

KEEPING THE CONCERNS AND NEEDS OF THE STOLEN GENERATIONS ON THE NATIONAL AGENDA

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'Ten Years Later: *Bringing Them Home* and the Forced Removal of Children' Conference

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I Introduction: The Work of the National Sorry Day Committee and its Affiliates

Thank you. Before I start, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we stand, the Elders both past and present, and the spiritual ancestors of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation.

I would also like to invite you all to take a moment to remember all of the Aboriginal children who were removed. To reflect on all of the mothers and fathers who lost those children and all of the families and communities whose lives, futures, and cultural and social structure were so deeply torn as a result of the forced removal policy.

When I was asked to speak on the work that the National Sorry Day Committee ('NSDC') has undertaken, I was not sure how to approach the task. My dilemma was this: how could I credit the NSDC with the work that has been undertaken by individuals and groups within their own local and state communities, and yet are affiliated and associated to the NSDC?

The NSDC is unique because its national networks and memberships are made up of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous volunteers from each State and Territory, including members of the Stolen Generations. It operates on a reconciliatory basis that upholds a positive and equal partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Since the initial formation of the NSDC back in 1998, each State and Territory has established an affiliated committee or network. It is these affiliated bodies who have focused (and continue to focus) their energies on Indigenous affairs issues

and political agendas relevant to the communities in their jurisdiction. For example:

- The Journey of Healing ACT has set up a taskforce that has been monitoring the implementation of the *Bringing Them Home* Report's recommendations¹ and has produced four ACT Community Progress Reports over the 10 years since the release of the *Bringing Them Home* Report.²
- The NSDC and its South Australian affiliate, the South Australian Journey of Healing, has over the years had a close association with the Trevorrow family and celebrated Bruce Trevorrow in his recent successful compensation claim.³
- Another Stolen Generations survivor, Val Linow, who has had a long association with the NSDC and is a former member of the NSDC's New South Wales affiliate, the NSW Sorry Day Committee, also set a precedent with her compensation win in the New South Wales Victims Compensation Tribunal back in 2001.⁴
- In 2001, former West Australian affiliate, the Western Australian Bringing Them Home Committee, organised a six week tour throughout the State to educate and inform over 6000 Western Australian students about the removal policies, the Stolen Generations and the *Bringing Them Home* Report. Out of the Western Australian tour, I developed the Journey of Healing tour that travelled throughout Australia over a period of two years, educating and raising awareness about the removal policies and the Stolen Generations, as well as promoting the NSDC, the Journey of Healing campaign and the Sorry Day movement. Individuals and groups associated or affiliated with the NSDC have initiated many other activities throughout Australia. The NSDC, however, cannot take credit for the work they have done

or the impact their work may have had on retaining Stolen Generations issues on the national agenda.

However, at a national level, the NSDC can be credited with having:

- Played a significant role in the Corroboree 2000 celebrations.
- Launched the Journey of Healing campaign at Uluru, back in 1999. The purpose of the Journey of Healing campaign was to strengthen the grassroots movement that had developed out of the release of the *Bringing Them Home* Report – particularly recommendation 7a that a National Sorry Day, a day of commemoration for the Stolen Generations, be held annually.
- Held a number of National Sorry Day events in Parliament House, Canberra.
- Served on the reference group working with the Public Interest Advocacy Centre ('PIAC') on its Moving Forward consultation project in 2001 and 2002. These consultations culminated in a national conference at the University of New South Wales in August 2001 organised by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission ('HREOC'), the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission ('ATSIC') and PIAC, and in the final report of the Moving Forward consultation project, which is called *Restoring Identity*.⁵
- Presented a submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee Inquiry into the Stolen Generations in 2000. This was followed by the 'Are We Helping Them Home?' seminar, which the NSDC hosted in Canberra at Parliament House in November 2002. At that seminar the NSDC presented a paper which focused on surveys of progress in the implementation of the *Bringing Them Home* recommendations.⁶
- Participated in a handful of consultations and evaluations with Link-Up, the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health ('OATSIH') and ATSIC, including those relating to the Stolen Generations Memorial at Reconciliation Place in Canberra, and more recently in OATSIH's *Evaluation of the Bringing Them Home and Indigenous Mental Health Programs*.⁷

The NSDC also initiated discussions with First Nations Canadians back in 2004, inviting Mike Degagne to speak at the National Day of Healing events held in Canberra and Sydney in 2005. Then in October 2006 the NSDC, in partnership with others, hosted the touring visit of Chief Phil

Fontaine, the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Kathleen Mahoney, the chief negotiator for the Assembly of First Nations for the Indian Residential Schools Settlement, and Charlene Belleau, the Director of the Assembly of First Nations Indian Residential Schools Unit. This tour was endorsed by former NSDC patron Malcolm Fraser, and sponsored by Qantas, with funds from both OATSIAH and CARITAS also being used for the tour.

