

APOLOGY TO AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES – 20th February 2008

Mrs VALE (Hughes) (5:33 PM) —I welcome and strongly support this motion of an apology to our Indigenous Australians, especially those who were forcibly removed from their mothers, their families, their communities and their land. Firstly, I offer my respects to the traditional owners of this land in Canberra, the Ngunawal people, and also the traditional owners of the land in my electorate of Hughes, the Dharawal of the coastal regions of Sutherland Shire and the Cabrogal people of the Liverpool area, who archaeologists suggest inhabited the land for over 40,000 years.

I know there are many of my constituents who will heartily approve of my support for this motion but, as is to be expected in the healthy, robust democracy that is Australia today, there will be those who will not understand and so I seek to explain to them my reasons. To those who say that this generation, our current generation of Australians, have no share in the responsibility of the actions of generations past, I point out that the policy of removal was a government policy and it was carried out under the orders of Commonwealth and state parliaments over several decades.

Parliaments, unlike human beings, command an inherent timeless sovereignty. For example, authorised agreements or contracts, treaties or memorandums of understanding of a parliament, as well as legislation, continue from one government to another and are honoured as existing formal instruments of the parliament. Indeed, parliaments could not be effective as the ultimate authority of our nation if it were otherwise. Therefore, it is right and fitting for this parliament, as the appropriate legal entity, to publicly and humbly express sorrow and contrition for this shameful blot on our national escutcheon. I am grateful that I am actually here as one of the federal members of this parliament to add my name to the names of those who support this motion. I agree with the comments of the member for Oxley, who said that he felt that this was perhaps one of the most significant events in this parliament.

Whether the children were stolen or rescued, whether the cause was either fear of or actual abuse, neglect or outright danger of harm, the permanent separation of children from their mothers and communities is not the way to correct any perceived social concern. Whatever the good intentions our forefathers may have had to save these children—and we all know that the road to hell is indeed paved by good intentions—the forced removal of children on a permanent basis from their mothers is a gross act of inhumanity and emotional cruelty.

The well-documented stories of the subsequent periods of many of the lives of these children reveal too many who were neglected, abused and violated by the separation. While, no doubt, there were many who were educated and who lived in caring environments, we now also know that far too many experienced a living hell on earth. There are many who have lived in constant fear of physical danger. However, because of their forced separation from their mothers and families, we now know that they all, even those who were properly cared for, suffered severe emotional and psychological scarring that continued for the rest of their lives and, for many, continues to this day.

What of the mothers? How did they live any kind of life after their children were taken? How could they have found any kind of peace or respite from their distress and their anguish? I would have gone mad if any of my children were taken from me. The good intentions of the parliament, the government of the day and the welfare officers or other officials would have been utterly and totally irrelevant to a grieving and distraught mother. All she would know is that inexplicably and without just cause her babies were taken by strangers and she may never see them again.

The very least this parliament can do is say a very public and humble sorry to these children, to these mothers and indeed to all of our nation's first people. I am grateful to have been in this parliament when this was done. Hopefully, there will now be many Indigenous Australians who will know in their hearts that we here in this place have listened to their voices and have come to understand the terrible sufferings many have endured, although through seriously misguided intentions of good.

Hopefully, with this powerful, symbolic expression of sorrow, expressed in the national parliament by the national parliament, the healing can now really begin. There are those who have said that this is simply a grand, symbolic gesture. But symbols have a real role to play in human relationships. They can represent a great promise of a new dawn in such relationships and this one carries with it great portents for our future together. This is a new beginning and this new dawn demands that we do not allow this sorry motion to be just all there is. We as a parliament must ensure that it is a symbol that carries with it great substance in delivering equality and equity for

all Australians, and that means addressing the disadvantage we know is grossly suffered by many of our Indigenous Australians today. The Prime Minister is quite right when he says:

It is not a sentiment that makes history; but it is our actions that make history.

Now is the time to change the history of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. I welcome the announcement from the Prime Minister that he will establish a joint policy commission to be led by him and the Leader of the Opposition to develop and implement, to begin with, an effective housing strategy for remote communities over the next five years. This is an excellent next step because, while housing is vital for the proper care of families, individual homeownership is a greater leverage for true equality and equity for Indigenous Australians.

