




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

Record of Proceedings, 8 November 2016

**LIMITATIONS OF ACTIONS (INSTITUTIONAL CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE) AND
OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL; LIMITATION OF ACTIONS AND
OTHER LEGISLATION (CHILD ABUSE CIVIL PROCEEDINGS) AMENDMENT
BILL**

 **Mr STEWART** (Townsville—ALP) (5.28 pm): I rise today in support of the Limitation of Actions (Institutional Child Sexual Abuse) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill before the House today. Firstly, I would like to thank the parliamentary committee for their work in the inquiry and, in particular, I would like to acknowledge and thank all of those submitters who either wrote to the committee and/or appeared during the hearings. I am sure that this was not an easy thing to do. I, too, would also like to acknowledge the Premier and the position taken by the government when during her opening remarks the Premier said—

We have prioritised this reform to recognise that there is no time limit on suffering and to ensure that survivors have the time they may need to come forward to talk about their abuse. This will give them the opportunity to argue their claim in a time frame that will accommodate the hardships they are already facing. The changes we are making will remove one of the barriers to justice that many victims have felt has let them down.

This legislation that we have heard this afternoon will amend the Limitation of Actions Act to retrospectively abolish the application of limitation periods that would apply to claims for damages brought by a person where that claim is founded on the personal injury of the person resulting from sexual abuse of the person when the person was a child and the sexual abuse occurred in an institution.

We have heard the member for Currumbin say that there are members in this House today who may know of persons who were abused in institutions in our state, and I think that is certainly true. I, too, have had a very dear friend, who helped me on my election campaign, divulge to me that as a young Aboriginal girl she was taken from her family and was one of the stolen generation. In the institution that she was placed she was abused for many, many years. As a strong Aboriginal girl, she would fight back and in her words that only made it worse. She was not prepared to give in. She was prepared to fight against the system even if it meant constant punishment and abuse. After finishing her formal schooling, Aunty Victoria went on to study nursing and had an extensive nursing career over many decades. In her later years she returned to study and achieved her PhD—a well-educated woman and a well-respected woman in the Aboriginal community and in the wider Townsville community. While I acknowledge the journey of Aunty Victoria, I would like to dedicate today's speech to a man who indirectly influenced much of today's debate.

In the early 1990s Bruce Grundy was a journalist and editor for a small independent newspaper in Queensland. He single-handedly broke the story to the nation of the decades of abuse at St Joseph's orphanage at Neerkol in Rockhampton. I am proud to say that Bruce Grundy, professor of journalism at the University of Queensland, now retired, is my uncle. I can remember the countless weeks, months and even years when his research into the events at Neerkol would uncover some of the most horrific

stories of child sex abuse and abuse of young children that would make most people cringe. Some 20 years later, the stories of Nazareth House, Silky Oaks and Neerkol have now come to light after decades of suppression by the keepers of those stories, those who were abused and tortured by those who were trusted to look after our children: the nuns and priests of St Joseph's Neerkol orphanage. However, speaking out about those atrocities comes at a price. The long-term pain and mental anguish that these people have harboured often comes bubbling to the surface when they relive those horrific events of their past. It does not stop there; threats upon their lives for revealing the truths about their ordeals were not uncommon.

In April 2015 at a public hearing in Rockhampton, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse heard from former residents of the Neerkol orphanage. One of those giving evidence was David Owen, then aged 76. He said he became a resident of the orphanage at five months of age. He told the commission he was an altar boy for a priest who sodomised him for years. Mr Owen said that on one occasion he was held over the side of a bridge by the priest and told that he would drop him into the fires of hell if he did not do what was required of him. He recalled a nun taking him to see the priest and claimed that the nun knew he would be sexually abused. Mr Owen told the hearing that if he refused to see the priest the nun would then beat him. Mr Owen said he reported the abuse to the police in the 1990s and received death threats by an anonymous caller shortly afterwards. He says, 'I also received a bullet in my mailbox. It may have been the same day that I received the call.'

At the commission hearing a witness known as AYA said she was sexually assaulted by one of the priests. She said—

... on my 12th birthday, I was sexually abused by—

another priest—

at Neerkol.

She said the priest—

would often ask the girls to visit him. He would entice you to his ... room with a display of food that we didn't have such as chicken.

As a young teacher in the 1990s I would listen to my uncle tell story after story of the barbaric treatment that the nuns and priests would inflict upon the innocent children in these institutions. My uncle would also tell me that instances such as these were not confined to Neerkol but were also occurring in other institutions such as Nazareth House, Silky Oaks and John Oxley. I am sure that if it were not for the work of my uncle during those early days of the 1990s when he was the editor at the independent newspaper and broke the story of Neerkol not only to Queenslanders but also to the world, perhaps this legislation would not be debated tonight. I thank him for the work over many decades. In doing so, I commend the government's bill to the House.