

# You made us want to be better, PM says

Anthony Albanese has told more than 100 Stolen Generation survivors that their harrowing stories made Australia want to become a better, fairer and stronger nation where any child can have the same chance at life.

“I want an Australia where every Australian can be prime minister,” Mr Albanese told The Australian on Friday.

The philanthropic Australian Indigenous Education Foundation wants this too. The foundation started a national conversation about it this week, asking each of us to guess if we will live to see the nation’s first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prime minister. An accompanying Newspoll found just 23 per cent of Australians think it will happen in the foreseeable future, down from 31 per cent in 2013.

It is a question that matters to AIEF because it has been backing promising young Indigenous Australians since 2008, the year Kevin Rudd made his historic apology to the Stolen Generations. On that day, Dr Rudd told parliament: “The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia’s history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.”

On the 18th anniversary of that apology on Friday, Mr Albanese had breakfast with more than 100 Aboriginal people who were removed from their families as children. In the Great Hall of parliament, Mr Albanese sat next to 97-year-old Ruth Hegarty, the Aboriginal author and activist who helped fellow Australians understand the human toll of past policies and laws that broke up Aboriginal families with her 1999 memoir *Is that you, Ruthie?*. She tells her extraordinary story, including growing up as a “dormitory girl” at Cherbourg Aboriginal Mission.

Ms Hegarty told Mr Albanese: “Freedom was something I never had, freedom was what I wanted more than anything.”

The Healing Foundation reflected on the grace of Stolen Generation survivors on Friday, calling for them to be cared for in old age in a manner that respects their trauma.

Mr Albanese told the elders they were central to an important shift 18 years ago.

“The apology was an honest reckoning with our history,” he said in his speech at the breakfast event. “But the apology didn’t just look to the past – it was a call to action for the future.

“A call that was – at its heart – deeply patriotic, true to our abiding instincts for better, fairer, stronger Australia – an Australia in which we have closed the gap.”

This week former Indigenous Australians minister Ken Wyatt, who was born on a mission and became the first Aboriginal person appointed to a federal cabinet, said the next generation of Indigenous leaders were so capable and not focused on history.

He predicted the first Indigenous Australian to serve as prime minister would be proud of their Aboriginality but also proud to serve all Australians.

Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, an Aboriginal woman from Alice Springs, expressed a view shared by The Australian’s subscribers when she said: “Leadership in this country must be determined by merit, capability and service to all Australians, not identity.

“Symbolic milestones will not close the gap; practical outcomes in education, safer communities and economic opportunity will.”