

**KELVIN THOMSON MP
FEDERAL MEMBER FOR WILLS
APOLOGY TO AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES
18th February 2008**

House of Representatives

Mr KELVIN THOMSON (Wills) (4.15 p.m.)—Madam Deputy Speaker Burke, I congratulate you on your election to your important office. I feel proud and privileged to participate in this debate on behalf of the people of Wills, who are overwhelmingly compassionate and have a strong sense of a fair go for all. I apologise to the Indigenous peoples of this land, particularly the Wurundjeri people, for the wrongs which have been done to them. In particular, I say sorry for the mistreatment of the stolen generations. Last Wednesday, 13 February, the day of the parliamentary apology, I went down to the stage set up between the old and new parliament houses. I met up with my parents, Allan and Dorothy, long supporters of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal causes. We listened to musicians such as Troy Cassar-Daley who were playing there. I do not think I have ever heard Troy sound better. The atmosphere was quite electric. To stand amongst these people, many of whom have suffered so much just because they were born black, was quite overwhelming. People had tears in their eyes—tears of pain, tears of joy. There is so much unavoidable pain in the world, but to see all this avoidable pain was another matter altogether. For all their lives, Aboriginal people have carried the stigma, the unbearable weight, of being black or half-caste and, therefore, considered inferior by far too many of the rest of us. People talk about symbolic measures and people talk about practical measures, but the thing which has to change is this: being Aboriginal must become a source of pride, not a source of shame. We must learn to see Aboriginal people as our equals and stop thinking of them as lesser people, as second-class citizens, as drunks. It would, in fact, be a fine thing if we learnt to envy Aboriginal people, to envy their long history, to envy the way they learnt to live with this landscape for over 60,000 years, deriving a living from it without destroying it.

Back in June 1997, over 10 years ago, I spoke to the House about the *Bringing them home* report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, known at the time as the 'Stolen children report'. I wanted to bring home to people why there was a need for an apology from this parliament and for people to understand that, although we cannot erase these past wrongs, it is necessary for us to understand them as a precondition for going forward together. I brought to the House the story of William, and I will quote from it again. William said:

... I was about six years old ... [when] our mother passed away. My family tried to get the Welfare to keep us here ... trying to keep us together ... My uncle wanted to keep me and he tried every way possible, apparently, to keep me. He was going to try and adopt me but they wouldn't allow it. They sent us away.

... ..

When St Francis [orphanage] closed up, they sent us out to different places. My second eldest brother and I went to a Mrs R. And my only recollections of that lady was when we first went there. We were greeted at the door. The welfare officer took us into this house and I can remember going into this room, and I'd never seen a room like it. It was big, and here me and my brother were going to share it. We put our bags down on the floor. We thought, 'This is wonderful'. As soon as the welfare officer left, Mrs R took us outside that room and put us in a two bed caravan out the back.

I was sleeping in the caravan. I was only a little boy then. In the middle of the night somebody come to the caravan and raped me. That person raped me and raped me. I could feel the pain going through me. I cried and cried and they stuffed my head in the pillow. And I had nobody to talk to. It wasn't the only night it happened.

... it seemed like night after night. It seemed like nobody cared. I don't know how long it went on for, but night after night I'd see the bogeyman. I never saw the person, I don't know who that person was.

... ..

They shifted us again and that was into town again. And then they put us in with this bloke ... They've got records of what he did to me. That man abused me. He made us do dirty things that we never wanted to do. Where was the counselling? Where was the help I needed? They knew about it. The guy went to court. He went to court but they did nothing for me, nothing. ... I remember the child psychologist saying, 'He's an Aboriginal kid, he'll never improve.'

Let me repeat that:

'He's an Aboriginal kid, he'll never improve.'

William said:

I've had my secret all my life. I tried to tell but I couldn't. I can't even talk to my own brothers. I can't even talk to my sister. I fear people. I fear 'em ... It's rarely I've got friends.

I wish I was blacker. I wish I had language. I wish I had my culture. I wish my family would accept me as I am. We can't get together as a family. It's never worked. We fight, we carry on. I've always wanted a family.

That comes from a man removed from Alice Springs to Adelaide in the 1950s. It is because of that and so many other accounts in the report that we as a parliament needed and now need to pass this resolution to say to people around Australia that we are sorry. That is a precondition to moving forward. But going forward is about more than acknowledging the stolen generations, important as that is. I am scarcely alone in noting, as I have often done, that we should thank our lucky stars that we get to live in Australia. But there is a hole in the Australian heart. We are incomplete. The reason we are incomplete is that the opportunity and prosperity which we enjoy as a nation does not include Aboriginal Australia. Let me quote two men from the 1830s who give a pretty plain picture at the time of what happened upon European settlement. First, the writer Robert Lyon, who arrived as an English settler in 1829 and who said to his countrymen:

You are the aggressors. The law of nations will bear them out in repelling force by force. They did not go to the British Isles to make war upon you; but you came from the British Isles to make war upon them. You are the invaders of their country—you destroy the natural productions of the soil on which they live—you devour their fish and their game—and you drive them from the abodes of their ancestors.