The community title system of landownership in remote communities where all land is actually owned by the community itself or by a land council is nothing other than a communist collective. Indeed, I am concerned about an article in today's *Australian* by Patricia Karvelas which talks about the 99-year lease system instigated by the previous Prime Minister and the then Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough. In the article Karvelas says:

The 99-year lease system was designed to give Aborigines the opportunity to buy and look after their own homes rather than return to the communal title—the system under which all land is jointly owned by the local community.

This indeed is a communist style collective and it is something that we do not impose on other Australians. We should not bear inequality and inequity and impose it on our Indigenous Australians. There is something dignified about being able to own one's home, and our Indigenous Australians have that right alongside non-Indigenous Australians. I strongly supported the measures by the previous Prime Minister in this regard and I commend the value of individual homeownership to the current Prime Minister.

The conditions and living standards of Australians in remote communities have challenged governments now for some decades. In more recent times we have heard the stories of horror and violence against women and children in many of those remote communities—stories that make us realise that many of them are at the point where they live their lives in constant fear and hunger. Back in 1998 I actually spoke on a report by Professor Boni Robertson from Griffith University in Queensland where she and a panel of Indigenous women elders went and investigated the violence in remote Indigenous communities in North Queensland. I was concerned that for about two years after that report was handed down it was met with silence. Nothing, however, is quite as powerful as an idea whose time has come and it is now clear that the concept that we have to address the violence and neglect in remote Indigenous communities is right before us. Many of the children and women who have been subjected to violence in these remote communities have experienced neglect induced by the unlimited alcohol, and have been debased by the pornographic material, available in those communities. In a way, this was a result of further misguided good intentions of the government of the day, but also the debilitating corrosive impact of welfare. I note many of the comments that have been articulated by leaders of Indigenous communities today regarding how welfare kills softly. I commend again the previous minister for Indigenous affairs, the Hon. Mal Brough, for his work in addressing this serious issue in many of our remote communities of Australia. But again I agree with the current Prime Minister when he said:

The old approaches are not working. We need a new beginning ... a new beginning that draws intelligently on the experiences of new policy settings across the nation.

I would like to make a contribution to this new beginning and it is appropriate that we make a start with housing and with the education of children, as he has indeed suggested; but this must be done in a culturally sensitive manner. At this point I make the observation that abused and neglected children are found not just in remote Indigenous communities but also in non-Indigenous Australia. Indeed, it is a regular and genuine cause for wondering whether or not we actually like children in our country anymore when we see the constant news reports of abuse and violence against Australian children. Last year most Australians were shocked and horrified to hear of a little girl who was starved to death, and only yesterday I was disturbed to hear news of two young children who died in mysterious circumstances in their home in a suburb close to Liverpool in my electorate. It is clear that the agencies that various Australian governments have put in place for the protection of Australian children are not working. It is impossible for a DoCS officer to live permanently in the homes of troubled families. If ever there was an urgent call for a new beginning it is certainly here in the protection of young Australians, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Imagine if we could provide safe accommodation for these children that included a

structured learning environment where meals and supervised play were provided with care and a genuine commitment to their progress. Imagine if these centres had world-class facilities, state-of-the-art classrooms and swimming pools, tennis courts, playing fields, fully equipped gyms, craft and music rooms. Why not?

Why could the centres not boast the very best teachers and special educators that money could buy? Not only can I imagine such a place but I know of such a place. It is Boys Town in my electorate at Engadine. Boys Town provides such a structured learning environment for boys who come from troubled families. The boys generally arrive on Sunday evenings and return to their homes on Friday evenings for the weekend. Such learning facilities as Boys Town could easily be provided across the nation by the federal government. We are wealthy enough to provide for our children. Teachers could ideally be on rotation from the mainstream educational system of each state, with specialist teachers and educators appointed as required. Such centres could offer first-class facilities and maintain the highest educational standards. They would provide a real circuit-breaker for a child existing in neglected or traumatic circumstances who is identified as needing interim protection from a troubled family or community. However, the children would not be permanently separated from their parents or families or those communities because they would be able to return home on weekends or on a basis that is practical and suitable to each individual child. The children would be able to maintain—indeed, would be encouraged to maintain—those vital links with culture, family and community.

The provision of appropriate housing and education for children are only two areas of concern that require our immediate attention and action if we are to implement important actual indicators of our genuine expression of reconciliation. It will, indeed, be a new page in our shared history that will allow us to write a vision for a bright future together as fellow Australians, as one people. I wholeheartedly welcome and support this motion to say sorry and I commend the motion to the House.