



Full Day Hansard Transcript (Legislative Assembly, 26 February 2008, Proof)

Proof

Extract from undefined Hansard and Papers Tuesday, 26 February 2008 (Proof).

APOLOGY BY THE COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENT TO THE STOLEN GENERATIONS

Ministerial Statement

Mr MORRIS IEMMA (Lakemba—Premier, and Minister for Citizenship) [2.18 p.m.]: In view of the comments I am about to make, it is with a special sense of respect that I acknowledge the traditional owners of this land and pay tribute to elders past and present. On 18 June 1997 my distinguished predecessor, Bob Carr, stood in this place and made one of the most historic statements in the 152-year existence of this Parliament:

That this House, on behalf of the people of New South Wales—

- (1) apologises unreservedly to the Aboriginal people of Australia for the systematic separation of generations of Aboriginal children from their parents, families and communities;
- (2) acknowledges and regrets Parliament's role in enacting laws and endorsing policies of successive governments whereby profound grief and loss have been inflicted upon Aboriginal Australians;
- (3) calls upon all Australian Governments to respond with compassion, understanding and justice to the report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission entitled *Bringing them home*; and
- (4) reaffirms its commitment to the goals and processes of reconciliation in New South Wales and throughout Australia.

Eleven years later the power of those words and the emotion of that day remain undimmed and undiminished. All of us who witnessed it and who were privileged to vote for that motion will forever regard it as one of the high points of our life in public office. The statement was just over 100 words long but it can be encapsulated in just one word—short, simple, precious—the word we teach our children to value above all others but the word we often find the hardest to say. It is, of course, the word "sorry". Just five short letters that some Australians staked their reputations on denying and who, despite the overwhelming evidence and the sheer weight of moral urgency, never found the courage or the humility to utter. Thankfully, with the apology made by the Prime Minister and the Commonwealth Parliament on 13 February the age of denial is over. No more must the Aboriginal community face a double hurt: the original trauma of the Stolen Generations and the added insult of refusing an apology. A great national wrong has been righted; a great national healing has begun, and the first Australians can walk a little taller in their own land once again.

No-one would deny the apology marks a beginning as much as it marks an end. The apology marks the end of a series of symbolic actions and gestures that have unfolded since the referendum of 1967: the handover of Wave Hill to Vincent Lingiari; the Northern Territory Land Rights Act and its many State equivalents; the

appointment of the first Aboriginal judges, governors and politicians; the Mabo judgement and the Native Title Act; the apologies of the State and Territory parliaments; the bridge walk; and Cathy Freeman's unforgettable victory in the 2000 Olympics 400 metres final. Now we have the great missing piece in that sequence: the apology by our national Parliament. With that action, the era, symbols and tokens have come to an end.

That is not to say there will not be, or need to be, such actions in the future. But the defining era of recoiling gestures has reached a conclusion. It is now time to give them substance, to give them real meaning and power in the lives of Aboriginal Australians for whom "sorry", however powerful and necessary, can never on its own be enough. What lies ahead is more challenging and less defined. Unlike symbols and actions that occur on defined days, there will not be a precise moment when Aboriginal infant mortality or school results or incarceration levels reach appropriate benchmarks. They will not happen at the same time nor evenly among the States and communities of this nation. There will not be a defining moment when we know we have made it. It will happen slowly and, at first, imperceptibly, but it must happen. And it will happen, lest the words so solemnly uttered in this place 11 years ago, and uttered with even greater meaning in Canberra two weeks ago, turn to dust and ashes, and our plans for rebuilding join the scrap heap of failure and waste, which is what our decades of attempting to defeat Indigenous disadvantage amount to.

For this generation it can no longer be so. In the face of that shameful legacy, with so many lessons learnt, and so many good intentions scorched, more of the same will not be acceptable. It will be time to right the wrongs. Therefore, in welcoming and celebrating the apology, we acknowledge that it also sets the bar higher and makes the price dearer if we get the future wrong. With the apology we have a chance for black and white Australians to live on just terms in this lucky country we share: our last and best chance, an open door through which we must pass if our third century together is not to repeat the mistakes and failures of the first two. It is a challenge that we, and we alone, must face; a challenge that we, and we alone, must meet. We have said "sorry". It is time to show we mean it.

Mr BARRY O'FARRELL (Ku-ring-gai—Leader of the Opposition) [2.25. p.m.]: In replying to this motion, I assume the usual courtesy will be extended to the Leader of The Nationals on this motion as it has been over the past 13 years whenever these matters have been raised. I spent the morning of 13 February at Newcastle Civic Centre, along with the member for Newcastle, the Lord Mayor of Newcastle, the Anglican Bishop of Newcastle, Bryan Farren; the Catholic Bishop of Maitland and Newcastle, Michael Malone; the member for Port Stephens, Craig Baumann; and the Hon. Robyn Parker, MLC, and, thankfully and joyously, hundreds of ordinary citizens. We heard Awabakal Aboriginal Co-op spokesman Richard McGuinness speak with great feeling about what the apology meant to him. It is clear that not just for Richard McGuinness, not just for people of Aboriginal descent across this State and nation, this was a significant event.

We last spoke about this matter in May last year when we celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the 1967 referenda in which Faith Bundler, whom I had the privilege to represent, played such an important role. The apology by the Federal Parliament is a vital step towards the goal of genuine reconciliation in this country, and I believe it was an historic an event as that 1967 referenda. But legislation or motions cannot guarantee equality, respect or dignity. To achieve those goals also requires an understanding of the problems and the determination to overcome them.

