

The Vision Splendid

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Sometimes, it seems we were all away the day they did imagination. Recently on ABC Local Radio a call-in segment asked listeners to outline their sixty second grand vision for the nation. There's an election due any week now, apparently, with precious little vision evident on either side in Canberra. Call now, have your say.

The segment was worrying, even allowing for Local Radio's programming focus on the lighter side of life. All entertaining enough, there was talk of free optical surgery for people with eye disease and putting respect back into schools. Good. Lots of calls for better public transport, making local government more accountable and proper redistribution of wealth. Yes, let's do it. Someone suggested the piping of city storm water inland. Nice idea, if it's practical. And, of course, let's get rid of the states, that'll fix things. No argument here.

In fact, it's difficult to disagree with any of this, really, except that it hardly amounts to vision. What was sad was that not one caller nominated a genuine process of reconciliation with Aboriginal people which, it might be argued - and I do - is where the grand vision must begin. Perhaps we've all just 'moved on', as our Prime Minister terms it. And this isn't the only country, of course, where historical discomfort is avoided. The British have collective baggage to reconcile in India, Ireland and Palestine, as do the French in North Africa. Canadians and Americans have made a start with their own indigenous peoples and there's more to be done. Around the world there are many sorries still to be said.

Is any talk of future vision realistic, though, before the present has achieved honest equilibrium? Not to denigrate the obviously good intentions of the radio callers, I don't believe so. And balance in the present first needs balance with the past. The 'sorry' dialogue in this country, after a period of inspiring reconciliation marches in the 90s, has gone quiet. Some sympathisers with the wider cause say the word itself may no longer be relevant, anyway. Aboriginal people are encouraged by many of their leaders to look to their own house and the statistics on violence, drunkenness and child abuse suggest this is a major priority.

But why is the problem there in the first place? Why is domestic violence so much greater than the national average in indigenous Australia? I recently discovered Kate Grenville's extraordinary historical novel *Secret River*. I had thought I understood fairly well the situation in which Australia's conquered people finds itself, until I read this book. Nowhere have I seen described so eloquently the way in which alienation, across the generations, can be absorbed into collective self perception. So, no, I don't agree that a dignified apology to black Australians has become irrelevant. It remains long overdue and until we do it (and until, for that matter, the British do it in Palestine and the French in North Africa) the people of these places will continue to resent, and continue to collectively self harm.

Why is this simple word 'sorry' so difficult, when to say it would liberate both them and us; and more importantly, do away with the very idea of them and us? It would take longer than sixty seconds, but then perhaps a grand vision for a future together could be properly considered. And then we could really move on.