

AWD Aboriginal Justice Support Group

Action for World Development (AWD)
Education and advocacy for justice for over 30 years

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Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600



Dear Committee Secretary

Submission on Stolen Wages

We are an ecumenical group that for 30 years has been working for justice for Aboriginal people. The restitution of Aboriginal Stolen Wages, therefore, is an issue that particularly concerns us, and we congratulate the Senate Committee on efforts that will bring the process nearer conclusion.

The practice that withheld what was theirs from Aboriginal people for so long can be seen from today's standpoint as one of the worst abuses of the paternalism that for so long characterised white Australia's treatment of them. While its cruelty was not as anguishing as that of the taking of their children, it contributed significantly to the economic disadvantage and social exclusion that Aboriginal people still suffer from. Not only did it make their efforts to achieve an independent and dignified life harder, but the implication of their inferiority, even of their worthlessness, that it communicated to Aboriginal citizens must have been extremely painful. Both these effects of the practice contributed to the demoralization and the sense of helplessness that paralyzed so many of them over generations.

The practice inflicted an extra layer of poverty on people who had already been impoverished - driven off lands that whites wanted, and (even where this was not done violently by settlers or by murderous raids such as those of the Queensland Native Police but just as effectively by government regulation) had been forced to live in missions and reserves where poverty and wretchedness awaited them. Traditional activities were impossible, traditional diet was replaced with rations destructive of their health, and unemployment, idleness and welfare dependence were the lot of most. The final significance of the theft of this money was that even those who did get employment, or those who did have a claim to welfare, were denied access to the little money with which they might have been able to better themselves or their children.

The injustices done to children who had been taken from their parents, sent to homes like the notorious Kinchella and put into employment from there - with all sorts of promises about the education they were to receive and their livelihoods this would ensure - were a particularly loathsome form of this theft. Often the employers to whom these children were sent mistreated the boys, raped the girls, and denied both boys and girls the education that they had been promised and the money that was owing to them. That so many of them were in

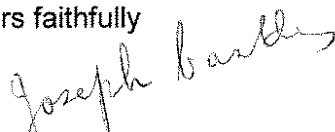
trouble with the law because of this dislocation of their lives is not surprising. That they were then the subject of cruel and discriminatory treatment by the police is heartbreaking. Members of our group have had a lot to do with people whose lives were affected in these ways and know first hand what it has meant.

Nothing can now make up fully for the losses the practice inflicted over so many generations, but whatever can be done now should be done. Of first importance are the principles that the issue should be approached through the widest possible consultation with the Aboriginal people involved and that, whatever the state of the written records available, every respect should be paid to what Aboriginal people remember of their family experiences.

Finally, it is especially incumbent on governments to recognize that in this area, as in that of the Stolen Generations, their predecessors were often the perpetrators of the injustices. And despite all the competing claims on their budgets, Governments must recognize that they really have the resources to address the issue of restitution in a flexible and not in a legalistic way.

We again congratulate the Senate Committee on the important contribution it can make both to the understanding of this issue and to the working out of ways to proceed with it.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Joseph Castley', written in dark ink.

Joseph Castley
for

AWD Aboriginal Social Justice Group