



Speech by

Mr TIM MULHERIN

MEMBER FOR MACKAY

Hansard 26 May 1999

STOLEN GENERATION

Mr MULHERIN (Mackay—ALP) (4.29 p.m.): Before I begin, I acknowledge and pay respect to the people on whose traditional land we are meeting today. As the parliamentary representative for Mackay, I apologise to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Queensland for Government policies under which children were forcibly separated from their families. I express deep sorrow and regret at the hurt and distress this caused.

I know that there will be people in the Mackay community who will criticise me for making this apology, just as there were those who were critical when in Opposition the now Premier apologised to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on behalf of the Australian Labor Party. I say to them: before you rush to judgment, please take the time to read the stolen generation report or, at the very least, take a look at your own children and ask yourself one simple question: how would I feel if this was done to me?

The stolen generation report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has done much to make Australians more aware of a neglected and shameful part of our history—the forcible removal of children from their families as part of a Government policy to break down Aboriginal culture. Over more than 700 pages, the report movingly documents in great detail the effects of Government policy that sought to assimilate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into the mainstream community. It also reveals how the forced removal of children, which severed vital connections with families, land, community and culture, occurred even within the past 30 years. These things happened within our living memory and the resulting trauma continues to affect many individuals and communities to this day.

Of course, the report was not the first time that Australians were made aware of the horror of forced removal. Sally Morgan's classic book *My Place* tells the story of her uncle, Arthur Corunna, who was taken away from his mother at the age of 11 or 12. Arthur's story is similar to many of those contained in the stolen generation report, and I will read a short extract from it now. It states—

"Sometimes I wish I'd been born black as the ace of spades, then they'd never have took me. They only took half-castes. They took Albert and they took me and Katie, our friend. She had a big doll with her when she went, Albert had me. Others went, too. I was about eleven or twelve.

When I left, Lily cried and cried. She was only little, but she ran away and hid, no-one could find her. I was her favourite. She was full blood, real black, so they didn't want to take her. Daisy was only a baby, she didn't know what was goin' on.

They told my mother and the others we'd be back soon. We wouldn't be gone for long, they said. People were callin', 'Bring us back a shirt, bring us this, bring us that'. They didn't realise they wouldn't be seein' us no more. I thought they wanted us educated so we could help run the station one day. I was wrong.

When they came to get me, I clung to my mother and tried to sing them. I wanted them to die. I was too young, I didn't know how to sing them properly. I cried and cried, calling to my mother, 'I don't want to go!'. She was my favourite. I loved her. I called, 'I want to stop with you, I want to stop with you!' I never saw her again."

Stories like Arthur Corunna's were repeated many times over in Australia.

Historian Dr Peter Read from the Australian National University has estimated that in Australia today there may be 100,000 Aboriginal people who do not know their families or communities as a result of forcible removal. And, of course, the effects of this policy on families were devastating. The stolen generation report details evidence from one group of five brothers and sisters who were removed from their mother in north Queensland in 1958. Penny was aged 10, Trevor was 11, Murray was seven, Judy was six, and baby Olive was five or six weeks old. According to Murray—

"It was as though someone had turned the lights out—a regimented existence replacing our childhood innocence."

Baby Olive was the first to be removed from the other children and they were told by a Government official that she had died from meningitis. It was only many years later that they found out that Olive had not died but had been fostered out and had her name changed. Penny tells the story of her mother's attempts to see the children—

"I do remember my mother showing up for visits, supervised visits. We used to get excited. I just wanted her to take us away from there. Then the visits suddenly stopped. I'm told the authorities stopped them because she had a destabilising effect on us.

That didn't deter my mother. She used to come out to the school ground to visit us over the fence. The authorities found out about those visits. They had to send us to a place where she couldn't get to us. To send us anywhere on mainland Queensland she would have just followed—so they sent us to the one place where she can't follow—'Palm Island Aboriginal Settlement'. By our mother visiting us illegally at that school she unknowingly sealed our fate. I wasn't to see my mother again for ten nightmare years.

I remember when I learnt to write letters, I wrote to my mother furiously pleading with her to come and take us off that island. I wrote to her for years, I got no reply then I realised that she was never coming for us. That she didn't want us. That's when I began to hate her. Now I doubt if any of my letters ever got off that island or that any letters she wrote me ever stood a chance of me receiving them."

Often the effects of this treatment are not visible from the outside. Penny takes up the story—

"Judy had the resources to seek psychiatric care. Murray's got psychiatric care. Trevor's still under psychiatric care and been diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic. His psychiatrist says he attributes all the things that happened to him in his childhood to bring him to that state he is in today. Sometimes he gets suicidal. He rings up and wants to kill himself. And I say, 'Don't let your life pass into nothingness'.

People probably see on the surface that we've led successful lives. But that's on the surface. Nobody knows that Trevor, who until six years ago has never been out of a job in his life, owns his own home, got his own car. They look at that and say, 'He's achieved the great Australian dream'. And they don't look behind that. Is that what it's all about? They look at us and say, 'Well assimilation worked with those buggers'."

If only they knew the truth. I defy any fair-minded and reasonable person to read the many stories such as this contained in the report and not feel great regret at what happened.

As I said earlier, I say to people who criticise my apology: before you rush to judgment, please take the time to read the stolen generation report or at the very least take a look at your own children and ask yourself the simple question: how would I feel if this was done to me? An apology of this kind is not about guilt or blame. It is simply acknowledging and taking responsibility for someone else's suffering.

I know that I have spent a lot of time today talking about all the hurt and trauma caused by past policies, but Sorry Day is about more than just negatives. For me, Sorry Day is also a time to reflect on the survival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over the past 210 years and to celebrate their important contribution to Australian society. It is also about admiring the courage and determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to hold their families together against all the odds. Despite the barriers put in their way, they remained true to their families, their culture and themselves.

It is that determination, combined with the goodwill of many decent people in our community, that gives me the faith to believe that one day reconciliation in this country will be more than just a word and justice for indigenous Australians will have finally arrived. Until then, we will just have to keep working away at it together.