The tour included Canberra, Melbourne, Alice Springs and Perth, where Chief Fontaine met with Indigenous community members, Elders, members of the Stolen Generations, academics and government representatives. Chief Fontaine and his colleagues presented the Canadian Government's compensation initiatives for those children who were removed and institutionalised in the residential schools. They also presented the ways in which they were attending to the effects of these removals on those who were removed, such as counselling and workshops.

Although the exchange was enlightening and some parallels could be drawn between our experiences, the fact remains that there are many differences that set the needs of the Stolen Generations and those of the Canadian residential school children poles apart. The result of the Canadian visit for the NSDC's cause has been minimal, with the Canadian visit having no impact or influence in keeping the concerns and needs of the Stolen Generations on our national agenda.

In the 12 months since the Canadian contingent returned to Canada all contact and communication has ceased. With tens of thousands of dollars being spent on the Canadian tour there also came an expectation of a continued dialogue, partnership, cultural exchange and reciprocity of knowledge regarding removed Indigenous children. It is hoped that other avenues between the NSDC and Canada will allow this disappointing situation to be rectified.

II Organisational Change

As many of you would be able to appreciate through your own personal experiences, an organisation sometimes finds itself at a crossroads. This recently occurred for the NSDC. One of the critical issues that worked to push the NSDC to this point was the Canadian visit – one of a number of initiatives acted upon by a select few within the organisation with little to no consultation with the Stolen Generations. A large proportion of the NSDC membership felt the organisation needed to

operate at a higher level of accountability, transparency and responsibility towards those members who give it its mandate, Australia's Stolen Generations survivors. Whilst these members of the NSDC have remained loyal to the organisation, others have chosen to break away and form a duplicate organisation.

Taking up the position of Indigenous Co-Chair throughout this transformation and rebirth has been extremely challenging, highly demanding and provided many insights. It has also been inspiring, and has further strengthened the commitment and passion of myself and the loyal team of NSDC members that I have had the honour and privilege to work with in recent months.

Along with these recent changes in membership and governance within the NSDC there has come a new direction, a reinforced commitment and a plan to move successfully into the future. Based on consultations with the Stolen Generations, the NSDC's direction is designed to genuinely represent and respect their concerns, needs and wishes. This, we believe, will allow the NSDC to be a true advocate for the Stolen Generations.

Throughout this process of internal change, the NSDC has also had to counteract deliberate misconceptions about the organisation as a result of what is being communicated by other parties regarding the reasons that brought on these changes, and what the focus, aims and objectives of the NSDC are. The assertion by these other parties has been that the only concern of the NSDC is for an apology from the Australian Prime Minister on behalf of the nation.

As a way of correcting this false information, let me state that the NSDC always has, and continues to be, committed to much more than an apology from the Australian Prime Minister. Although the NSDC stands firm in the need for an apology, the members are quite clear that it is only one of the 54 recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home* Report.

The aims of the NSDC include the encouragement of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to work towards recognition and justice for Indigenous people forcibly removed, for their families and for their communities; to monitor and lobby for the implementation of the recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home* Report; to assist the process of healing; to educate the general community on the history and continuing effects of policies of forcible

removal; and to organise appropriate events to mark the anniversary of Sorry Day.

III Saying Sorry

When looking at the word 'sorry' and the significance of it to the Stolen Generations, their families, communities, ancestors and descendants, it is so much more than the required apology from the Prime Minister or the non-Indigenous Australian population.

Of the 54 recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home* Report, recommendations 5a and 7a have been directly associated to the term 'sorry':

Recommendation 5a: That all Australian Parliaments:

1. officially acknowledge the responsibility of their predecessors for the laws, policies and practices of forcible removals,
2. negotiate with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission a form of words for official apologies to Indigenous individuals, families and communities and extend those apologies with wide and culturally appropriate publicity, and
3. make appropriate reparation as detailed in following recommendations.⁸

Recommendation 7a: That the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, in consultation with the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, arrange for a national 'Sorry Day' to be celebrated each year to commemorate the history of forcible removals and its effects.⁹

The decision to use the word 'sorry' to express the apology required by recommendation 5a was asserted by ATSIC in response to recommendation 5a(2). Given the abolition of ATSIC, the NSDC and its State and Territory affiliates, in partnership with Link-Up services and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, need to negotiate the process of wording a national apology. The use of the word 'sorry' to identify a Sorry Day in recommendation 7a specifically indicates a direct relationship of the term 'sorry' to the Aboriginal population and 'sorry business'.

