



Speech by

Jann Stuckey

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

Hansard Thursday, 8 March 2007

MOTION: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Mrs STUCKEY (Currumbin—Lib) (12.02 pm): I rise to support the motion from the honourable member for Burdekin on International Women's Day 2007. For centuries, women have battled for recognition and rights that were bestowed automatically on males. In the 19th century when women first sought admission to the legal profession, the courts resisted their requests. At that time, the legislation was couched in terms of 'persons' joining the profession and male judges held that the definition of the word 'person' did not include women. According to Richard Chisholm and Garth Nettheim in *Understanding Law*, it could be said that the legal system embodies a tradition of indifference to the rights of women to protection against violence. Superficially, those domains remain neutral but in truth it is not the case. Last week figures published showed that women's representation in parliaments around the world is at 17 per cent, which is said to be a record high.

I dedicate this speech to all those women who were unfairly treated by past Queensland state governments through the forced removal of their children by callous practices under the guise of moral danger and the Adoption Act 1901. Their suffering continues today because of the insensitive decisions made by past governments.

In this day and age it is abhorrent to think that only a few decades ago young single pregnant women could be seized by police and taken to government sanctioned facilities to wait until their children were born. In many cases they were treated as slave labour, worked long hours in laundries without pay and were forbidden from seeing their boyfriends or, indeed, family members. They were imprisoned as criminals.

Under the Adoption of Children Act 1964, the director of the department of children's services was the sole authority to control and make adoption orders in this state. Most politicians and key decision makers were men who had no concept or personal experience of motherhood, yet they took children from their natural mothers under questionable circumstances.

Last month in parliament I was privileged to attend an art exhibition and book launch that was organised by Origins. I acknowledge members who are in the gallery today. Stories tumbled from women still raw with the grief of not knowing whether they had delivered a son or daughter as they never got a chance to see their child's face. Women's adoption stories were supported with graphic paintings and shocking memoirs of mistreated women. One would think that the cruelty depicted came from the Dark Ages. Women were tied to beds, treated like animals and drugged to the eyeballs so that they were beyond comprehension as their babies were extracted from them.

Today in some circles the term 'single mum' still carries a degree of stigma, as it did for women and girls who had babies out of wedlock in days gone by. Today in this House and parliaments elsewhere in Australia, there are women who have had children out of wedlock. I ask them to ponder for a moment how they would feel if they had lived during the dark days of discrimination and had to surrender their babies in such a manner?

In 1990 and 1991 amendments to the legislation made provisions for adults who were adopted and birth parents to receive identifying information about each other where no objection was lodged. Additionally, people who were adopted and birth parents who signed an adoption consent after June 1991 were provided with an unqualified entitlement to access identifying information once the adopted person attained the age of 18. What of children born prior to 1990? Herein lies the inconsistency, discrimination and cowardice of past governments.

Proof is forthcoming that many were tricked into signing adoption papers, which they were told were merely hospital discharge forms. Another ploy commonly used was to get the mothers to sign the papers when they were drugged so heavily that they were incapable of knowing what they were doing.

I have heard the excuses that governments ignored mothers' pleas because of claims that adoptive parents and birth mothers were promised secrecy. Those excuses are only partially true as, in yet another cruel twist of justice, there is evidence that the Department of Families did not keep the name of the natural mother private. In reality, it provided the names of mother and child to adoptive parents, thus denying the natural mothers any sense of equity.

In 1990 members from both sides of the House debated the Adoption Act. After 16 years of lobbying by birth mothers and Origins, affected groups were devastated to learn that section 39 of the legislation included permanent objections.

On International Women's Day we need to be cognisant of the trauma inflicted not once but twice on those women. Hearing their stories and looking into their sad eyes, I can begin to imagine the heart-wrenching grief that they have felt for so many years. We have the power and the opportunity to correct this gross prejudice and human injustice which discriminates unfairly against a group of women who are caught in a time warp.

In closing, I acknowledge all Queensland women who had their children taken and who have continued to search for them despite the enormous odds. I admire their courage and strength.

Time expired.