, but apologies can help write closing chapters where the past is filled with difficult events" (2001, p. 33). On the other hand, occasionally apology moves in a timely fashion with forgiveness and reconciliation. Obama's election was a unique step forward. The success of apology should not be left to timing and chance, in our judgment. Critical discussion and review should be taken up in the study of argumentation. In cases where severe imbalances of power have impaired the symmetrical relationships of interlocutors to make decisions on the "force of the better argument," the admission of state actors to the use of force to subjugate citizens raises the question of when and how reciprocal respect, trust, and confidence can be restored to assume the safety of conversational exchange. In this sense, reconciliation entails renewing or initiating dialogue that crosses national status, collective memory, and public cultures.

[Link to commentary](#)

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