

Submission
No 10

**INQUIRY INTO REPARATIONS FOR THE STOLEN
GENERATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

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Partially Confidential

Parliament Inquiry – Stolen Generation – Bringing them Home Report.

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When I was about 12-15 months old, mum worked for a family at Castlecrag – the
Because Aboriginal girls and women were “trained” for domestic duties, mum cleaned and I think cooked (mum was an excellent cook) for this family, whom she clearly liked but the most ironic dichotomy was mum also looked after their 4 children! These children adored mum and even as adults they stayed in contact with her! Yet the Australian Government didn’t think my mother was capable of caring for her own children!

By some government reasoning, when I was about 6 years old, my sister 4, we were taken to, what I have always referred to as “a home”. This home was on the outskirts of Sydney, as there was a lot of open space and few houses. It was a regimented routine. Lots of children but as a child I didn’t see “colour” – just people. It was what you would call a dormitory where my sister and I were to sleep. There were lines of bunk beds with scratchy dark grey blankets and lumpy kapok pillow. Meals were served on long bench tables and you ate what was given to you. A particularly traumatic experience for me was at breakfast. This consisted of white bread soaked in milk and sugar. I took one mouthful and nearly vomited, the taste and particularly the texture was vile. I couldn’t and wouldn’t eat it. A staff member told me to eat it. I told her it made me feel sick but that was of no concern to her. I again was ordered to eat it and again I said I couldn’t.

Consequently I was told I would not be allowed to leave the table until I had eaten this disgusting slop. All the other children ate and were allowed to go outside but I was told not to move and to eat. I was watched continuously, as though they were going to teach me a lesson. I don’t know how long I sat there but I didn’t eat and my punishment was to not have lunch or dinner either.

I don’t know how long we were at this Institution and I was confused as to where my mother was and why we were in this place but at least I had my sister with me and we were happy about that. We stayed together all the time and this, I think, helped us cope with the loss of our mother.

My most painful and still to this day , heart wrenching experience, was one day all we children were sent outside. Nothing unusual in that but I can’t remember how, I was outside with my sister with me one moment and then I suddenly couldn’t see my sister anywhere. I ran everywhere I thought she could be, calling her name over and over again. I was 6 years old and I had never felt such pain, fear and loss in my life. It feels like it happened yesterday – the pain still with me. No-one came to comfort me even though I was panicked and crying but eventually someone told me my sister was “gone”. That was it! My sister was gone. The attitude was one of “stop your whinging and get over it”.

Obviously, in today's age, it is recognised that children "feel" but not in the 60's! Can you fathom a 6 year old hearing this news and the loss and despair of not wanting or caring to exist anymore? That was me.

I was there another day or two, alone and frightened, when a staff member got me and the next thing I knew, I was taken away by a man and woman.

I can't remember how long I stayed with this couple but I did have Christmas Day there. They were a lovely couple and treated me as though I was their own but even at that young age, I knew I wasn't their child. I think they lived at Cabramatta or Canley Vale – I must have heard them mention this.

One evening mum rang, spoke to the lady and she then put me on the phone. As soon as I heard my mother's voice, I broke down in racking sobs and was unable to speak to her, even though it was the one thing I wanted most in the world to do. I had questions I wanted to ask. I was heartbroken as to why she wouldn't come to get me. What had I done so wrong that my mother didn't want me anymore?

I have no recollection of when I left this family but I think all the children were fostered out to spend Christmas with someone. To be 'home' with my family was all I wanted for Christmas. No dolls or prams. Just my family.

My sister and I were re-united at some stage and then taken to a, I use the term loosely, woman, by the name of _____ and her sadistic daughter, _____ I think they lived in or near Ryde and somewhere close to the water.

These women were two horrible, cruel, sadistic excuses for humans. _____ delighted in taunting us and putting us down at any opportunity. She would forcibly pour cod liver oil down our throats, feed us disgusting concoctions that were specifically for my sister and I, while she and her daughter had real meals. I remember one incident when I was having a shower, I mentioned a particular way my mother washed my hair. For that comment I was beaten on my naked backside with a wooden brush whilst having my arm pulled up above my head and whilst being beaten, told that my mother wasn't in charge anymore. I had never been physically abused like this before and even at this young age, I knew she wanted me to cry but I didn't, even though I had never felt such physical pain in my young life before.

_____ was a sadist, with her mother's knowledge. She treated my sister and I as her pets. She liked one of us one day and nothing bad would happen to the liked sister. But the one who was out of favour was physically and mentally abused.

Two instances I remember were when my sister was the unliked child. She took us down to the waters edge where oysters were encrusted along the retaining wall. She picked my sister up and swung her over the edge of the embankment, scraping her across the sharp oysters and threatening to drop her head first into the water. Her favourite one for me, was to take my hand and run it against the branch of the Lantanas

growing not far away. In case you don't know, Lantana have tiny sharp prickles along the entire stems of the plant. Not a pleasant experience. This abuse was a daily occurrence – not a one off.

At this time I must have been of school age because I was enrolled in the local school. I remember sitting under a tree on a bench during recess or lunch and when the bell rang, all the children returned to class. I didn't move. I sat there and didn't care what happened to me. I was in emotional pain and turmoil. If no-one cared about me, then neither did I. A teacher saw me long after classes had resumed and came to take me back to class. I said I didn't want to and I can't remember if I was crying but at least the teacher was kind and eventually I went back to class. They probably thought I was just anxious about starting school. Ha! Little did they know at that young age I had no will to live. I functioned - I wasn't alive. All my thoughts were consumed with questions about what did I do so wrong that mum doesn't want me anymore? If only I was better, if I was really really good mum would come back I thought. "I promise mummy I won't be naughty" I said to myself over and over again".