The reason the word 'sorry' was first introduced into the recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home* Report was because of the level of sorry business that this country will have to contend with indefinitely. Sorry business for

Australia's Aboriginal peoples is about death, loss and the processes of mourning. The impact of the removal policies on the Indigenous population of this continent has brought about an immense experience of sorry business that will never have closure. Too many have died, too much has been lost and the grief and trauma can never be undone.

Standing alongside the sorry business is the empathy from others, their recognition and understanding (as far as is possible) on an emotional level. Empathy is so often expressed in the word 'sorry': 'sorry to hear of your loss', 'sorry for what you have gone through', 'sorry for the pain you have experienced'.

Then there is the use of the word 'sorry' to express the apology by the Australian Government to the Stolen Generations and the Indigenous population. Prime Minister Howard's refusal to apologise on behalf of the Australian Government to the Indigenous people of Australia for the past acts perpetrated against them through the forced removal policies has kept the need for an apology and the Stolen Generations on the political agenda. Regrettably, it has also brought about misdirection and misunderstanding towards the use of the term 'sorry'. It is unfortunate that such a level of confusion has grown around the significant relevance of the term 'sorry' in regard to the forced removal policies and the recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home* Report. As such, it has reduced the focus and understanding of what sorry business is, why there is a need for a day of commemoration, remembrance, mourning and sharing, and why it is called 'Sorry Day'.

Even so, the NSDC is proud to acknowledge that recommendation 7a has been successfully achieved, with 26 May 2007 being the 10th National Sorry Day to be commemorated since the tabling of the *Bringing Them Home* Report in 1997.

IV NSDC Ten Year Campaign: Walk Your Talk and Bring Them Home

Looking back over the 10 years since the tabling of the *Bringing Them Home* Report, one can say that both directly, but more so indirectly, the NSDC has contributed towards retaining the concerns and needs of the Stolen Generations on the national agenda.

Unfortunately, the reality is that the work the NSDC has done in that time has fallen well and truly short of the necessary

outcomes required to enable the Stolen Generations and the 54 recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home* Report to successfully reach their goals. This is sadly reflected in the fact that only two of the 54 recommendations have been fully implemented and fulfilled. These are recommendation 7a and recommendation 30b.¹⁰ The NSDC believes that less than two thirds have been partially implemented.¹¹

Given that 10 years have passed since the tabling of the *Bringing Them Home* Report, the NSDC is committed to having the following 10 years look very different, through the launch of its Ten Year Campaign, 'Walk Your Talk and Bring Them Home'.

The campaign was launched in Parliament House, Canberra, in May 2007. The intimate launch was hosted by Senator Rachel Siewert, and attended and supported by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma and Senator Andrew Bartlett.

The NSDC's campaign to have the 54 recommendations fulfilled by 2017 has an exciting platform that will encourage participation from all Australians, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The Ten Year Campaign includes many components, some of which are detailed below.

A NSDC Website

The NSDC has a new and vibrant website. The NSDC website is in the process of becoming a communications portal for the Stolen Generations, their families and communities as well as the general Australian and international audiences. It will be a site where all information relating to the Stolen Generations, both historical and contemporary, can be found. It is a resource tool to highlight who the Stolen Generations are, the *Bringing Them Home* Report, services provided for the Stolen Generations, and state and territory groups working with and for the Stolen Generations. It will link to other relevant sites, in particular those groups and organisations supporting the NSDC.¹²

The website has served as a platform to launch the NSDC online petitions. It has been an effective means of encouraging dialogue relating to an apology from the Prime Minister, the need for service education for professionals working with Indigenous Australians as well as those working in the field of education and teaching all Australians about the history of Indigenous Australians and past government

policies targeting Indigenous Australians. There is also an online pledge book and register of pledge books held throughout Australia. These pledge books show the work that is being done locally and regionally in the states and territories in relation to people's commitments to fulfilling the recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home* Report.

B Stolen Generations Track Home

Consisting of plastic feet in the colours of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags that may be planted into the ground on metal stakes or stuck on walls or windows, the Stolen Generations Track Home comes in two different sets: the flag set, comprising 12 feet, and the recommendations set, which is a set of 54 feet – one for each *Bringing Them Home* recommendation. The Stolen Generations Track Home initiative is the symbolic representation of the thousands of silent and unseen tracks of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were taken away under the forced removal policies. The moment of removal of the first Stolen Child was the birth of the first step in these 'ghostly tracks' that are stamped all over the land of Australia, and linger silent and strong.

