



Speech by

Hon. D. WELLS

MEMBER FOR MURRUMBA

Hansard 26 May 1999

STOLEN GENERATION

Hon. D. M. WELLS (Murrumba—ALP) (Minister for Education) (2.46 p.m.): May I begin by paying my respects to the traditional landowners and language groups of the Brisbane area. I also acknowledge the presence of indigenous elders and community members in the gallery.

I represent an electorate that bears an Aboriginal name, which means good and beautiful place, and I represent very many Aboriginal people. I say to those people who sent me here and to those who are in the gallery that I am sorry for what my predecessors did.

National Sorry Day emanated from the stolen generation inquiry—a report of a national investigation into the policy of removing Aboriginal children from their families. One of two recommendations in the report was for a National Sorry Day—a day to remember that sad chapter of Australian history that saw the unjustifiable separation of indigenous children from their families. It was a practice that was aimed at assimilating children into western culture and went on until the early 1970s and caused immense suffering. It also caused immense dislocation to the education system. Education is a partnership between schools and families. When a generation is taken away, the capacity of that generation to play its role, to remember the culture and to continue the culture from which it came is mitigated by this kind of gratuitous disruption and the assimilation of the education system into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is extremely difficult.

The suffering and hurt inflicted on indigenous Australians had consequences that are still in evidence today—social dislocation, dislocation to our education system, loss of culture and identity and a continuing sense of hopelessness in the lives of many of the first people of our nation. The accounts of family separation and the terrible personal suffering endured by our indigenous fellow citizens brought about by Government policies of the day are well recorded in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report *Bringing Them Home*. The history of Australia starts 40,000 years ago, and we need to teach that to our children. The community needs to understand this history and the policy making that has brought us to today's thinking. It is only when people are informed that we can debate these issues. This informed debate requires an understanding of the events, the actions and the injustices that created the need for a National Sorry Day. Education plays an integral role within this process. The *Bringing Them Home* report recorded the assistance given to the implementation of these unjust policies through the provision of institutional care by a variety of agencies, including schools and the education system which, despite the best of intentions, reflected the prevailing attitudes of the era. It is now time to redress the balance. It is now time to present an informed and accurate history through the schooling system.

My department is currently finalising a course of studies on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their cultures, lifestyles and histories. I seek the support of schools and teachers in its implementation and development as part of a productive partnership with their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This partnership is one based on a shared understanding. On this day I encourage all Queenslanders to embrace the vision of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation which guides all its endeavours. The vision is of a united Australia which respects this land of ours, values our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and provides justice and equity for all.

Let us work for the creation of a confident and harmonious nation where we acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the original inhabitants of this continent, and recognise their loss of land, children, languages, health and kin, and where we believe that Australia will only become a mature nation if the past is acknowledged, the present understood and the future confidently based on the recognition of human rights. This commitment should provide the underlying philosophy to National Sorry Day. Saying sorry has nothing to do with guilt; it is about acknowledging what happened to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples so that we can move forward and come together as one people. Other countries will be viewing us and the way we deal with our indigenous Australians as a measure of how we will treat other people.

On this day of remembrance we are at a crossroads in the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous people. In the new millennium, Australians will look back and think how immature we were in our basic inability to acknowledge history and feel not guilt but sorrow that it happened. In the spirit of sorrow and forgiveness, may I record my department's commitment to continue the healing process for the benefit of victims of the unjust policies of the past, to support the just needs of indigenous people of today and to contribute to the quest for national reconciliation. It is my hope that others in this Parliament will share this commitment so that our nation may grow in unity and live as one people with dignity.
