



Speech by

Hon. ANNA BLIGH

MEMBER FOR SOUTH BRISBANE

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STOLEN GENERATION

Hon. A. M. BLIGH (South Brisbane—ALP) (Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care and Minister for Disability Services) (12.44 p.m.): I wish to pay tribute to the traditional owners of this land and acknowledge the presence here today of many indigenous Queenslanders, both in the gallery and outside participating in the journey of healing ceremony on the Speaker's Green. I hope that in the not-too-distant future I may also acknowledge indigenous members of our community in this Chamber as fellow honourable members.

As a member of the Queensland Parliament, which sanctioned, legislated and implemented practices in the past including segregation, assimilation and protectionist policies which have forced the separation of indigenous communities, I offer my unreserved and profound apology. In my capacity as the Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care, I also publicly apologise for the role that the Department of Family Services and previous Ministers have played in the past in the removal of indigenous children from the guidance and love of their parents, family and community.

This is a deeply personal and emotional issue. I challenge anyone sitting in this Chamber who has held their child or heard their child's laugh to imagine what it would be like to know that their child, due to no reason other than the colour of their skin, is only their child as long as someone decrees it so, and to imagine what it would be like to live their lives searching for their family. In this regard, I put on the record the voice of one of the people who gave evidence to the stolen generation inquiry, someone who found their mother late in their life. This person said—

"I walked into my mother and we hugged and this hot, hot rush from the tip of my toes up to my head filled every part of my body—so hot. That was my first feeling of love and it could only have come from my mum. I was so happy, but that was the last time that I got to see her."

The Family Services Department has had a long and lasting effect on the lives of indigenous people in Queensland and it acknowledges its own part in this history. Aboriginal children were systematically removed from parents by officers of my department for reasons which would not be countenanced today. No doubt the many officers of the department who removed these children in the past were well-intentioned people of goodwill—well-meaning people carrying out the laws and policies entrenched and endorsed by this Parliament. But the forced removal of these children was wrong, the laws of this Parliament were wrong and the actions of those officers were wrong.

From the stories documented in the Bringing Them Home report, it is clear that many indigenous children were taken out of non-abusive family environments and put into abusive circumstances. They were taken into circumstances where their labour was exploited, circumstances where their childhood was stolen and circumstances where their understanding of love and safety was diminished or destroyed.

This legacy lives on. The legacy lives on in the trans-generational lack of parenting knowledge usually passed from one generation to the next. The legacy lives on in the social disruption associated with dispossession and the despair of loss of identity, such as family violence and alcohol abuse. It lives on in the lack of personal resources in many families to address the problems confronting them. It lives on in the broken hearts and broken lives of so many members of our community

There is no more tragic evidence of this legacy than the overrepresentation of indigenous children in the protection or detention of the State. Indigenous children make up 5% of all children in Queensland, but they are three times more likely still to be subject to child protection notifications than non-indigenous children. As at 30 June 1998, indigenous children comprised more than 25% of all the children under Queensland protective orders.

Queensland also has the shameful claim to one of the highest rates of indigenous youth incarceration. Indigenous children are 41 times more likely than non-indigenous children to be in our detention. Fifty-six per cent of all children in custody in Queensland are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children. We must reverse this trend.

To truly embark on reconciliation, past practices must be severed with a loud declaration of apology. In Queensland, the next millennium must be faced with a full acknowledgment and apology to its indigenous peoples by its rulers—by this Chamber. We cannot face the future with hope unless we open our minds and our hearts to our full history. We cannot in all honesty reach back into our past and select our moments of glory to celebrate with pride whilst we collectively unremember our shameful episodes.

I ask those who say that the past is best forgotten: would you have us forget the bravery of the young Australian men who did not return from Gallipoli? Would you have us forget the national pride in Australia winning the America's Cup in 1983? If these live on in our collective memory, are not entire generations of Aboriginal children stolen from their culture and their families also worthy of our memory?

Our past lives with us today. At the end of a park in my electorate is a vacant block of land with old stone steps leading into it. Like many local residents I have passed this land many times over the past 20 years and wondered what it was. I found out last year when it was identified as the site of a church home where hundreds of stolen Aboriginal children had lived. This was marked by a public ceremony, initiated by Lord Mayor Jim Soorley and fully supported by his council, to which all local neighbours were invited, as were members of the Aboriginal community and senior representatives of the churches. This place is now marked by a plaque which reads in part—

"In the years 1900-1971, as a matter of Government policy, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were forcibly removed from their families and culture by representatives of the State with the support of the wider community including the Christian churches. Some members of these stolen generations were placed in State or church institutions. Others were fostered or adopted by white Australians. They took the children away. Our souls will cry no more for now we are going home."

A church service was held at that plaque this morning and, no doubt, they will be held similarly on every National Sorry Day. This service was celebrated by both Aboriginal and white clergy to mark this important day.

My only regret in this debate today is that it has taken almost three years since the Bringing Them Home report for this apology to transpire in Queensland and that it lacks the full consensus of all members in the Chamber. Much has been said about an apology and whether it will do any good or make any difference. I do not know the answer to that. I do know that the many people who were stolen or had their children stolen have asked for this apology. I know that they believe it will make a difference and help them in their healing process. I know that it is a very small thing to ask, and it should be a very easy thing to give. If this small gesture makes any small difference for even one member of my community living with this pain, then it should be given with generosity and with an open heart. I believe that everyone in this Parliament aspires to live in peace with our indigenous Queenslanders. But there cannot be, and never has been, peace without justice. And there can be no justice without reparation.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the hope and resilience of Queensland's indigenous peoples. Their determination to survive the genocidal policies of the past is a testament to their personal strength and the enduring nature of their culture. To each and every one of these Queenslanders I say sorry.
