



Speech by

Mr D. BRISKEY

MEMBER FOR CLEVELAND

Hansard 26 May 1999

STOLEN GENERATION

Mr BRISKEY (Cleveland—ALP) (4.21 p.m.): First, I would like to pay my respects to the traditional owners of this land on which Parliament sits. One year after the nation commemorated the first National Sorry Day, the Queensland Parliament has the opportunity to apologise to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on behalf of all Queenslanders for the past policies under which indigenous children were forcibly separated from their families and to express our deep sorrow and regret at the hurt and distress that this caused.

I fully support this motion moved by the Premier. It represents the first step for the Queensland Parliament on the long journey towards redressing the past injustices perpetrated against the stolen generation, many of whom are Queenslanders. The consequences of these cruel and tragically misguided policies haunt us today. Five or six generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were affected by removal. We are talking about up to 100,000 Australians. The devastation inflicted on Aboriginal families as recently as the early 1970s cannot and will not be addressed until the whole community acknowledges the wrong that has been done and together expresses our heartfelt regret.

It is my sincere hope that the members opposite join with the Government members in their support for this motion. Bipartisan support for this motion would send a strong message to the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that the past has been acknowledged and, as a united Parliament, we are committed to healing the wounds. It is an expression of our compassion for those whose human rights were denied and abused.

It would also send a strong message of leadership to the wider community. Unfortunately, there are still a lot of people in our communities and probably in this Parliament who do not understand why it is so important to acknowledge these past atrocities and to say sorry. These people feel compassion for the Kosovo refugees fleeing ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia but discount any suggestion that, as a nation, we are not responsible for redressing past policies aimed at destroying Aboriginal culture. If we celebrate all that is honourable in the action of our ancestors who fought at Anzac Cove in 1915, we must also acknowledge the shameful past of previous Australians who stole children from Aboriginal families. Both stories have contributed to modern Australia. Both stories must be acknowledged. A strong, mature nation acknowledges the good and the bad in its past.

Today, through this motion, the Queensland Parliament has the opportunity to demonstrate its maturity. Today, by voting together in support of this motion as we support the motions moved on 11 November and 25 April each year to honour the heroic deeds of Australians, this Parliament will be acknowledging the breadth of our nation's past. A bipartisan vote would be a powerful symbol of our preparedness to take the first step on the journey to healing. It would be a powerful symbol of our maturity as a Parliament and as a State.

It is our responsibility as leaders and representatives of our communities to convey how important this apology is to the process of reconciliation. We need to educate our communities and bring the non-indigenous Australians who are unaware of the significance of saying sorry with us in this manner. There is no more powerful or moving way to do this than to hear the stories of

the stolen generation. This is what I intend to do today. The following story comes from page 426 of Bringing Them Home, the stolen children report. It is Tony's story—a Queensland man only a few years younger than me, but how different our lives have been because of the colour of his skin and the policies of the previous Queensland Governments. This is Tony's story. I seek leave for his story to be incorporated in Hansard.

Leave granted.

When I was three months old in 1965 the welfare department sent the police to my grandparents' house. They came armed with a warrant to have me removed. Despite any opposition my fate had been decided. I was taken away. My family was left with the guilt of being accused of child neglect.

In 1967 I was adopted into a white family. They had two sons of their own. It is documented that, from an early age, my adoption mother had feelings of rejection towards me. She wanted a white son. She was taking offence to me as I grew up and my skin got darker. I can remember her always making fun of me. She had a favourite song that she always sung to me. It was that old country song called, "the biggest disappointment in the family is you". They adopted another son and my new brother was very fair, with blue eyes and blonde hair.

As I grew up, more problems arose. I began to notice that I was getting darker. My adoption father was often sticking up for me when my adoption brothers would come home and tease me about my colour. They were learning words like, boong, coon, abo ...

I'd ask her why I was dark. She would tell me it was because I kept playing with Aboriginal kids at school. My adoption mother would make me feel guilty when I got into trouble for something. She would confirm her statement by saying things like, "... if you keep playing with Aborigines, you'll end up turning into one." I was beginning to believe that was why I was getting darker. I started to hate what I was turning into. I started to hate my own people.

In 1978 I went to high school. I was to be separated again. This time it was from my adoption brothers. They were sent to one high school and I was sent to another. When I wanted to know why, my adoption mother told me that she didn't want me to embarrass her sons.

Towards the end of 1978, I was running away from home and truanting from school. I was sick of my adoption family. I hated my adoption mother. I wanted them to send me back to the orphanage. I wanted my real mother. I didn't belong where I was. I just wanted to go back to where I believed my mother would come and get me one day. I committed my first offence at 11. I was trying to make my adoption family hate me so they'd send me back. I ended up back at the orphanage. When the welfare officer questioned me about my behaviour, I told him that I wanted to have my real family. He kept telling me that it was impossible. I didn't believe him and persisted in asking for many years to follow.

After a few months at the orphanage I was getting blamed for things that I wasn't doing. On one occasion I was blamed for starting a fire in the building. I never did it. They wanted to foster me with white families. I ran away. I was sick of getting into trouble and I was scared about being fostered. I just wanted my real family. I couldn't understand why they wouldn't take me home.

