



Speech by

MIKE REYNOLDS

MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

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STOLEN GENERATION

Mr REYNOLDS (Townsville—ALP) (3.40 p.m.): Firstly, I recognise the traditional owners of this land. I would like to speak in support of the Premier's motion that this House apologises to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland on behalf of all Queenslanders for past policies under which indigenous children were forcibly separated from their families.

As a member of the State Reconciliation Committee, I would also like to put on public record my very strong support for the related motion that the House recognises the critical importance to indigenous Australians and the wider community of a continuing reconciliation process.

There is great symbolic significance attached to the House today debating and passing these motions moved by the Premier. It is timely, on National Sorry Day, that the Queensland Parliament acknowledges the terrible toll on human health and dignity exacted by dubious State and Federal policies of the past relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Since my election as the member for Townsville and my appointment as Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier in north Queensland, I have been working solidly with indigenous people to redress the injustices of the past. I believe it is overdue that official institutions of the State also examine, in a frank and self-reflective manner, the realities of life for indigenous peoples and, most importantly, how those realities were germinated in past policies and programs of the State.

It is time that we, as parliamentarians, accepted unconditionally in our hearts the grim facts on public record such as the reality that indigenous children were being stolen from their families as recently as the 1970s. It is time that we acknowledged that many of the contemporary realities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people result, in very large measure, from these flawed public policies of the past.

The first statistical profile of Queensland's indigenous youth, released in March this year by DATSIPRD, highlights some of the stark social realities. Most importantly, the profile shows that the current generation of indigenous Queenslanders is suffering terribly as a result of State intervention in the lives of previous generations.

Fellow parliamentarians, that is why the past does matter and why it cannot be discounted. It is simply not good enough to say "all that is in the past" or it is "not our fault" or it is "not our business". Human culture is the accumulation of thought and action over time. If the bottom layers of our culture are rotten, then what appears on the surface must be inherently unstable.

First and foremost, we must absorb and internalise the facts or circumstances of life for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland today and indicate why we must say sorry and why Governments must make a determined effort to improve the lives of indigenous Australians.

The facts are as follows. Unemployment among indigenous Queenslanders is twice that of non-indigenous Queenslanders and three times worse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. Indigenous youth are less likely than non-indigenous youth to remain at school until Year 12. Indigenous youth are less likely than non-indigenous youth to obtain formal qualifications or attend university. Indigenous youth are significantly overrepresented in Queensland youth detention centres and account for over 50% of detainees. The suicide rate of young Queensland indigenous males is three and a half times that of all young Queensland males. The incidence of low birth weight among

Queensland indigenous infants is twice the rate for non-indigenous infants. More than 29% of indigenous people employed in the workforce are labourers or work in related fields, compared with 10% of non-indigenous workers. There are relatively fewer young indigenous females than young indigenous males participating in the workforce. Finally, a large proportion of indigenous youth live in overcrowded households and in one-parent families—around 30% in both cases.

Clearly, the facts speak for themselves. Taking children forcibly from their parents a generation ago is undoubtedly impacting on this generation. Any objective examination of the empirical record shows that young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people still face a wide range of social and economic disadvantage relative to their non-indigenous counterparts, and there is a significant gender dimension to be factored into the equation as well. It is just not good enough to sit back and say, "It's all in the past." The record cannot be ignored.

We must act on this information and a preliminary, strategic step is surely to acknowledge the damage done by previous Government policies. That is what Sorry Day is all about. It is about acknowledging the legacies of the past and getting on with the job of improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is about turning over a new leaf and thinking holistically and strategically about what needs to be done. It is simply not good enough to sit back and develop policy in an ad hoc, piecemeal way.

I urge all members to support the motions now being debated. They are an essential part of the healing process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and they are an essential part of the reconciliation process. The very real and well documented experiences of indigenous Australians must be acknowledged and validated. Saying sorry is a very human starting point. May I conclude by saying that it is long overdue.