There are the tracks of the horses and camels used to take the children away; there are the tyre tracks of trucks and cars and railroad tracks of trains; there are the footprints of the authorities who took the children and those of the Stolen Children who were taken. There are the tracks of the mothers, fathers and families as they searched for their Stolen Children and the tracks of the Stolen Children trying to find their way back home. There are the paper trails, the records of truth, the stories of abuse, pain, heartbreak and death. All of these tracks belong to the Stolen Generations, their families and communities, and they also belong to the once silenced history of white Australia.

These silent tracks hold the history of the Stolen Generations because it is the past, but because it also lives in the present with the knowledge of the truth, the teaching of the past, the survival of the Stolen Generations and the need to bring them home.

What we as Australians create now will be looked back upon in the future. The Stolen Generations Track Home is also symbolic and representative of a new direction toward the recommendations being filled.¹³

C The School Component

Since the inaugural Sorry Day in 1998, many schools throughout Australia have held their own Sorry Day.

To celebrate the 10th anniversary of Sorry Day in 2008, the NSDC will be inviting all Australian schools to participate in the Australian Schools National Sorry Day. This schools initiative is one component of the NSDC's Walk Your Talk and Bring Them Home campaign. It focuses on four of the recommendations:

- recommendation 5a: apology;
- recommendation 7a: Sorry Day;
- recommendation 8a: compulsory modules in primary and secondary schools on the history and effects of the removal policies; and
- recommendation 9a: training for professionals working with Indigenous children, families and communities (for example, teachers) on the effects of the removal policies.¹⁴

D Petitions

As part of the Ten Year Campaign, the NSDC has three online petitions.¹⁵ These three petitions support recommendation 5a, recommendation 8a, and recommendation 9a. The third petition, 'Educate the Educators', specifically asks that teachers, as professionals who work with Indigenous children, take up the challenge to lobby their state education department for funding to receive in-service training about the history and effects of the forcible removals.

E Pledge Books

Since the sorry books were launched in 1998, thousands of non-Indigenous Australians have written messages of empathy. The sorry books presented an opportunity for non-Indigenous Australians to express their recognition of the injustices experienced by the Stolen Generations as a result of the removal policies.

Sorry Day 2006 saw the Journey of Healing ACT network launch 'pledge books' in Parliament House, hosted by Senator Rachel Siewert and then Shadow Minister Peter Garrett. One of these books has remained in Parliament House since Sorry Day 2006.

The NSDC has now adopted the pledge books as a national initiative. In doing so, the NSDC is creating an opportunity for the Australian public to reconfirm and further demonstrate their commitment towards reconciliation by making a pledge of support towards the fulfilment of the 54 recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home* Report, ensuring Indigenous Australians enjoy the equality, justice and human rights to which they are entitled. The pledge books also provide an opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members to affirm how important this process is for them.

The NSDC invites schools, organisations, community and faith groups, businesses and corporations and government departments to create their own pledge book and register it on the NSDC's National Pledge Book Register.¹⁶

F Commit to Implementing a Recommendation

The Ten Year Campaign then moves into the ongoing active initiative that will encourage and support the Australian public to adopt recommendations and assist in bringing about their full implementation and fulfilment by the year 2017. With the issuing of Certificates of Promise, members of the public and the recommendations they adopt will be registered online, which will allow the NSDC to support, monitor and record the progress of the public's success in achieving the fulfilment of the recommendations.

To support the public's commitment, the NSDC Ten Year Campaign will encourage the use of the Journey of Healing ACT taskforce's four Community Progress Reports to be used as the models for future State, Territory and national monitoring programs of the *Bringing Them Home* recommendations.

G Monitoring of the 54 Recommendations

Monitoring and lobbying for the implementation of the *Bringing Them Home* Report's 54 recommendations is one of the aims in the NSDC's Constitution.¹⁷ As part of its Ten Year Campaign, the NSDC has been seeking an independent audit of the implementation of the recommendations. At a national level, there has not been a recommendation-by-recommendation evaluation of the *Bringing Them Home* Report's implementation since 2003.¹⁸ In order to move forward, it is necessary to assess what has been done and what needs to be done. This is why the NSDC and others

are now calling for national audit and monitoring of the recommendations to be re-established.

V State and Territory Stolen Generations Consultation

The NSDC wants to bring together members of the Stolen Generations and to listen to what it is they need and want. We believe that this would best be done through conferences held at a state and territory level. These conferences will allow for an assessment of where the needs of the Stolen Generations, their families and communities fit into the programs that already exist, to find out other programs that are needed, and to face those issues of the *Bringing Them Home* Report that are yet to be adequately addressed. This is specific to reparations and includes, but is not limited to, apology and acknowledgment, restitution, rehabilitation, prevention and monetary compensation. Not only will the conferences provide a forum for the Stolen Generations to voice their stories, concerns and ideas; they will also provide the NSDC with important information to use in consultations with government and with Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations regarding the fulfilment of the *Bringing Them Home* Report's recommendations.