After some months on the streets in Brisbane, at the age of 13 Tony was taken into care as uncontrollable. While at Wilson youth centre I felt like I was in a prison. In my mind, I hadn't done anything wrong to be sent there. I spent months asking what I'd done wrong. They told me that I was uncontrollable. I used to cry a lot. I kept asking the social workers to find my real mother. It was the same old story.

I ran away a few times. When I escaped I used to go to a family I'd met. They had Aboriginal foster kids. I used to like going there. I felt that I had something in common with these kids. Everyone there liked me. The parents there treated me as if I was one of their own kids. I ended up getting caught and sent back to Wilson. I was depressed again. The family who I'd stayed with made several attempts at fostering me. The welfare department blocked all attempts. I didn't know how to feel. All this time, the welfare couldn't wait to put me into a home. Then when I found a family that I wanted to stay with on my own, they wouldn't allow it. It was like nobody cared what I wanted. It was as if I had no say in anything. It was being arranged for me to be adopted again by another family. When I became aware of this, I did what I was beginning to do best, run away. This made matters worse. People were beginning to give up on me. I was finally sent to Boys Town aged nearly 14.

I ran away from Boys Town several times. On one occasion that I ran away, I caught a train back up to Townsville. One of the passengers—a woman travelling with her boyfriend—took care of me. We got on real good. She had brown skin just like me. This woman kept asking me questions about who I was and where I came from. I was a runaway, so I was restricted to how much I could say, in fear of being caught. I was in love with this woman. I remember falling asleep with my head on her lap. We talked each other to sleep.

The following day we arrived at Townsville station. She asked me if I had anywhere to stay. I told her no. Her and her boyfriend invited me to stay with them. I stayed only two days with them. She washed my clothes and made sure that I had a good feed. On the second day she went out with her boyfriend. I got jealous of her boyfriend and ran away when they left.

Until the age of 28 I wasn't aware just how close I was to finding my mother.

Later the next day I was arrested by the Townsville police. Tony was returned to Boys Town where he stayed until he turned 15. He then found employment.

It was a difficult time in my life. It was then that I was mature enough to realise the full ramifications of what everything was building up to. I started to convince myself that I was destined to spend the rest of my life alone. I often saw old people in the street, who were obviously homeless, and knew that that was how I was going to end up. I used to get really depressed about that. Those thoughts and feelings stayed with me for a very long time.

I was never sent back to my family. When Tony was aged 17 his welfare officer recommended reintroduction to his birth family. The recommendation was ignored. Nobody cared about the pain that I was feeling. So I tried my best to hide from it. Antisocial behaviour seemed the only way that I could deal with my problems for years to follow. I've been a loner since then.

At 16 Tony stole a car from the family with whom he was staying and left the State. At 18 he committed a burglary and spent 10 months in prison.

When I got out I started making contact with my adoption family by phone. It was becoming positive. My adoption mother refused me permission to go home to them when I got my holidays from work. She claimed that, "... Dad doesn't think it's a good idea". That hurt me a lot. A year later I tried to contact them again. This time my adoption father answered the phone. I rang up to wish my adoption mother a happy birthday. When I asked, "...is Mum there?", I was told that she had died two months earlier. It devastated me. While I was on the phone, I made it clear to my adoption father that I loved him. I felt terrible because I never got to say it to my adoption mother. I'd spent the previous two years trying to make amends.

My life fell apart once again. I became a drug addict and started to abuse alcohol and everyone around me.

Tony was soon convicted of robbery with wounding in company. He is serving a 14 year sentence. Link-Up (Qld) located his family in 1993. His mother had died 9 years earlier. She had been the woman on the train.

Mr BRISKEY: Tony's story demonstrates the emotional pain, the enormous anger, the loss of self-esteem and the self-hatred that is the legacy of forced removal policies of past administrations. His story, coupled with the horrific fact that 43 of the 99 Aboriginal people whose deaths in custody were investigated by the royal commission had been separated from their families, suggests that he is battling the odds just to survive imprisonment. He is only 34 years old and he, along with the thousands of others who were stolen from their families, deserves an apology. They deserve to be brought home. They deserve to live in a reconciled nation.

As a Parliament, we know the truth of what happened and we can no longer turn our backs on the past nor, as Mick Dodson said last year, is the defence that "it was not us" acceptable. These children were removed as a matter of national policy—the policy of our nation. As a nation and as a State Parliament we must apologise and we must ask for forgiveness—forgiveness which, as the following quote from another stolen generation story indicates, is ready to be given. Fiona said—

"I guess the government didn't mean it as something bad but our mothers weren't treated as people having feelings. Naturally a mother's got a heart for her children and for them to be taken away, no-one can ever know the heartache. She was still grieving when I met her in 1968.

When I finally met my mother through an interpreter she said that because my name had been changed she had heard about the other children but she'd never heard about me. And every morning as the sun came up the whole family would wail. They did that for 32 years until they saw me again. Who can imagine what a mother went through? But you have to learn to forgive."

Last year on 26 May, thousands of Australians came together to say sorry. This year on 26 May, we come together to take the first steps on the journey to healing. My wife and our children have asked that their deep sorrow be recorded here today. I join with them in saying we are sorry.