The Federal Parliament's apology is an expression of the community's desire to

begin that process of healing. It is an acknowledgement by the Australian community of past wrongs and that as a nation we care about the effect of those actions upon our Aboriginal brothers and sisters. There is no doubt that when Aboriginal children were taken away from their parents, because of Aboriginality, government policy of the day was clearly unjust and unreasonable, and there can be no excuse made for that. This apology, and the reaffirmation of the apology offered 11 years ago in this place, sends a clear message to Aboriginal Australians that they are valued by all Australians, that we recognise past injustices and that we are committed to achieving reconciliation.

Motions and expressions of goodwill will not provide Aboriginal Australians with what they ultimately deserve from all of us as Australians, that is, genuine equality. I will not recite today the appalling statistics across a range of areas that demonstrate the lack of equality between Aboriginal Australians and the rest of us. I do acknowledge the following passage of the motion in the Federal Parliament. The Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, has shown, at least initially, that he is going to direct an enormous amount of energy towards some of the tasks, including housing, that confront Aboriginal Australians. I acknowledge that he does so—I think to his credit—in a bipartisan fashion.

<10>

Eleven years ago I stood in this place and spoke in support of the apology offered by this, the oldest Parliament in the nation, the first Parliament to offer an apology to Australian Aborigines. Now, 11 years on, I believe that none in this place could be satisfied that the outcomes of the hopes, the energies and the goodwill that were clearly put into that exercise have been delivered to the people in our State. From time to time in this place we get very excited and we seek to hold governments to account for the failings of big portfolios involving billions of dollars. Frequently we fail to understand the impact of those failings upon communities across the State. Whether in Health or the Department of Community Services, what at times might be issues of great conflict between political parties in this place are matters of life and death, care and treatment, and protection and nurture for those weakest and most vulnerable within our communities.

Today I asked the member for Barwon about the status of the Brewarrina office of the Department of Community Services. I was told, again, six months after the matter was first raised in this House, that the Brewarrina office still does not have a child protection officer attached to it. That fills me with distress but it also fills me with a determination; a determination to ensure that 11 years on from our apology, and after the Federal Parliament's apology, we continue to hold governments to account and we continue to work to ensure that these are not just words, but are matters of action. We must meet the expectations of all Australians in this being a practical step towards real reconciliation and, above all, we must meet the needs of Aboriginal Australians in this State.

Mr ANDREW STONER (Oxley—Leader of The Nationals) [2.31 p.m.], by leave: On behalf of the New South Wales Nationals I indicate tripartisan support for an apology to Aboriginal people who were taken from their families as children. Several years ago in this House I expressed the same support for an apology. It is important for many Aboriginal people in New South Wales to hear those words during their lifetime, words that will assist them in their healing process. The Nationals members in this place represent seven out of the 10 electorates with the highest Aboriginal population; that is, most Aboriginal communities are located in country New South Wales. The Nationals members in this place have consistently sought to improve the living standards of Aboriginal people in their communities. They are proud to represent those people and they are desperate for a changemore than mere

words and for practical reconciliation in their communities.

There are significant Aboriginal communities in towns such as Kempsey, Bowraville and Bellbrook in my electorate of Oxley and in other parts of the mid North Coast. The notorious Kinchilla Boys Home, which played a very dark part in the history of the stolen generations, is near Kempsey. The day before the apology was delivered in the Federal Parliament I spoke to a respected elder of the Aboriginal community in Kempsey. I will call her Aunty Janet. I will not reveal her full details. Aunty Janet was one of eight children in a Taree family in what was then known as the Aboriginal mission near Purfleet. In the late 1950s her father was a worker on the railways. When Aunty Janet was 14, her parents told her to go bush, to go and hide, because the authorities were after her. The authorities were the Aboriginal Welfare Board, an agency of this State.

On that occasion Aunty Janet escaped. However, when she was 15 she was removed from her family and sent for domestic work in Sydney, where she was placed with a Jewish family in Edgecliff. Of her seven siblings, five were removed from the family. Things became worse when her father was killed during his employment on the railways. The Aboriginal Welfare Board took the insurance money owed to her mother. The manager of the so-called mission wrote documents to say that she was an unfit mother, which resulted in five of the siblings being placed into various locations involving domestic duties. They were taken from their mother because she was regarded as unfit. Two of the boys were sent to Kinchilla Boys Home, one died while there and the other died subsequently as a result of alcoholism in western New South Wales.

Aunty Janet told me her story not because she wants any money—she said that she is happy with her lot in life—but to have the record corrected regarding her mother and her family. I appeal to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, to whom I will speak later, to go through the archives and read some of the documents that I believe were falsified. The Federal Parliament's apology has helped Aunty Janet and many of the Kempsey community no end. However, indigenous and non-indigenous people want more than mere words; we want practical reconciliation on the ground.

Last year I toured Aboriginal communities in western New South Wales. I saw chronic drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and child abuse. I heard of incarceration rates for Aboriginal men that were 12 times the average. I heard that life expectancy for Aboriginal men in far western New South Wales is 33 years. That is an absolute scandal and an international shame. These issues have been raised by way of a report entitled "Breaking the Silence: Creating the Future. Addressing Child Sexual Assault in Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales", which recommends practical reconciliation on the ground, whole-of-government action and significant funding for those recommendations. As yet the New South Wales Government has failed to come to grips with those recommendations.

Whilst The Nationals join with the Government in its apology, we urge it to get serious about practical reconciliation and about addressing the serious disadvantage in Aboriginal communities throughout New South Wales. That disadvantage is not confined to remote communities in the Northern Territory; it exists in the Government's backyard in New South Wales. Let us be tripartisan and work together on this. I am sure all members will join with me when I say that words are very good. We give those words out of a spirit of wanting to see people move forward in their healing process. However, if we are fair dinkum about addressing those issues we will work together and provide the necessary resources towards dealing with them.