VI Concluding Comments

At the NSDC Annual National Conference in October 2007, its members met with fellow advocacy bodies and community organisations, faith groups, government department representatives and members of the Stolen Generations who together drafted a five year strategic plan within a 10 year framework based on the Walk Your Talk and Bring Them Home campaign. This collaboration has been encouraged by the enthusiastic adoption and implementation by various sectors of the Australian public of a number of the campaign initiatives launched in May 2007.

Endnotes

- * Helen Moran is a Stolen Generations survivor and descendant of the Wiradjuri and Wongaibon Nations of New South Wales. She has been involved with the Journey of Healing and the National Sorry Day Committee ('NSDC') since their inception, and is currently Indigenous Co-Chair of the NSDC. Most recently, Helen played a pivotal role in the consultations, negotiations and coordination of the motion of apology to the Stolen Generations in Federal Parliament. The author wishes to thank

- Tiffany McComsey, Sally Fitzpatrick and Ricki Dargaval for their assistance in the researching and drafting of this speech.
- 1 National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (*Bringing Them Home Inquiry*), *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1997) (*Bringing Them Home Report*).
 - 2 Journey of Healing ACT, *Are We Bringing Them Home?: Community Progress Report on How Far the Recommendations of the Bringing Them Home Report Have Been Implemented in the ACT* (1999), <<http://www.johact.org.au/CPR1999.PDF>> at 20 March 2008; Journey of Healing ACT, *Are We Bringing Them Home in 2000?: Second Community Progress Report on How Far the Recommendations of the Bringing Them Home Report Have Been Implemented in the ACT* (2000), <<http://www.johact.org.au/CPR2000.PDF>> at 20 March 2008; Journey of Healing ACT, *Are We Bringing Them Home in 2002?: Third Community Progress Report on How Far the Recommendations of the Bringing Them Home Report Have Been Implemented in the ACT* (2002), <<http://www.johact.org.au/CPRREP%7e1.PDF>> at 20 March 2008; Journey of Healing ACT, *Are We Bringing Them Home?: 10 Years On: Fourth Community Progress Report on How Far the Recommendations of the Bringing Them Home Report Have Been Implemented in the ACT* (2007).
 - 3 *Trevorrow v South Australia (No 5)* (2007) SASC 285.
 - 4 The case was unreported.
 - 5 Amanda Cornwall, *Restoring Identity: Final Report of the Moving Forward Consultation Project*, PIAC (2002).
 - 6 Peter O'Brien, 'Are We Helping Them Home?: Surveys of Progress in the Implementation of the *Bringing Them Home* Recommendations' (Paper presented at the 'Are We Helping Them Home' Seminar, Parliament House, Canberra, 13 November 2002) <<http://www.nsdcc.org.au/pdf/54RECOMMENDATIONS.pdf>> at 20 March 2008.
 - 7 Ania Wilczynski et al, *Evaluation of the Bringing Them Home and Indigenous Mental Health Programs*, Urbis Keys Young for OATSIH (2007).
 - 8 *Bringing Them Home Inquiry*, above n 1, 287.
 - 9 *Ibid* 293.
 - 10 *Ibid* 293, 368–9.
 - 11 Lowitja O'Donoghue, '10th Anniversary of the *Bringing Them Home Report*' (Speech delivered at the Great Hall of Parliament, Canberra, 24 May 2007), in (2007) 11(2) *Australian Indigenous Law Review* 1, 1.
 - 12 See NSDC, <<http://www.nsdcc.org.au/>>.
 - 13 NSDC, *Stolen Generations Track Home* <http://www.nsdcc.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=57> at 20 March 2008.
 - 14 *Bringing Them Home Inquiry*, above n 1, 287, 293, 295.
 - 15 See NSDC, <<http://www.nsdcc.org.au/>>.
 - 16 NSDC, *National Pledgebook Register* <http://www.nsdcc.org.au/index.php?option=com_pledgebook_register> at 20 March 2008.
 - 17 NSDC, *Constitution of the National Sorry Day Committee* 1 (copy held on file with author).
 - 18 Ministerial Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, *Evaluation of Responses to Bringing Them Home Report: Final Report* (2003) <<http://www.mcatsia.gov.au/>> at 20 March 2008. The author acknowledges Tiffany McComsey for her work in investigating the status of reporting on the implementation of the recommendations.