



Speech by

Hon. PETER BEATTIE

MEMBER FOR BRISBANE CENTRAL

Hansard 26 May 1999

STOLEN GENERATION

Hon. P. D. BEATTIE (Brisbane Central— ALP) (Premier) (11.57 a.m.): I move—

"That this House apologises to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland on behalf of all Queenslanders for the past policies under which indigenous children were forcibly separated from their families and expresses deep sorrow and regret at the hurt and distress that this caused.

This House recognises the critical importance to indigenous Australians and the wider community of a continuing reconciliation process, based on an understanding of, and frank apologies for, what has gone wrong in the past and total commitment to equal respect in the future."

The stolen generations inquiry exposed thousands of sorry stories; thousands of examples of individual loss, family devastation and community grief and harm. This week, State Cabinet decided, on a submission from Judy Spence, the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, and myself, that the Government should: apologise to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland on behalf of all Queenslanders for the past policies which forcibly separated indigenous children from their families; express deep sorrow and regret at the hurt and distress the policies caused; recognise the critical importance of a continuing reconciliation process between indigenous Australians and the wider community based on an understanding of, and frank apologies for, past wrongs; and give a total commitment to equal respect in future. This meets the intentions of recommendation 5a of the Bringing Them Home report.

I moved a similar motion when I was Leader of the Opposition in 1997. It was significantly amended by the coalition Government in that it only expressed sincere regret for the personal hurt suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were forcibly removed from their families. The wording stopped short of an apology and did not satisfy the intentions of recommendation 5a. They, the members sitting opposite me in the Chamber today, were unable to bring themselves to say sorry despite one of their own National Party colleagues admitting that, in the mid-seventies, two or three times a week he was dealing with cases of children being taken from their homes.

Finally, today we are able to put the record straight and offer a full apology—an apology that was recommended by the stolen children inquiry and its subsequent report which stated that all Australian Parliaments should officially acknowledge the responsibility of their predecessors for the laws, policies and practices of those forced removals. And they were forced!

One of those stolen children told the inquiry about how mothers and children were bundled into a police ute on the pretext of being taken to a town. The story of abduction—of kidnapping—continued—

"But when we'd gone about 10 miles they stopped, and threw the mothers out of the car. We jumped on our mothers' backs, crying, trying not to be left behind. But the policeman pulled us off and threw us back into the car. They pushed the mothers away and drove off, while our mothers were chasing the car, running and crying after us. We were screaming in the back of that car."

Those stories are heartbreaking. Any parent would feel the pain. Those stories are real and they are from people still hurting alongside us. These stories are not ancient history. We are not talking about the Viking invasion of Ireland or anywhere else. In many cases, we are not talking about history, but of living hurt, living grief, living anger, living resentment and pain that is with our fellow Queenslanders still. We are talking about people to whom an apology might help in some way to ease the pain of being stolen from parents by Queensland Governments, including Labor Governments—and I have to emphasise that—of having had parental love stolen from them, of having had their normal childhoods stolen from them, of having had their culture, their history and their future stolen from them. We are not talking about some obscure policy that dealt with intangibles and dusty statues; we are talking about vulnerable, innocent children.

Saying sorry is a key part of the reconciliation process. It is a key to building our future together. It is a key to the healing process. It is a key to maintaining a fair and caring Australia. Only little people cannot bring themselves to say sorry. Some use the excuse that saying sorry will open the door to huge compensation. We have legal advice that says that it will not. There is the excuse that it is ancient history. It is not. Others allege that the stolen children inquiry is part of an attempt to establish a guilt industry and that its findings are used to manipulate Australia's Governments and people. Those who push that line are out of step with ordinary Australians.

Hundreds of thousands of ordinary Australians took part in the Sea of Hands reconciliation ceremonies across this country. Ordinary Australians have bought copies of the Bringing Them Home report in record numbers. When one runs into them in a bus or down the street, they say, "We did the wrong things here", and we did. They say, "I could never have imagined someone doing that to me or my children." Nor can I. I can think of nothing worse than a child being torn away from his or her mother, from his or her family, on the grounds of race. It would scar me for life if I was one of those children, as it would scar any other normal person.

