

**Submission  
No 9**

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

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## NSW Parliament Inquiry – Bringing them home report.

One of my earliest memories is standing with my sister in what I would describe as a cattle holding yard. I was with many other children many were bigger than me and therefore likely to have been older than me. I was around 4 years old. The experience of this particular day has always been clear in my mind and has never faded with time – such was its impact on me.

I recall as I said, standing inside this cattle yard – I see the horizontal wooden slats that form the fence, the dry dusty ground and other children moving around, looking lost and bewildered. Some kids were sitting on the ground while others were peering through the slats of the cattle yard. It was clear none of the kids knew what was happening. At some point adults started to come to the other side of the cattle yard and look at us. I didn't know it then, how could I, I was only 4 years old but these adults had come to foster a child. I vividly remember saying to my sister I had to go to the toilet and her reply was I better go to the toilet now in case I get into trouble if I wet myself. I know even now, I feared getting into trouble for not controlling my bladder – so I ran back toward where the toilets were. I was confronted by someone who was displeased with me leaving the cattle yard, but relented to my request for the toilet. When I finished I was told to go back to the cattle yard which I did. I went to find my sister. I ran through all the kids and even though I was young I could fathom there weren't as many children left in the cattle yard. My sister was gone. I didn't know where or why or what happened to her. I was distraught with grief.

My world had collapsed. I was alone and afraid. I didn't know what to do or if I would ever see her again. My distress only attracted derision from those in charge. I was threatened with being locked inside the toilets if I didn't shut up. I shouted for my sister which was in vain. I pleaded with those women who scolded me to take me to her. I was dragged to the toilets and locked inside. No explanation was given to me about my sister – except she was gone. There was no comfort or empathy or any humanity in how these people treated me. The experience left an indelible mark on me that forms' my view of authority to this day.

Decades later I would learn this experience took place at a childrens' home. For me it was the beginning of years of horrendous treatment by "people in charge". I don't know where the children's home was because when we eventually came back as a family those dark episodes were never spoken about. I think my mother wanted my sister and I to forget it and get on with life as she had to do. We are second generation stolen children.

I was removed from my mothers' care for no other reason than she was Aboriginal. Likely to be deemed unfit by some government policy and or, some warp reasoning – the action of being taken away by authorities not only affected my life but must have brought about terrible pain and suffering to my mother.

My mother was taken from her family somewhere in the Northern Territory in the 1930's. Deemed by the government to be of a skin colour that might improve given schooling, she was sent to the notorious Kahlin Compound, a huge compound with a dark and sinister past. Rape, beatings and deaths of the children were common place. The treatment of the children was so bad, missionaries begged the government to hand over care of these *poor unfortunates* to them. It is of no real surprise a spontaneous fire burnt all the government records that would name those who partook in this crime. But memories live beyond the physical evidence and like me the memories remain vivid when recalling them from where you have tried to compartmentalise them away from your daily life. But the experiences don't go away and when my sister and I journeyed to the Northern Territory to piece together our mothers' life torn apart by government policy – the insult and emotional terror done to her simply because my mother was black, was profound.

My mother never really found her family. At age 4, she was impounded at Khalin Compound and given the verbal accounts of what happened under full control of the government, there's no reason to expect her treatment there was humane. Mum was around 10 years of age when at the request of the missionaries, they divided up the kids into groups, Methodists, Catholic, Protestant and Anglican. My mother was sent to the Methodists and according to her friends at the time, it was better than the Catholic institutions which enforced corporal punishment in Gods' name with wicked indifference to Christs' compassion of the poor and destitute. Sometime in the 1940's she was sent to Crocker Island. Mum recalls this period of her life as the most free, although food was strictly controlled and punishment was administered regularly for minor infringements. It was ironic that while on the island mum and her friends would make scarfs for the soldiers of World War II who were fighting for their country to remain free from oppression. "Their" country and mum's country would not be mutually inclusive until 1967 when voting rights were given to Aboriginal people. Mum would be about 37 years of age before she was finally identified as Australian. Up until then, mum had no authority to stop her history repeating. What must it have felt like to have her children taken from her just as she had been taken from her mother, her father, her siblings. Government control over people's lives is overwhelming disempowering. The message by the government was clear – we control you - we say how your children will be brought up – we say you are not good enough. You see in the 60's we were deemed half castes therefore, in the governments view, better off integrated into white society.

For that to occur, we had to be taken from our mother and exposed to all white families, and a white way of life.

