

Craig Muller,

The Committee Secretary,
Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee Department of the Senate,
Parliament House, Canberra

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate's inquiry into stolen wages.

My name is Craig Muller. I am employed as a professional historian with the Goldfields Land and Sea Council. Through this and previous employment I have been involved in Aboriginal history for the past nine and a half years. This includes having researched and written more than half a dozen expert reports for Native Title claims for the Federal Court. However, I am making this submission as an individual, professional historian and not as a representative of my employer.

I apologise for the brevity of this submission; I have not had sufficient notice of this inquiry to make a more formal and detailed submission. I know through my work in the field that the issue of lost wages is relevant to Western Australia, but because of the time constraint I am providing indications of further research that is required, rather than the research itself.

In the course of the work I have done I have become aware that some Aboriginal people in Western Australia have at certain times and places been denied wages and other entitlements that were their rightful due. I believe that to some extent this mirrors the situation in other states of Australia.

This denial includes, but is not confined to:

- the holding back of wages due to Aboriginal employees, particularly in the pastoral industry;
- the failure of some missions to disburse child endowments and other pensions to Aboriginal inmates;
- and the repossession of houses without any compensation when Aboriginal people had paid substantial parts of the mortgage.

In each instance these events occurred through to at least the end of the 1960s.

I have become aware of these things issues when I have been employed to research other matters, and thus have not followed up the specifics of these instances. This makes the Senate Inquiry party timely, but also, as indicated, limits my submission mainly to urging that the Inquiry direct and oversee further research.

In the cases I have cited, this research might begin as follows:

- Wages: There are files containing the inspection reports of Department of Native Welfare officers who patrolled to pastoral stations between the early 1950s and the early 1970s held at the State Records Office of Western Australia (SRO). These inspection reports include some statements about wages being paid, and in some cases withheld, at individual pastoral stations. Further

research should be done by making contact with Aboriginal people in regional centres of Western Australia.

- Child endowments, etc: As I understand it, a system was made possible under S.39 of the *1954 Native Welfare Act* whereby missions could allocate how a portion of child endowments and other pensions was spent. I have seen expressions of concern by the Department of Native Welfare that some missions were not passing on all the monies they received on behalf of Aboriginal people. Research on this could start with those Department of Native Welfare files held at the SRO under the titles of the various missions.
- Lost mortgage payments: I became aware of this issue some years ago when doing research for the Western Australian Aboriginal Affairs Department (AAD) (as it was then). In this case, some Aboriginal people were encouraged to buy homes through the then State Housing Commission (SHC) at low interest (I think this was done under S. 9 of the 1963 Native Welfare Act). Their repayments were made to the SHC, but I believe that if at any stage, and regardless of how long they had been paying the mortgage, they stopped making repayments and moved they received no part of the value of the house. While I was working as a consultant for AAD I know one Aboriginal family approached the department making inquiries about such a situation. I do not know what the outcome was. Once again, I believe there are Department of Native Welfare files held at the State Records Office of Western Australia which detail some or all of these loans. These would be identifiable in the SRO indexes under the title of Section 9 mortgages or similar.

In summary, my submission is that misappropriation, improper withholding, and misdirection of money to which Aboriginal people were entitled occurred in Western Australia and that much further research into this is required. I would in particular urge that the Senate respond affirmatively to section (i) of the terms of reference of the Inquiry:

whether there is a need to 'set the record straight' through a national forum to publicly air the complexity and the consequences of mandatory controls over Indigenous labour and finances during most of the 20th century.

I believe a national inquiry and report is required.

Thank you again for the opportunity to make this submission.

Yours faithfully,

Craig Muller