To this day, I am fearful of authority. I am always "good", respectful and basically frightened something bad will happen if I don't obey authority. That is the effect of being removed – you make it your fault. The "authorities" treat you badly and as a child you think *they must know* your bad – you are too young to rationalise any other reason behind the treatment. And you are deliberately mistreated because you are different – you have a black mother. Shame and humiliation is imposed and you can't get rid of it. In the 60's there was no counselling – and who could say if there were it wasn't draconian, whereby the child would be to blame.

So, this was the Government making life better for "the black fella". Well done.

I can only imagine how my mother felt, She was looking for family and didn't know if she had sisters or brothers. She always felt an only child. Her family was taken away forever. She told my sister she remembered her father picking her up onto his shoulders and running to hide because the "white fellas" were coming to take the children again. Think how a parent feels not to be able to protect their child and have absolutely no rights. When this happens in todays age where a father takes his child to another country and denies the mother any contact – it's headline news! I'm sure many of you reading this have children. How would you feel? As a parent, there is no love equal to the love of your child, no matter what race you are.

Taken to Khalin Compound at about 3 or 4, mum and the other children were kept behind wire fences and forced to do hard work in unbearable conditions. I've read where medical experimentation was performed on children at Khalin Compound and my sister and I are fairly certain our mother was a victim.

When mum was taken to Croker Island in the late 30's, she seems to have had happy times there with the Methodist Sisters. Then Japan attacked Darwin. According to Sister

Margaret Sommerville, the Japanese flew over Croker Island so low, the children could see the pilots.

As the danger of attack was becoming imminent, the Government ordered the Methodist Sisters and white staff to evacuate Croker Island but leave the Aboriginal children, aged from 2 to 17, my mother included. The absolute insult and complete indifference to Aboriginals, was to evacuate live stock – cattle were higher in importance than black or half-caste Aboriginal children. The Sisters refused to leave the children and consequently the Government relented.

This experience is documented in the book written by Margaret Sommerville “They Crossed A Continent” and “Colour Me Black” by Claire Henty, a friend of mum’s from Croker Island. Mum’s given name of _____ is mentioned in both these books and a Documentary of Margaret Sommerville was made for the ABC.

I wish mum had talked about her history but that wasn’t done in her generation. My sister and I could have helped immensely to find information relating to her life. But she never did. She told stories about minor events that any parent would relate but never about her real story. Mum was given her birthday and an approximate age but that was an assessment made by the authorities as to how old they thought a child looked. Mum never had a birth certificate and she could find no record of her existence in the Northern Territory. My sister and I discovered this after her death whilst clearing her home and finding a letter from Darwin. She apparently had been searching and looking for any connection to family but didn’t say anything to my sister or I. It was heart breaking to learn this after her death. Mum died in 2010.

After mum’s death and to our complete surprise, we received a phone call from a person in the Northern Territory telling us he might be our cousin - _____ had heard of mum’s death and was anxious to meet with us. Link up organised a reunion. My sister and I were offered counselling before the final preparations were made to meet with _____. While speaking to a Link-up counsellor on 2nd December 2010, I suffered a minor heart attack medically known as Tako-Tsubo Myocardiopathy but the layman’s name is “broken heart”. While speaking to this lady I felt my heart break but initially thought it was a panic attack. NO. I spent a week and a half in hospital, have an enlarged aorta and will be on medication for the rest of my life.

So, yes, I have been deeply affected by the Governments’ actions. More profoundly than I thought. Writing this document has brought back many, many sad and painful memories. Painful for me but more painful knowing what my wonderful mother was put through for simply being the wrong colour and wrong breed of human.

My mother was a loving and caring person who gave my sister and I the best upbringing . Far superior from many of our white counterparts. When we eventually came back together as a family, my mother did everything she could to reinvent us in satisfaction of white expectations – inferring once again white superiority. We were always well dressed, impeccable manners and she tried to make our childhood a

normal happy one with a mother who was there every day, doing the “normal” motherly duties. The inhumanity of being removed from a caring mother is a despicable injustice.

I am fair skinned and in the 60's my sister and I were such a paradox it was believed mum was our employed nanny and not our mother. Her punishment – as if there should have been one, was to have her well mannered children removed into a institution and then to be fostered to white families so that we would not “suffer” the prejudice of mixed race family.

Prejudice and bigotry still exists, no more so when I applied to be a member of Metro Land Council after mum died. At the application meeting my fair skin and blue eyes would invite brutal questioning of my “*real intentions*” to become a member. The questions had nothing to do with my Aboriginality and more to do with bipartisan politics. The greatest insult after no one seconded my nomination, and I was leaving, was a woman in the front row who said “Go on, get out” As if I had done something so wrong to invite such derision and bitterness from the committee. I wanted to connect - to be part of something that was an umbrella of unity. Instead, that night, I was told I was unacceptable, not aboriginal and it was quiet alright for them to treat me and by default my mother with ridicule and total disrespect.

When Aboriginal organisations talk about reconciliation I wonder where I fit in that statement?

Recommendation

We as a nation pride ourselves on our generosity in lending a hand no matter where in the world help is needed. Australia has signed treaties and declarations that have changed the lives of millions of people. This country has welcomed migrants and refugees from every island and continent in the world. We are leaders in science, technology and innovation. Yet we refuse – steadfastly refuse to acknowledge and compensate for past atrocities to Aboriginal people.

“Injustice anywhere is injustice – everywhere” (Martin Luther King).