Let me tell you what that was like. As I said, at age 4 I already had a profound experience of being separated from my sister. How we reached the cattle yard, I don't know. At some time later, my sister and I were reunited in another foster family. Given the authorities lack of humanity, I can only suggest it was our mother who persuaded the authorities to have us together. My mothers' fierce will for survival in a hostile world was her saving grace. I can't express the horrors my mother faced in her day in "care" because mum didn't talk about them. It was her era to be stoic – and mum knew there was no-one there for her so to fall apart would be to let "them" take all her life away while she was still alive. Mum endured as many did, not that it didn't affect her, it did. And no, she didn't drink or take any drugs not given to her by her doctor. But I have digressed. The governments' plan to have half castes experience white family life and how I experienced it pertains to this inquiry.

I recall scenes of numerous places my sister and I were fostered. I also recall with stark clarity, being fostered by what would be described as a single mother with a daughter about 10 years of age. The daughters name was Cecilia and she was cruel. Cecilia and her mother lived near the water somewhere where there was a sea wall. The sea wall was full of oyster shells – sharp piercing rough oyster shells, open and closed. Cecilia would take me by the arms and dangle me over the sea wall and drag me over the oyster shells, cutting my legs and any part of me that came into contact with the oyster shells. Cecilia thought it was funny, me struggling to keep away from the oyster shells and fearing if she let go of me I would be in water deeper than I could stand. My sister would scream "stop, stop it" - but that didn't deter Cecilia. My sister being bigger than I was saved such cruelty but the almost daily ritual was so scary one evening my sister and I decided we would run away. We whispered to each other in our single beds, how we would run away, and what we could take – we were definite in our plan the next night after they went to bed we were going to run. We weren't to know being so young, but Cecilia's mother overheard us and punished us severely. Cecilia did other cruel things to us, and looking back as an adult, Cecilia's behaviour was unbalanced and narcissistic - a product of an equally unbalanced mother. No authorities checked on us – at least not to my recollection – there's no mental health test for foster parents. The scratches on my arms and legs were explained away by Cecilia's mother as being a clumsy child on the one and only day my mother came to visit. On that day, we begged mum to take us with her, but we weren't to know she wasn't allowed. We just didn't understand why we couldn't go home with her and seeing our distress and terror being left with these cruel people must have been devastating. But adults have a way of dismissing children, and I can recall the mother of Cecilia pretending she was sweet and caring while mum was visiting us. I knew though after mum left my sister and I were

in for it. And she punished us for telling our mother about Cecilia's physical cruelty toward us. But when you know you are going to be punished for telling the truth, you shut down, you leave your body and look at yourself from a distance – the beating you know is hurting you, but your soul tries to survive it – you sort of split in two and there's no tears just numbness. You don't know it at the time, but you have compartmentalised the horror.

But there was one good foster family. It was Christmas time, a time where most children are with their families, anticipating Santa and hoping for the things wished for. Again my sister and I were separated. I went to a foster family I would later know lived in Sylvania. There was a daughter around my age. I don't recall her name but she was nice to me. Mostly though, I remember the parents as being kind and gentle. I wish I knew who they were as I would like to say thank you. Although I was lonely within myself, I was treated with kindness and in my short life that sort of treatment was significant as it was different to all my other experiences. While I was there my mother called by telephone, and they let me speak with her - it was special and nice to hear her voice. I missed her terribly, but promised I was being a good girl. But nothing fills the hole left by the absence of your family. As a child you don't understand, and nobody reasons with you to help you understand, you are expected to accept the decisions made for you without question and imposed on you without empathy or humanity. You realise you are nothing but a number, a source for some peoples spiteful vindictive heartless treatment to satisfy their own inadequacies. So much for the integration of half castes.

*Breeding* out Aboriginality by past governments in so many cases has been successful in so far as the government has made people like myself, neither black nor white. I am not black enough for many aboriginal organisations both physically and by acceptability. For example, after mum died, my sister and I applied to Metro Land council to become members. We were refused. We weren't political enough – we hadn't been involved in marches or campaigns and didn't hang out at various centres, and that is how they determined Aboriginality. We weren't black enough despite the fact we lived in the area, identified as aboriginal –and in particular are children of a full blood Aboriginal woman. The decision to disenfranchise us by an organisation that had itself been dismantled because of factional infighting and consistent unaccountability and to my memory more than once was notably disturbing. Who tells you who you are? And how do you identify when your mother's whole upbringing was a deliberate campaign to annul identity? By default the government had achieved its aim, to extinguish lineage and rights to identity by leaving identity with organisations whose motivation to exclude is based on a collective pot of perceived allowances and concessions. Our mothers' story, verified by the book, *"They Crossed a Continent"* by Margaret Sommerville and *"Paint me Black"* by Claire Henty" didn't move any of the members of Metro Land council to the history of government intervention to eliminate identity. My mother was stolen from her family and

