



Speech by

Hon. STEVE BREDHAUER

MEMBER FOR COOK

Hansard 26 May 1999

STOLEN GENERATION

Hon. S. D. BREDHAUER (Cook—ALP) (Minister for Transport and Minister for Main Roads) (2.37 p.m.): I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land occupied by this Parliament. I have been the member for Cook for 10 years and it has been my privilege to represent an electorate that has the highest proportion of indigenous people of any electorate in Queensland.

Over recent months many people around the world have been shocked by the nightly images emanating from Kosovo of the ethnic cleansing of Albanians from that part of the world. I have tuned into the news on a regular basis and seen the misery on the faces of the people as they are rounded up from their homes, as their families are separated, and as they are purged from their land. I have seen the damage that has been done to those people.

All the commentators tell us that some families and the community will never recover from this situation. It will take generations for the people who eventually become reunited with their families to overcome the shock and trauma they have suffered. The analogy between what has happened in Kosovo and what previously happened in Queensland and other parts of Australia runs quite deep.

In the early 1960s in my electorate of Cook—in my lifetime; I am a young man—the people of Port Stewart near Coen on the east coast of Cape York Peninsula were rounded up from their homes by the native protector. They were advised that they were going to be taken elsewhere for medical attention. They were loaded onto a ship and, before they were out of sight of their land—Lamalama land—their houses were bulldozed and torched. Families were torn apart and the community was splintered, disintegrated and spread across a number of other areas.

We have seen the pictures of people from Kosovo being herded into refugee camps and we know of the terrible conditions that exist in those refugee camps. I draw the analogy between the refugee camps and the conditions that exist in some of the Aboriginal communities in my electorate and in other parts of Queensland. In Marpuna, just north of Weipa on the west coast of Cape York Peninsula, a similar incident occurred. People were loaded onto the back of trucks and before they got out of sight of their homes, their homes were knocked to the ground and burned. People were dispersed to other parts of Queensland. There were people who attempted to travel to their homes to piece back together their families, but they did so without success.

We need to recognise that these things have happened in our lifetime and they have happened in our own country. What is missing is the formal declaration of war. I do not draw the analogy between a war zone such as exists in Kosovo and what happened in Queensland or in other parts of Australia because, in most cases, the decisions were made by well-intentioned people and the people who took responsibility were well-intentioned, whereas that might not be entirely the case in Kosovo. So I think that is where the analogy ends.

However, the human suffering and the effect that that had on the people in my electorate and in other parts of Queensland and Australia remains the same. When I go to Coen now or Port Stewart, I meet people who were affected. When I go to Marpuna, I visit the grave of a very close friend of mine who on a number of occasions sought to return to her homeland and to try to put her family back together. Unfortunately, she has now passed away. She spent her life searching to try to pull her family back together. I believe that, as we see the images of families in Kosovo that were torn apart, as we look into the eyes of those people, we see the hurt, the anguish and their burning desire to reunite their families and to try to piece together their existence, that gives us some inkling of what Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Island people in Queensland and other parts of Australia have been through, over the past 90-odd years in particular.

Because we have that appreciation, we should have some understanding of why those people who are victims ultimately, who have asked for an apology, are not making an unreasonable request. Today, I have sat in the Parliament and listened to the speeches from both sides of the Parliament. I do not think that making an apology is going to improve the life expectancy of Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders in my electorate. I do not think that it is going to improve their standard of housing. I do not think that it is going to improve their standard of education. Previously, in this House I have spoken about being in my early 40s and having many of my peers in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities basically reaching their life expectancy. It is a shocking thing to know that, although I can look forward to another 30 years or 40 years of life, those people of my age have actually reached their life expectancy. Those people, my contemporaries, are going to their graves—I am attending their funerals now—never having known peace with themselves for having had the opportunity to reconcile the difficulties that have occurred to them and their families in the past.

This apology is about providing an opportunity for the commencement of the healing and reparation process. That does not create the jobs, the housing, the health or the education for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, but it lays the groundwork for the process of reparation. It is a simple ask that these people have made of us: they have asked for an apology for those actions which disrupted their families in the past.

Over the past 10 years as I have travelled around my electorate, I have been surprised by the generosity of Aboriginal people. Notwithstanding what they have been through, many of them do not talk in terms of compensation. Many of them do not want exclusive possession of their land; they are happy to continue to share, they are happy to try to get on with their lives as best they can. This morning, I sat in the Parliament and listened to the Leader of the Opposition speak on this issue. I decided that in my speech today I would not be focusing on rebutting the arguments of people opposite. However, I want to say that I empathise with the people in the gallery and some in this House who were so offended by the views of the Leader of the Opposition that they decided to leave. I can understand why those people did that. In my opinion, in such situations it is not my role to leave; it is my role to confront those views, to challenge the opinions of people such as the Leader of the Opposition and to take up the fight on behalf of all of those Australians who believe that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders do not enjoy an equal place in Australian society and continue that fight until such time as they do. This apology is a small part of that process.

I want to refer also to the former Premier's comment about the opportunity for a free and frank exchange of views and debate in this House. I support him absolutely on that. Unfortunately, free and frank exchanges of opinion and debate can occur only among equals. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are not equal in this debate. They are not members in this House and they are not equal in the community. Notwithstanding the views that other people put, they still suffer disadvantage that many of us in our communities would not tolerate in our electorates.

Today, reference has been made to the sorry industry. That is the so-called guilt trip that is laid on us. Not very many Aboriginal people remain in the gallery. However, I ask people in this House to consider whether they think that looking someone in the eye and having the courage to apologise is an act of guilt. In my view, it is not an act of guilt; in my view, it is an act of courage. It is an act of our courage to be able to stand up and say, "My predecessors in this Parliament in Governments past committed policy decisions that were wrong for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. For that, I have the courage to look Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders and Australians in the eye today and say, 'I apologise.'"