He went on:

What shall we say to the barbarous practice of firing upon them whenever they are seen.

... ..

They may stand to be slaughtered but they must not throw a spear in their own defence or attempt to bring their enemies to a sense of justice by the only means in their power—that of returning like for like. If they do—if they dare to be guilty of an act which in other nations would be eulogised as the noblest of a patriots' deeds—they are outlawed; a reward is set upon the heads; and they are ordered to be shot as if they were so many mad dogs! Thus, in a barbarous manner, you practice what in them you condemn, the law of retaliation.

Then in 1838, there was the Reverend John Saunders, who at a sermon in Sydney referred to:

... the sin in which the whole colony has been engaged and for which, therefore, the whole colony is answerable—our injustice to the Aborigines. I do not select individual delinquents, but impeach the nation; for whether in ignorance or with a guilty knowledge, we certainly have been culpable in our neglect and oppression of this despised and degraded tribe of our fellow men.

After that initial period of attack and dispossession came a long period of neglect and cover-up. In 1968 Professor William Stanner gave a Boyer lecture devoted to what he called 'the great Australian silence' about Aboriginal people, noting how they scarcely rated a mention from historians and other writers about Australia. He said:

... inattention on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absentmindedness. It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale. We have been able for so long to disremember the Aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so.

And the first Aboriginal senator, Neville Bonner, made a similar point in his speech to the Senate, saying:

All within me that is Aboriginal yearns to be heard as the voice of the indigenous people of Australia. For far too long we have been crying out and far too few have heard us.

He said, 'Less than 200 years ago the white man came. I say now in all sincerity that my people were shot, poisoned, hanged and broken in spirit until they became refugees in their own land. Then began to appear the emotional scars, the psychological wounds from which, by and large, we have still not recovered.' The Aborigines today find themselves drifting between two worlds, accepting some of the white man's virtues but, alas, also many of his vices. Neville Bonner was, no doubt, thinking about alcohol. He did not live to see the ravages of internet pornography and child sex abuse. But this period marked the end of the great silence and an awakening—passage of the 1967 referendum counting Aborigines as people, Senator Bonner's election and the handing back of land to the Gurindji people in the Northern Territory by the Whitlam government. Pope John Paul II said in Alice Springs in 1986:

Christian people of good will are saddened to realize—many of them only recently—for how long a time Aboriginal people were transported from their homelands into small areas or reserves where families were broken up, tribes split apart, children orphaned and people forced to live like exiles in a foreign country.

He also said:

To call for the acknowledgment of the land rights of people who have never surrendered those rights is not discrimination.

The high-water mark of this modern awakening was Paul Keating's 1992 speech at Redfern Park. He said in that speech:

... the starting point might be to recognise that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians.

It begins, I think, with the act of recognition. Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disasters. The

alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion.

... We failed to ask—how would I feel if this were done to me?

As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us. But Paul Keating said it was not about feeling guilty. He said:

Down the years, there has been no shortage of guilt, but it has not produced the responses we need. Guilt is not a very constructive emotion.

I think what we need to do is open our hearts a bit.

All of us.

Perhaps when we recognise what we have in common we will see the things which must be done—the practical things.

He said we needed:

... to bring the dispossessed out of the shadows, to recognise that they are part of us, and that we cannot give indigenous Australians up without giving up many of our own most deeply held values, much of our own identity—and our own humanity.

It was a sensational, positive, optimistic speech and inspired much hope, but in the 15 years since it was given those hopes have not been realised. I know there are competing views as to whose fault this is and I do not want to make a politically partisan speech, but it needs to be said that measures of Aboriginal disadvantage, life expectancy, education, health, homelessness, alcoholism—all the indicators which make it clear that life for Aboriginals is a world away from life for the rest of us—show no sign of abating.

The Labor government was elected having made commitments to, firstly, eliminate the 17-year gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a generation; secondly, at least halve the rate of Indigenous infant mortality among babies within a decade; thirdly, at least halve the mortality rate amongst Indigenous children under five within a decade; and, finally, at least halve the difference in the rate of Indigenous students at years 3, 5 and 7 who fail to meet reading, writing and numeracy benchmarks within 10 years. These are worthy goals. To achieve them will require an effort from the whole nation. In particular, we need to go back to and we need to recapture the spirit of Paul Keating's speech at Redfern—to 'open our hearts a bit'.

I want to congratulate GetUp! on its email campaign concerning this issue. Some people say this is all only symbolism, but I believe it is very powerful symbolism. It is saying to Aboriginal people: you do matter. It does matter that people thought it was okay to take Aboriginal or half-caste children from their parents simply because they were Aboriginal, because that is what happened. And it does matter that your life expectancy is so much lower than that of the rest of us. Aboriginal people do matter. Let us resolve in this place that never again will Aboriginal people be denied the dignity and the respect to which they are entitled as our fellow human beings.

KELVIN THOMSON MP
Federal Member for Wills