

## **SORRY DAY - 2007**

### **Historical Perspective:**

We are gathered here today to observe the tenth National Sorry Day as well as the tenth anniversary of the Bringing Them Home Report. When the report was presented to the Federal Parliament in 1997 it recommended that a National Sorry Day be established as a first step in the process of righting the wrongs that had been done to the indigenous peoples of this great land. By gathering once each year on the 26th of May we are taking the first step which is necessary to any rehabilitation process. We are acknowledging the wrongs that have been done in the past.

In the City of Brisbane, official responses to the report began as early as February 1998 when an official Ceremonial reception was held in City Hall. Among the participants on that day was Auntie Ruth Hegarty, who is present with us this morning. She was given the task of thanking the Brisbane City Council and other members of The Establishment who were involved on the day. Mayor Jim Sorley, Councillors, Bishops, Moderators and other representatives of the City's establishment, including MLA's and Union leaders escorted Elders and those from the Stolen Generation into City Square where they were presented with Keys to the City.

In the course of the next few weeks a series of Commemorative Plaques were dedicated in various parts of Brisbane where institutions housing the Stolen Generation had been located. The Plaque in Kalinga Park was dedicated on March 15th, 1998. With only one exception, a Sorry Day ceremony has been conducted every year since that time. Each one has been under the auspices of the Noonga Reconciliation Group. We are pleased to welcome you here once again.

In establishing a National Sorry Day, the BHT report acknowledged the need for a day 'to pause, to grieve together and recommit ourselves to making things better for the Stolen Generation, their families and communities. It is significant for the social, emotional well being of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.' It would seem that the first step has well and truly been taken although our Prime Minister seems not to have gotten the message.

However, the BHT (which has sold more copies than any other report of its kind) contained recommendations for a further five steps to be taken in order to establish the sincerity of that collective 'act of contrition', that acknowledgment of wrongs done. They consisted of the following:

1. Reparation was to be made (by way of government support in every area).
2. A guarantee was to be provided that basic human rights would not be violated again.
3. As far as possible, the Indigenous people of Australia were to be given back what had been wrongfully taken, which by implication includes their land, their history, their culture and their lost family members (for some an impossibility).
4. A process of rehabilitation would be undertaken to address loss of dignity and self-worth among those affected by past policies.
5. Compensation was to be made for loss material goods such as Stolen Wages etc.

While there is no time to dwell on any of these recommendations, I think that most people here this morning would agree that Australia is a long way from having taken several of the all-important steps toward full implementation of the report. This week's report on Aboriginal Health by the AMA is an obvious case in point.

Of course it will never be possible to restore the lost years, and there is not enough money in the country, indeed in the world, to compensate for the heartbreak, the dislocation and continued lack of identity for many who suffered the worst of government policies. Some of these policies continued on into the 1980s. The report itself acknowledged that 'one half - two thirds of the children taken into custody were under the age of five years'. It further acknowledged that 'unresolved grief and trauma of being taken from your family as a child is inherited by future generations'. 'The effects of these experiences on Indigenous people have been multiple, generational and ongoing.' Some might say, 'where does one start which the task is so daunting?' When does 'sorry' become action rather than simply a word. Every Australian from the man on the street to the politician who holds the power of corporate action in his hands must search his or her own heart to provide the answer.