



Speech by

Hon. JUDY SPENCE

MEMBER FOR MOUNT GRAVATT

Hansard 26 May 1999

STOLEN GENERATION

Hon. J. C. SPENCE (Mount Gravatt— ALP) (Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Minister for Women's Policy and Minister for Fair Trading) (12.09 p.m.): I begin by acknowledging the Jagera and Turrubal people, the traditional owners of the land on which this Parliament stands, and the other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are present in the gallery today, many of whom were personally affected by the past policies that we are discussing in this debate. I also acknowledge the other interested and supportive people who have come to listen to this debate and for whom the debate is important. As the Premier said, they reflect the sentiments of the general Queensland population who generally regard this debate as important.

It is indeed a great honour and a privilege as the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy to second the motion before the House today, which is the anniversary of National Sorry Day, and formally apologise to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this State for the past Government practices and policies that led to the forced separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. On a day such as this I wish to say that I share the regret of indigenous people that there is not one Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders in this Parliament who can represent their people in a debate such as this. It is a sad indictment of the political process that, at the turn of the millennium, there are no indigenous members of this Parliament.

The advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders is a priority for this Government, but we realise that progress is not possible without a sincere acknowledgment of and reconciliation with the past. Our way of saying sorry gives full effect to the intention of recommendation 5a of Bringing Them Home, the report that flowed from the national inquiry. However, it goes much further than that. It shows that the State that spawned One Nation now sees that reconciliation requires a sincere overture from non-indigenous people who are the ones who took the children away.

It is almost a source of embarrassment that the Queensland Parliament needs to have this debate in 1999, because almost every other jurisdiction in Australia was sufficiently mature to say sorry two years ago when the Bringing Them Home report was released. The Queensland Labor Party moved an apology motion in 1997, but the coalition watered it down and robbed it of sincerity. People such as Jeff Kennett, John Olsen and Richard Court said sorry. Only Rob Borbidge, David Watson and John Howard refuse to acknowledge past injustices and show remorse. And nothing has changed today.

Bringing Them Home, the report that inspired National Sorry Day, is indeed a tribute to the strength and struggles of the many thousands of indigenous people who were affected by forced removal. While we acknowledge the hardships that they endured and the sacrifices that they made, we must also reflect, remember and lament all the children who will never come home. Grief and loss are the predominant themes of the report. Tenacity and survival are also acknowledged. It is no ordinary report. Much of the evidence was such that it could not be reported. Much of the subject matter is so personal and intimate that the courage of those who told their stories inspires the utmost respect, for respect was something that was denied the stolen generation. The lives of men, women and children were shattered forever and the harm continued in the generations that followed, affecting their children and their grandchildren.

As the Governor-General said in August 1996—

"It should, I think, be apparent to all well-meaning people that true reconciliation between the Australian nation and its indigenous peoples is not achievable in the absence of acknowledgment by the nation of the wrongfulness of the past dispossession, oppression and degradation of the Aboriginal peoples."

It is perhaps a mark of the Commonwealth Government's refusal to apologise that the Governor-General has this week said that it is—

"... difficult not to feel discouraged—even depressed—about the slow course of the reconciliation process.

...

Certainly the path ahead is steep and long and full of obstacles and progress is much slower than I, at least, had hoped for."

Our apology today is a first step in ending the discouragement which the Governor-General spoke of this week. If white Australia cannot say that it is sorry, then building trust will demand an impossible leap of faith on the part of indigenous people.

Unlike some others in politics, the Labor Party has never denied that many Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders alive today are continuing to deal with the hurt inflicted by past Governments, including some from the recent past. In establishing a new Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, we detached it from those arms of the bureaucracy that took the children. However, we should not say sorry for the policies of removal alone. The Aborigines Welfare Fund and the underpayment of wages are also open wounds. They must be salved if the reconciliation process is to ever be complete. As Minister, I have made a commitment to settling the welfare fund and its associated savings accounts, which underpinned successive Queensland Government regimes for managing people's finances. Through the welfare fund and associated accounts, Governments denied Aboriginal people the opportunity to take control over their own economic circumstances.

Between the early part of this century and 1986, most Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders working on reserves were employed by the Queensland Government. They were paid less than non-indigenous people doing similar work and, where awards applied, they received below-award wages. After World War II the Labour movement began to take an interest in the conditions of indigenous workers and the question of wage parity for indigenous workers. This situation was always unjust. After the introduction of the Racial Discrimination Act in 1975, it was also unlawful. Nevertheless, the Queensland Government knowingly continued to underpay indigenous people in this State on the basis of race.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has made a decision on underpayment of wages and 20 people have now received recompense from the Government. Last year I presented 14 people on Palm Island with cheques for \$7,000 each and an official apology on behalf of the Queensland Government. We cannot expect the many others who were also unfairly treated to stand by passively. The Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action, FAIRA, recently lodged 380 claims with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. FAIRA estimates that 3,500 people will have similar cases. However, as a Government, we are not going to be able to turn our backs on this particular injustice. We must conciliate and settle with people whose grievances are legitimate. The Government does not want to contest those claims and force people into costly, time consuming and emotionally draining legal battles.

As the nation pauses today to pay tribute to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters who have fought and whose ancestors fought so valiantly for justice and equity in this State, I am honoured to be able to take a step in reconciling our past and our future, and to say sorry. I am sorry for the legislation that was passed by previous Parliaments in the name of protection.

However, it would be a mistake to think that the Acts enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to be taken from their families are ancient history. Only 30 years ago, the Queensland Government still had the power to expel people from reserves. Only 30 years ago, the Queensland Government was taking and misusing the hard-earned wages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Only 30 years ago, the Queensland Government still had the power to stop families from living together. Only 20 years ago, the Queensland Government was unlawfully underpaying its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers.

We must be accountable for the dishonourable actions of former Governments in this State because the individuals who were harmed deserve some justice, no matter how belated. Today we are not just apologising for the actions of Governments operating—as some attempt to argue—in a very different time and with very different values. We are apologising for things that were done during the time that some of the members in this House today were serving!

What is the legacy of the forced separations and the unjust laws mistakenly passed in this Parliament? Generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders who were shunned, abused and neglected by the system they were forced into. People who have spent their lives not knowing who they really are or where they came from. Generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders who distrust Governments and non-indigenous people of authority. If it is with frustration that today we observe the substance abuse, poor educational attainment or disappointing health outcomes on some Aboriginal communities, we must remember that those things can only be understood if we appreciate the past.

When our predecessors took the children, they stole the most precious inheritance of any people—their children. They deprived generations of the child-rearing skills that most of us learn from our parents. Generations of Aboriginal people who spent their formative years in institutions now find themselves without parenting skills, and so the legacy of the stolen generations lives on.

Our predecessors tried to destroy the culture, the identity and the pride of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The undeniable proof of their courage and resilience is that this destructive policy did not succeed. Today hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are demonstrating their triumph over ill-conceived policies and practices by gathering in this Chamber and outside for celebrations. Today they are making a journey of healing, because they have moved on from demanding an apology. It behoves us all to learn from their ability to forgive and reconcile. By making this apology today, the Queensland Government can progress with renewed sincerity into an era of uncompromised reconciliation. Together, we can all make the journey of healing.