These policies were flawed because they were based on racist assumptions and innocence. I would like to read a passage from the Bringing Them Home report. It is from the indigenous organisation Link Up and 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."

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not asking us to dwell on the awful consequences of those misguided and discredited policies; nor are the churches, the welfare agencies, the mission managers, the adoptive parents and the many others who gave evidence to the inquiry. Instead, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are asking us to make practical responses, to take responsibility for working with indigenous people to undo the damage that sits on their shoulders every day.

As a Government, we can take practical steps to attend to the health problems that flowed from Aboriginal children being wrenched from their families and growing up in the cold care of institutions and to provide counselling and support for the many children who were physically and sexually abused. We can assist shattered families reunite, for example, by maintaining Queensland's Family Histories Unit, which is held up as a model records service. We can assist in restoring the parenting skills lost and by preserving the evidence of the experience.

Since the inquiry, the evidence is out on the table. The forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families is now an accepted part, an acknowledged episode of Australia's history—a sad part of our history. It is the part of the truth of our collective history like Gallipoli, the Great Depression and the White Australia Policy, but we have to learn from it. In learning that history, what surprised many Australians was that there were so many, it was so long and it was so recent. Probably 100,000 Aboriginal children were taken from their homes to be brought up instead in orphanages, juvenile detention centres, missions or by adopting families.

The Queensland Government, like other State and Territory Governments, acknowledges that, in this State, every single Aboriginal family was affected by these practices. Isolated cases occurred soon after the arrival of non-Aboriginal people in Australia, but systematic removals began in earnest at the turn of the century. The policies that framed the removals were still on the books decades later. In some cases, three, four or five generations of children were removed. These events are recorded not just in flickering black and white newsreels but in the vivid memories of those families torn apart in the 1970s, and fresh in the minds of those children who remained in institutions until the 1980s.

It is important that we learn from delving into our history and holding this part of it up to the light, that we learn about the intense grief which loss of families brings, that we learn about the confusion and anger which follows estrangement from culture and that we learn about our folly when visible difference leads to discrimination.

We also learned the tangible, terrible consequences of being denied the health, education, housing and employment opportunities which were used to justify the removals in the first place. We can recognise the burning pain and sense of injustice of those who were taken and those whose loved ones were removed and we can simply say sorry.

It is the very least that we can do and the necessary first step to demonstrate that we non-indigenous Australians have the maturity and willingness and character to move forward in a partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is part of the rebuilding process. In such a partnership we can develop policies and deliver services and build a community of which we can be proud and which will stand up to the scrutiny of future generations looking back in the next century.

The Labor Party in Queensland, both in Opposition and in Government, has supported the need for a full apology to the stolen generation. Because of its importance we have done it as part of the Sorry Day processes that have been held in this country. As Premier of Queensland, I express deep sorrow and regret at the hurt and distress that the policies have caused—policies of previous Governments, of previous Labor Governments, of previous conservative Governments, of previous Labor Premiers. There are generations of Aboriginal people who are still searching for their homes, and there are generations of Aboriginal children who will never return. Today's apology means that all Queenslanders on this National Sorry Day know that my Government is genuine about acknowledging the damage done by past Government practices and policies, that we are truly sorry for the hurt they caused.

Let me conclude my remarks by saying this: since I announced on Monday that my Government was, in fact, going to move this motion, that I was going to move it personally and that it was going to be seconded by the Minister—and this was done in the Parliament yesterday—my office has received a large number of communications from Queenslanders. Some have been supportive, some have not. I want to say to all Queenslanders that this is about bringing people together. This is about building a new future together. This is about trying to do something about the scars of the past. I just say to all members of this House, as I say to all Queenslanders, that we are talking about children. As a parent of three children, I would be destroyed if my children were taken from me or I was a child who was lost in these circumstances. I ask everyone to have some heart in this debate today.
