



Speech by

PHIL REEVES

MEMBER FOR MANSFIELD

Hansard 26 May 1999

STOLEN GENERATION

Mr REEVES (Mansfield—ALP) (3.33 p.m.): I would like to begin, as I did my first speech in this Parliament, by paying respects to the Jagera people on whose traditional lands this Parliament and my electorate stand. I also pay public tribute to the stolen children who, as adults, have shared their painful stories with the community. They have come forward with courage and in the knowledge that their efforts to share this version of their history will not always be met with understanding—as can be seen today.

We are entrusted on this day of national mourning with the solemn task of making amends. We make amends to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were taken from their families, and to the parents and extended family members who suffered from such forced removals. We make amends for the failure of the 48th Parliament to apologise. I was in the public gallery that night in 1997 when the motion moved by the then Opposition Leader, now thankfully the Premier, was debated. Anyone who witnessed that debate could not have helped but be moved by what they heard both from the floor of the Parliament and from the gallery itself.

In his speech on that night, the member for Brisbane Central referred to the horrific example of Penny. Little did he know that members of the family to which he was referring were in the public gallery. This brought home to many, including myself, the realisation of the hurt that these families were still feeling. This hurt turned to anger when the Commonwealth Government moved an amendment to the apology. Not only was that amendment an insult, but the speeches made by those opposite were nothing short of appalling and lacking any sort of respect.

To my horror, and that of others who lived in my electorate and who were in the gallery, my predecessor, Frank Carroll, was the only sitting city-based Liberal who spoke in favour of that pathetic amendment. His speech made no mention of the hurt or the actual events that occurred. Instead, he spoke of juvenile justice programs. I came away from the gallery that night disgusted with the Parliament's motion and, in particular, my representative. However, I was motivated like never before to ensure that I would defeat that hypocrite. Although it was a long election campaign, this issue was my single biggest driving force in working for victory. That is why today is a very proud day for me, as I promised some of those families in the gallery that night that I would do whatever I could to redress that disgraceful amendment. Today I can say that I did my bit. But more importantly, I am personally saying—as is the Government— "sorry" for the actions of past State Governments. We are all coming to terms with what it means to be Australian, what it means to live in a society which has its roots in ancient indigenous traditions. These are difficult questions for us as a Parliament and as a community, and these questions cannot be answered in a spirit of blame or division or self-righteousness.

In 1997, Sir Ronald Wilson released his landmark report on the stolen generations. We have had two years now to come to terms with this shameful chapter in our national history. We have had two years in which to go through the recriminations, the anger, the disbelief and the sense of sorrow which are a necessary part of confronting that history in a genuine way. It is time to make a symbolic gesture of recognition and of healing. It is time to open our hearts to our indigenous sisters and brothers and tell them that we have heard their stories and that we embrace the truth that they contain. Those truths are about a loss of country, of culture, of family and of identity. They tell tales of suffering

and deprivation, as well as tales of the resilience of the human spirit in the face of deliberate attempts to extinguish it.

There is a need for us as a democratic institution to play a genuine part in the process of reconciliation. As part of our international obligations, and in keeping with the spirit of similar movements in North America, New Zealand and Malaysia, we say "sorry". We look at the present effects of past laws and policies, and we meet our responsibilities with honour and generosity. This apology is an act of recognition, and we make it in the hope of a shared future which has confronted its past without flinching.

We often hear sermons and a great deal of preaching from the member for Caboolture, and now the member for Burdekin and others. I challenge them today to practise what they preach. In common with many members on this side of the House, I do not believe that a person's religious beliefs should be used as political arguments. However, the member for Caboolture, the member for Burdekin and others, time after time, use their speeches in this place to quote the Bible and make other religious statements to justify an argument. Today I look forward to the member for Caboolture, the member for Burdekin and others supporting the Premier's motion. Failure to do so would go against all the Christian churches in Australia, which not only have asked Governments to apologise but, in fact, have apologised themselves for their involvement in the system which existed. They have asked every Government in Australia to apologise.

As a person who grew up in a Christian family and system, the very first thing I ever learnt was to apologise for our wrongs and to ask for forgiveness. Only when this occurs can one then go forward. So I hope that the member for Caboolture, the member for Burdekin and others today really do practise what they preach. Today is a moment in time when we can illustrate that we are a mature State and that we are willing to admit our wrongs and then get on with working and walking together with all Queenslanders. I know that members on this side of the House firmly believe it. Let us finally show our maturity on all sides of the House by supporting this motion.

To the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are affected directly or indirectly by past policies I say, "I am sorry." Together with members on this side of the House I apologise for past policies. Today is a great day for Queensland. If and when this motion is approved it will be an even greater day for Queensland.

Tonight we have the State of Origin Rugby League match. Unfortunately, even in that case we have an opposition trying to spoil a great day for Queensland. I can assure the indigenous people of Australia that this motion will not be defeated and this great day for Queensland will not be spoilt.
