



Speech by

PAUL LUCAS MLA

MEMBER FOR LYTTON

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STOLEN GENERATION

Mr LUCAS (Lytton—ALP) (3.08 p.m.): At the commencement of my speech, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which this Parliament sits. I wish to say a few words on the issue of the Parliament's recognition of our sorrow and regret with respect to the hurt and pain caused to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fellow Australians by past Governments, institutions and people. Pain has been caused to so many people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander extraction by those past policies, particularly in relation to forced removals and the stolen generation. That excellent Bringing Them Home report indicates the very terrible injustices done, I might add many in good faith, to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. However, we now realise, with hindsight and with our modern understanding, how fundamentally wrong those actions were. For example, we now know the importance of keeping children together and with their families. We now know how much better it is to support families rather than split them up. We now know that, in rare situations where children are unable to live with families, a culturally appropriate placement preserves dignity and pride in an ancient and wonderful culture.

How it must have felt to be a mother and have your children ripped away by a white administrator turning up on your doorstep. How it must have felt to be a young child and have one of your siblings taken away forcibly, never to be seen again. I have four quite young children and they adore each other, and the love that children—brothers and sisters—have for each other is extraordinary. I think of the way that my two-year-old daughter loves her seven-year-old eldest brother and the way that she idolises him. To be in a position such as that one day her brother was taken away for reasons that she could not understand, for reasons that, if she could understand, she would not agree with, must be the most catastrophic thing that could happen to a child.

Kids adore their parents, and how it must have felt to be a young Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child in an institution and be told wrongly that your mum and dad were not interested in you and did not want to visit you. The member for Caboolture mentioned that there are children of European extraction who also suffered at the hands of inappropriate adoption and removal, and that is right. But the difference here today is that that was not a policy based upon systematic withdrawal on the basis of one's racial origins. That is the difference. I do not support any forced removal of children, but this is a particular issue that we are talking about today. At the same time in the situation in which the young children in that institution were told that their mother and father were not interested in them, there were the grieving parents—the grieving mother who was told that her kids did not want to see her or that they had gone to a good home, whether that was true or not.

Many Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children were raised in caring and loving foster or adoptive families, but many were not. Many policies were formulated and/or implemented by people of good faith in Government, churches, institutions or by members of the public. But those policies were wrong. The member for Caboolture indicated that we cannot look at policies that people undertook in that period and judge them now. That is a half-truth if ever I have heard one. Of course we can judge the actions of the past, and we understand that some actions of the past were thought to be right by those times, but there are other actions of the past that were wrong, wrong, wrong then and wrong now.

I draw the attention of the House to an excellent article in the Sydney Morning Herald this morning by Robert Manne, the Australian social commentator. He did research about a case in 1903 in which the Chief Protector of Aborigines, a gentleman by the name of Dr Roth, had his attention—and I am using some of the language of the time—drawn to half-caste children roaming about the black's camp. In particular, he had his attention drawn to a 14-year-old boy named Walter whose mother was an Aborigine, Nellie Bliss. It was thought by the Chief Protector of Aborigines that this 14-year-old was loafing around the camps instead of learning a trade at the industrial school.

So what happened to him? In Brisbane it was decided that young Walter be brought to court and charged under the Industrial and Reformatory Schools Act. What was his charge? Being a child born of an Aboriginal or half-caste mother! That was the charge—not doing something, but being something. That was the offence that this young boy was charged with, and he was convicted of it and sentenced to two years at an industrial school. That is what he got.

The article then referred to the Shire Clerk of Cardwell, a person called William Craig. He took an interest in the welfare of this young boy. He wrote to the Queensland Home Secretary in Brisbane and talked about the mother of the half-caste boy, Walter, sleeping outside the lock-up, saying she would injure herself by inflicting blood-letting and starving herself if her son was not released. He wrote to the Home Secretary, pleading for his release. Craig wrote—

"It is an unassailable and incontestable fact that Aborigines treat all children they come in contact with or nurse—half caste or full-blooded or white—with universal kindness.

...

'It is an act of impossibility to prove ill-treatment in this or any similar case.' "

So nothing wrong had been done. The young boy became so ill that the police sergeant at Cardwell became seriously alarmed because the boy had been removed and locked up for being black. That is what he had done wrong—he was black. The Cardwell police sergeant—and it was good to see the compassionate police sergeant—

A Government member interjected.

Mr LUCAS: The member for Caboolture did not show any earlier.

The police sergeant, through his wife, asked that the young boy's mother be allowed to nurse her son in his cell, which she did, and he returned to health. So he was now in good health, so it was time to remove him again. What did they do? They told the boy and his father that the Chief Protector of Aborigines, who had sailed up to Cardwell to check on the situation, just wanted to talk with him and then after they spoke with him they would release him. This is all based on historical records. They said, "Come on the yacht and we will grant you your freedom." What happened? He went on the yacht and they seized him and said, "Off you are going for your two years."

The young boy tried to jump off the ship. He was physically restrained. He had not been able to even say goodbye to his mother. When the clerk spoke to the Cardwell magistrates, they told him that they were powerless to dismiss the case as the protector had drawn their attention to a clause in the statutes which stated that every Aboriginal child was a neglected child as a matter of law. Mr Craig, the shire clerk, ended up writing to the Chief Protector of Aborigines—

"Do you dare to assert that under English law you have a better right to this boy than the mother who reared and fed him?"

The file note indicated that no reply need be sent. Nothing is known of what happened to that young boy. This was a case that I would argue shows, regardless of the wrong-headed laws—and they were pretty wrong-headed—that that sort of duplicity and callous treatment by a Government is totally unjustifiable.

In closing, I point out that Jeff Kennett, John Olsen and even Richard Court were able to say sorry. They did not have a problem with it. Saying sorry does not mean an acknowledgment of individual or even corporate liability. It is an attempt to demonstrate one's sorrow and regret for past activities. To say otherwise is intellectually dishonest and contextually inaccurate. When I hear about someone who has suffered a death in their family, I say, "Look, I am very sorry to hear about your loved one's death." It does not mean that I am saying that I am personally responsible for it.

Sorry is an important first step. But having said that, what is now important is for us to show our regret by positive actions for the future. From my travels around schools, among our youth and with people of goodwill on both sides of politics, I am optimistic and hopeful that we will continue to work towards a just and fair society where one's racial origin is a matter of pride and diversity, but not prejudice or poverty.