



Speech by

Mr L. SPRINGBORG

MEMBER FOR WARWICK

Hansard 26 May 1999

STOLEN GENERATION

Mr SPRINGBORG (Warwick—NPA) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (12.51 p.m.): I am surprised that a Premier who, last year, chose to criticise others for pursuing political agendas which divide rather than unite should now be engaged in the politics of division. I am surprised that a Premier who, last year, accused other political groups of wanting to engage in a race-based election should now be bringing a race-based motion into the Queensland Parliament.

We have heard much mention here this morning by members opposite about the desire to have more indigenous representation in this Parliament. I would like to make the point to this Parliament that the only indigenous representative ever to take a seat in this Parliament was a member of the National Party between 1974 and 1977. That person was Eric Deeral. When that person was defeated, he was defeated not by another Aboriginal member of the Labor Party but by a non-Aboriginal member of the Labor Party. It is fine for members opposite to stand up and talk about their desire to have a greater representation in this Parliament of indigenous people or other people; but at the end of the day, each and every member of the Labor Party opposite holds in his or her own hands the destiny of bringing into this Parliament an Aboriginal representative or Aboriginal representatives. So they need not stand in this place and wax lyrical about something that they would like to do. They should say what they are going to do about bringing about that particular goal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in this Parliament. I make the point again that the only indigenous representative ever to sit in the Parliament was Eric Deeral, a member of the National Party, who was defeated by a Labor Party member.

This motion is not about sorrow. Instead, this motion is about division. If the Premier was genuine about fostering a bipartisan approach to this issue, and if he was genuinely seeking bipartisan support from this Parliament, then why did he not discuss this matter with all political parties beforehand? Why did he instead choose to make the announcement at a press conference without even the slightest bit of liaison with the various political parties that make up this Parliament, and also the Independent members? The Premier—always the actor—chose to announce his intentions at a press conference without the slightest consultation with any other political party.

Where do we draw the line for apologies? There are tens of thousands of people in rural Queensland who would appreciate an apology from the Labor members opposite. They would appreciate an apology for the six years of the Goss Labor Government, which stripped them of almost every service that they previously had. They would appreciate an apology for the current freeze on building water infrastructure, which is costing tens of thousands of jobs. They would appreciate an apology for this Government's firm refusal to compensate for any loss of water rights.

When the Labor Party introduces policies that will force people off their land and out of rural communities, there is no apology, there is no sorrow or attack of conscience. In more than 200 years of Australia's history, there have been many people wronged by Government policy, and they have not all been black Australians. What about the thousands of Australian men of German and Italian descent interned away from their families during World War I and World War II? I have some of their families in my electorate. I have spoken to their families, their wives and their children about the trauma and the tragedy of having their fathers dragged off and interned.

In saying that, I am not trying to devalue in any way what many members of Parliament feel genuine about in wanting to support this motion. What I am trying to say is that there are a whole range of Australians out there—black and white—who have been wronged by previous Government policy, who have been wronged by policy which, with the value of hindsight, would not have been introduced. Nevertheless, that happened. As the Leader of the Opposition pointed out, we do have a sorry industry. But the sorry industry might not necessarily be confined just to the issue of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Last night, a fellow rang me. When I was speaking with him, he said, "Look, it is time to move on. My father went to war in 1939, and no sooner did he hop on the boat to head overseas than the Department of Family Services"—and this was in another State—"kicked in our door, they invaded our house, and they dragged six children out of the house—four brothers and two sisters—and took those children away from their mother and placed them in an orphanage"—something which was sanctioned by the State. The mother of those children saw a couple of her children only once in the next decade. So there is a whole range and a whole raft of great hurt out there in the community. That fellow said to me, "I don't really want an apology. It saddens me. But when I see things like what you are going to debate in Parliament tomorrow, it makes me wonder what is different about me." That is a very, very valid point.

On that issue, I understand that the honourable member for Gladstone is also considering the movement of an amendment which may extend this motion. But the Opposition is not prepared to countenance any amendments, because we believe that it is time to let bygones be bygones and move forward. Sometimes, unfortunately, we just have to express our regrets and get on with life.

