

Why we can't just 'move on'

On May 26 we will commemorate another National Sorry Day. For some, the significance of this day has been lost or ignored, while for others its importance has been an opportunity for learning, empathy and understanding.

We, the Board of Directors of Stolen Generations – Link-Up (NSW) in 2005, look back on the past nine years since the Bringing Them Home Report was first tabled in Federal Parliament in 1997. Reflect for a moment on the Acknowledgment and Apology within the Recommendations of the Report (section 5a). While all States and Territories have indeed said 'sorry' for the atrocities imposed upon our people, it is the Australian Federal Government that cannot bring itself to utter the word – an action that has gone down in the annals of Australian history.

Ironically, this refusal has made many people in various walks of life more aware of their responsibility and they now apologise for various actions against their fellow men and women in sport, the arts and in many different social circumstances. This has made most of us more cynical by watching the goings-on in Australian society and in politics where the reluctance and hesitancy are obvious. Whereas otherwise the simple word 'sorry', said with meaning, would be so natural.

It is so comical that one has to regret to say sorry. Talk about an island mentality!

It was in 1995 during the NSW Preparatory Forums for the then forthcoming Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People from Their Families, (conducted by workers at Link-Up (NSW) throughout the State) that word came back to the Link-Up Board that people were speaking with conviction and dignity about recommending that a government apology should occur for the taking of Aboriginal children from their families, community and country. They were people who had fretted for their lost loved ones for many years – the futile search of parents for their children who never came home and children for their parents who were never found.

If families were in contact with welfare officers and knew that their children were in institutions, proof of a clean house given the 'white gloved treatment' did not necessarily mean the child could go home. Some of these participants recalled how they alone escaped because their families ran through the bush from the Welfare. Others can never go home as adults because they are only remembered as babies back in their communities.

There are the youngsters who were adopted and fostered out simply because they were Aboriginal and who in some circumstances could 'pass for white' or were 'not ethnically distinctive'. Their ranks also include those who were institutionalised, losing any knowledge and all concepts of their home, their family, their belonging and their Country.

All these forms of separation occurred under various Australian governments' legislation and policy. Collectively they became known as the 'Stolen Generations' and their harrowing accounts from all over Australia can be read throughout the 'Bringing Them Home Report'.

Link-Up (NSW) has been 'bringing people home' since 1980 and this significant work is ongoing and current. Twenty-six years later during the Easter week of this year, 2005, the hard-working and committed staff at Stolen Generations Link-Up (NSW) took home seven adult Aboriginal people who may require follow-up care and ongoing support and counselling. For those who were reunited with family this is just the start of a new journey with many twists and turns. Coming home is, for many, but the beginning.

Section 7a of the Recommendations of the Report mentions a National Sorry Day being held each year to commemorate the history of forcible removals and their damaging legacy.

We, as Aborigines, are left to deal with the

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effects – the intergenerational effects on families. Damaged lives which may take years, if ever, to put right. In the Link-Up (NSW) submission to the Bringing Them Home Report there is a very profound statement.

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We, the members of the Board of Stolen Generations Link-Up (NSW), hear comments and read editorials and articles on the Stolen Generations. Some include such phrases as 'moving on' and 'get over it'.

How can one generalise about how a person and a people should deal with their tragic lost past?

Some individuals still experience a continual sense of being lost – an aching void in which ongoing separation is an ever-present reality that cannot be filled by simply and conveniently, for some, 'moving on'.

How does one move on from your childhood when being Aboriginal in Australia reveals attitudes in those one encounters that made 'separation' the Aboriginal solution?

This is no new phenomenon simply because it has recently been publicly identified. Aboriginal people were part of the all encompassing Stolen Generations long before the rest of Australian society heard about it. Some Australians today are still in denial of this chapter in Australian history and are still dominated by a sense of racial superiority.

It pains us that some of our own people would listen to those in authority who simply say to us that we should 'move on'.

We were institutionalised, adopted, fostered and abused physically, sexually and psychologically in some of these placements at such a rate that it was overwhelming and destructive to our personal and societal structure.

For many families it was the destined way of life over several generations; totally controlled and governed by departmental policies and practices. Maybe we are too close to the portrait but for many of us Stolen Generations, we daily experience and relive the true history of this country.

Yes, we have seen the shock in well-meaning peoples' faces when confronted with this reality. One comment made to a worker was 'I'm an educated Australian, why didn't I know'?

But knowledge of this Australian page of history is not the end of the matter. We continually grapple with prejudice and the dismissive comment that now, as the Stolen Generations are acknowledged, it is the end of the matter and to move on.

For some if you can't look back you can't move on. The urge to find one's family, one's community and one's country is all-consuming. For those who cannot find their lost past there is succour in the belief that their Country draws them all back to it.

And, quite naturally, so do the Old People. Like the old black fella sitting under the gum tree – quiet, perceptive, content and all-knowing. Reticence is not acquiescence. Australia's soul cannot rest until a heartfelt apology from the Australian nationally voted representative body is genuinely made.

These comments include input from our brothers and sisters in Link-Up services in other States and Territories who have reflected upon our shared endeavours in working with children taken from their Country and communities.

**The Board of Directors
Stolen Generations – Link-Up (NSW)**