her children were stolen as well. In my mothers' eyes to identify was to be persecuted, to stay safe and keep her children with her she didn't raise attention to herself nor did she allow us to do so – what part of the history of Aboriginal people did the Metro Land Council miss? To add insult to injury metro land council suggested we go to the Northern Territory and become members, where the same criteria exist. You have to live in the area, go to the same rallies and be involved in political campaigns and the like. On that basis neither my mother nor my sister or I belong – anywhere. And here you have the generational outcome of past government policies to eliminate culture, disempower people and alter consensus records. Am I Aboriginal? Not by land council standards. But no organisation can take from you who your mother is – I don't need verification from a land council to know there's an ancient knowledge running through my veins. The connection to land is inherent and never more so when my sister and I travelled back to the area where we believed mum was removed.

I will never forget the experience. In particular after a long drive on a dry dirt road, arriving at a park somewhere outside of Katherine NT. The park was deserted and my sister and I stood there wondering what the heck we were doing there. Two adults brought up their whole life in Sydney, standing around what seemed to be a tiny deserted town with a deserted park by the river. You could see the whole town from where we stood. It was hot and we sought shade under a tree. We were to have lunch here and our organisers from Link Up were unpacking the van. *Then they came.*

Cars started to arrive filled with very dark Aboriginal people, we saw groups of people walk toward the park from what seemed to be out of no- where. Within minutes there were more than 30 people who had come to meet us. They greeted us and eagerly asked us about our mother. Who was she? Did we know her original name? Was her brother called by this name? Did mum remember or tell us anything about her mother? They came with photos of their parents and relatives and asked if our mother and my sister and I might be their relative. We showed our photos of mum and looked for resemblance in their photos. We looked at each other for features that could link us together. Black, brown and almost white in skin colour, there was no doubt we had a connection. But because the authorities at the time gave children first and second names aligning with station owners or the police officers that picked them up or missionary workers – it was a mission of indescribable hope and futility. One woman told us her mother was called whiskey by the station owner, something she hated and which made her feel ashamed. This lady was looking for her mothers' sisters – 5 or 6 of them she reckoned. There was so much to know and many more leads to follow. I am very grateful for all the people who came that day. The will to survive government intervention is strong.

But time is of the essence. As the present government drags their feet in accepting responsibility for past atrocities, the historical damage continues in the lives of people

like myself who have been harmed by government policy and continue to be harmed. To belong no- where while holding the fragments of your mothers' alleged crime; being Aboriginal, in a society that now demands Aboriginal people be identifiable and ideally black only, is an insurmountable paradox. And we ought not to forget that was exactly the intention of past governments.

## **Recommendations**

### **Specific**

An apology by Prime Minister Rudd, while widely accepted hasn't had full force of meaning to many of the stolen generations. Wilful delays in recognising the country's responsibilities under the United Nations Human Rights' to compensation ought to be righted straight away, before many more from the stolen generation pass away. To hesitate further can only be seen as reprehensible act to mitigate costs – less members of the stolen generation equals less financial obligation. Do not invite criticism for the failure to complete earlier recommendations and pay whatever compensation that ought to have been paid to those who have passed away to the next generation. Honour an obligation generationally.

Do what can be done and ought to be done to mend peoples' lives. For those like my mother who have passed away, I would also like some personal acknowledgement made to her and in her name: a legacy of significant value to the community that reflects her courage and determination in the face of an unsophisticated irresponsible and irrational government. I want to be able to go to a place, a garden, a land or establish a bursary that bears her name so others will know her and where the government holds the responsibility to maintain her legacy in perpetuity. I want people to ask who mum was so that she is acknowledged as she ought to have been by the government who so willingly deserted her in every inhuman way. It ought to be remembered the government ordered the missionaries to leave Croker Island when the Japanese bombed Darwin and to leave the children behind.

All Australians need to know these stories through Constitutional recognition of the first peoples' of Australia.

### **Accountability**

Hold government departments accountable – in the *real understanding* of the word. We need to measure policies by the peoples evaluation – not by government departments self reporting to the government of the day. Authority has grave responsibility. What is fair what is just and what is right is not determined by a government department but by those are affected by the policies they implement. Let the voice of the people be heard in the effectiveness of any recompense that ought to be made. Recompense ought to

be a personal experience not a sum of money to a government department to consume in the administration of its task. Allow Indigenous people to determine their own needs and the outcome they want. Let us not be told what is good for us ever again.

S. E.