

Shaping the future on the back of hope and symbolism

By Eva Scheerlinck



2008 has come, and almost gone, in the blink of an eye. Yet so much has happened; so much has changed!

The American people elected a new president this year; a man who represents incredible change for the US administration. The election of Barack Obama to the White House symbolises optimism and hope, and an opportunity not only for the marginalised in society, but for everyone, anywhere in the world who has ever dreamed that anything is possible.

A great window of opportunity exists in the wake of the US election, but at the same time a large and heavy burden falls on the shoulders of Obama and his team. The triumph of a black man's win in a race for the White House will be short-lived, if he cannot maintain people's confidence and continue to provide the necessary hope. The opportunity for a renaissance of Western political thinking is vast; the stakes, however, are high.

In February 2008, the Australian prime minister, Kevin Rudd, apologised to the Stolen Generations and all those affected by the removal of Indigenous children from their homes and their communities. This, too, was powerfully symbolic, and represented the first step towards reconciliation and respect, in a country where the tensions between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities have

been palpable for over two centuries.

Here, too, a large burden falls to our current administration to follow through with real, positive actions to achieve true reconciliation. The apology cannot stand alone, and must be complemented by a meaningful system of reparations if the moves towards reconciliation are to retain the confidence and hope of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The 2008 Olympic games, hosted by the People's Republic of China, also represented a meeting of vastly different cultures and value-systems, and gave the world an opportunity to rediscover one of its earliest cultures. It was also seen as an opportunity to influence the development of a stronger commitment to human rights protections in China, in areas such as freedom of speech, democratic opposition, and eliminating the death penalty and torture.

The games also generated intense interest in China as a tourist destination. Trading with China has been on the increase for the past few decades, and this trend is only likely to increase with small companies now also maximising the potential to forge trading links. With increased foreign involvement in Chinese communities, there is hope that real change for the people of China will eventuate.

Hope and symbolism are powerful stimulants. Capturing people's minds is vital in bringing about wholesale reform. But giving the rhetoric

substance is necessary to consolidate people's faith and to prevent an enduring cynicism. Barack Obama and Kevin Rudd must both fulfil their promises with appropriate action in a timely fashion, or risk losing support; support that will take a generation to rebuild.

In Australia, we now have the opportunity to engage in a debate about our values, our dignity, our rights and our responsibilities. We must shape our future on the back of the hope and symbolism vested in the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the government's public consultation process on the creation of an Australian human rights instrument. If we don't act now and participate in this process, it will be another generation before the opportunity is likely to present itself again. ■

Eva Scheerlinck is the Australian Lawyers Alliance's Chief Executive Officer.

PHONE (02) 9258 7700

EMAIL eva@lawyersalliance.com.au