This motion does nothing to advance the real lot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We should ask: how many jobs did this motion create in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities or, indeed, any community? The answer is: not one! How does this motion put infrastructure like roads and sewerage into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities or, indeed, any community? It does not! How does this motion address the issues of alcoholism, malnutrition or suicide in Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities? It does not! How does this motion advance the causes of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders? I believe that it does not.

This motion has also been described as a diversion—a diversion away from the impending factional explosion within the State Labor Party, and a diversion away from the fact that the Deputy Premier did not consult with the Indigenous Working Group when drafting legislation which would enable the Government to compulsorily acquire native title rights under the State Development and Public Works Organization Act. Let there be no doubt that every decent Queenslanders has the deepest and most sincere regrets about the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

Sitting suspended from 1 p.m. to 2.30 p.m.

Mr SPRINGBORG: I would like to pick up on the point concerning the potential legal obligation for the State and the nation if there was an official recognition of an apology by a Parliament. This matter has been debated in the Parliament today and we have heard views and counter views concerning the implications of an apology. Those views range from the Premier's view that there is unlikely to be a problem through to the Leader of the Opposition's view in which he quite rightly says that if we have three lawyers in a room we will probably get three different opinions.

As I understand it, one of the Commonwealth's greatest concerns related to the possible failure to have universal recognition of an apology. This would be likely to cause difficulties for the nation in relation to compensation. The Parliament could express its feelings by way of an apology, but if Aboriginal people did not universally accept that apology as finishing the matter the issue of compensation could still be open.

With the value of hindsight most, if not all, of those children would not have been removed from those families. But as wrong as those practices were, many of the people who removed those children did so because they believed it was for the benefit of the children. It is very hard to place contemporary values on past actions. The dispossession of any child, black or white, must be one of the most difficult things for any child or any parent to have to live through.

Each night when we turn on our television sets we see the sad and sorry footage coming out of Kosovo. We are all reminded of the enormous emotional tragedies that so many families are suffering as they are forcibly ripped apart. Sadly, in some cases, those families will never be reunited.

As a father of four, I can only imagine the enormous emotional strain that those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their parents must have gone through. That is why I had no hesitation in 1997 in supporting a motion which expressed this Parliament's deepest regrets for those past actions. However, I repeat that there is a whole range of Australians who feel justifiably upset at previous decisions made by Governments at some time in the past. These decisions might have been made a couple of decades ago or even a century ago. Not all of those decisions affected black

Australians only; they affected white Australians, too. It is a question of how far one wants to take this issue of an apology.

In 1997 I had absolutely no hesitation in expressing my deepest regret because that is what I felt the people of Queensland wanted. But where do we draw the line? It appears that the Premier is infatuated with dwelling in the past. I do not believe that is a healthy attitude. Even though the Premier might believe the contrary, it is not a progressive attitude and it is not a forward thinking attitude. It is an attitude that allows bitterness to fester. If one continues to raise these issues they are always going to be an issue.

Today we have National Sorry Day. What happens with National Sorry Day next year? What happens with National Sorry Day the year after that? The National and Liberal Parties will not be part of a motion which encourages such a festering bitterness. We are happy to be part of a genuine motion that helps all communities—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal—to develop. We will not be part of some political game.

We have no reason to revisit an issue which was dealt with proportionately by this Parliament in 1997. This Parliament recorded its deepest regret for past practices which removed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. It embodied these strong sentiments in a motion moved in this House by former Premier Borbidge.

Queenslanders are saying that it is time to let bygones be bygones and to not look back, but to look forward. That is the overwhelming view expressed by many Queenslanders. All honourable members speak to people in Queensland every day. Is the Premier not in touch with the concerns of the average Queenslander? Is he not aware that the talkback radio waves have been buzzing with people questioning his actions? People are telling the Premier to move on and not to dwell in the past. The Premier is being told not to ignite racial tensions.

I think it is fair to say that, noble as one's intentions may be, when one continues talking about issues which have been dealt with in a previous response by this Parliament, one is going to ignite and continue to re-ignite racial tensions. Over the last day or so honourable members would find that staff in their electorate offices have had significant traffic on this issue, either in favour or against. It just so happens that in my case the comment on this issue has been negative.

I do not believe that the Premier is listening. The people of Queensland are telling the Premier to move forwards, not backwards. It is time that the Parliament heeded those words and moved forward.
