



Speech by

**Mrs E. CUNNINGHAM**

**MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE**

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Hansard 26 May 1999

### STOLEN GENERATION

**Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM** (Gladstone—IND) (2.52 p.m.) I move the following amendment—

"That all words after 'That' be deleted and the following be inserted—

- '(a) this House apologises on behalf of all Queenslanders to all children, those of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, European or other national descent for the past policies under which children were forcibly separated from their families and expresses deep sorrow and regret for the hurt and distress this has caused; and
- (b) this House recognises the critical importance for all Australians— Indigenous Aboriginal, Australian born and new Australian citizens—to work together to ensure mutual respect, peace and harmony grow now and into the future.'."

I move that amendment as an inclusive amendment to the motion rather than an exclusive one. I will deal with that later on.

I do not have a problem with the words "apology" or "sorry", although I know that others have acknowledged a fear that the use of either word will result in a legal obligation for financial compensation, and that is a genuine concern. My hope is that the search for an apology over the past few years was genuinely sought as a step in the healing process—the process of reconciliation—and not a cynical exercise to achieve financial gain. History will show the true motive of the various parties involved.

By their nature, Australians want to get along and give one another a fair go. I believe that decisions that were made in the past were made in good faith. Wisdom in hindsight is an easy commodity. In the future, there will be those who will look at our decisions and see fundamental flaws in some of them. They may also be faced with a situation in which they have serious corrections to make.

We have a wonderful ATSI community in my electorate. I acknowledge community leaders Mrs Jackie Johnson, Mrs Ces Wenitong and Mrs Eggmolese who this morning conducted a commemorative ceremony in Gladstone at Police Creek. My best wishes go to them. However, in moving this amendment I wish to acknowledge that the pain of separation was felt by more than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children; British, German and even Australian born children were affected. An article from the Courier-Mail of 22 September 1998 states—

"Children as young as three were sent to Australia under a 'shameful' migration policy to populate the empire with 'good, white, British stock', the Forde Inquiry into child abuse was told yesterday.

British children were subjected to 'barbaric' practices and 'horrendous' forms of physical abuse in Australian institutions, the British Child Migrants Trust told the inquiry."

Parents of many nations suffered at the hand of this policy.

The history of the Aboriginal people of northern Queensland in particular, especially the plight of half-caste women, is a tragedy in itself. One can imagine not only the heartache of separation but also the heartache of mistreatment that these people faced. However, I cannot support the Premier's motion because it ignores the broad effect of past policies on many different people and recognises only this one discrete group. Others who were also affected at the time that the policy was acted upon

could justifiably feel offended at their exclusion. This offence and further hurt can easily be avoided by an inclusive apology.

A paragraph at the beginning of the report titled Bringing Them Home states—

"We may go home, but we cannot relive our childhoods. We may reunite with our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunties, uncles, communities, but we cannot relive the 20, 30, 40 years that we spent without their love and care, and they cannot undo the grief and mourning they felt when we were separated from them. We can go home to ourselves as Aboriginals, but this does not erase the attacks inflicted on our hearts, minds, bodies and souls, by caretakers who thought their mission was to eliminate us as Aboriginals."

That focuses on the Aboriginal folk in our community, but the same emotions—the emotions of separation, of grief, of lost time together and of lost family—were replicated within many nationalities.

I acknowledge positively the many families who took children into their homes and extended love and nurture to those traumatised kids. In most part, those families did a great job. Were there abuses? I have no doubt that there were. It appears that the abusive element in society has always existed and even under the strictest controls it will continue to need to be policed. However, I believe that many families gave freely of their affection and the extended families flourished. To those many now elderly mums and dads, I say thank you. A great many children who were affected under this policy were relocated to a beneficial environment, that is, from an abusive environment to a non-abusive environment, and that occurred across the cultures. That point should not be ignored.

I am saddened that this is such a political issue. In every nation there are past and present directions that disadvantage people. Very often the most affected are the least able to fight: the elderly and, in this instance, the young. May any action that we take in this Parliament today build our communities and not further isolate, frustrate or embitter them. We need to send the message to all Queenslanders, irrespective of ethnicity, that they are valued and that, as a Parliament, we desire peace and harmony amongst all our people.

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