



VOICES FROM THE
BRINGING THEM HOME
REPORT 1997

"I guess the most traumatic thing for me is that... you forbad us to speak our own language and we had no communication with our family... I realised later how much I'd missed of my culture and how much I'd been devastated... Up until this point of time I can't communicate with my family, can't hold a conversation. I can't go to my uncle and ask him anything because we don't have that language... I couldn't communicate with my family because I had no way of communicating with them any longer. Once that language was taken away, we lost a part of that very soul. It meant our culture was gone, our family was gone, everything that was dear to us was gone."

(Fiona, Confidential Evidence 305)

"Language and identity are closely linked, and for many of us our language is a symbol of identity central to our self-esteem, cultural respect and social identification... when our children were stolen from our families one of the things that happened was that the language learning cycles were broken. Transmission from generation to generation is a crucial link in language maintenance. Taking the children away broke this link."

(The Kimberley Language Resource Centre, submission 759 page 1).

"It is well known that the mission children were not only discouraged from speaking their native languages, but in many cases physically punished for doing so."

(Bringing them home Report, 1997)

2 March 2012

Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
Parliament House
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Dear Secretary

Thank you for accepting this submission from the National Sorry Day Committee Inc (NSDC). to the Standing Committee's Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities. Our submission relates to the following terms of reference:

- The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages
- The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture

The National Sorry Day Committee has been working since 1997 to advance healing and justice for the Stolen Generations, and in particular progress the implementation of the *Bringing them home* Report.

The *Bringing them home* Report was tabled in Parliament in 1997. It documented the widespread impact of forcible removal policies which originated in the 1800s and continued to the 1970s. Most of its recommendations are yet to be actioned.

Past forcible removal policies brought about major losses of social and cultural knowledge and tradition, with lasting effects for the well-being of Stolen Generations, their children, families and descendants.

The disconnection from family, culture, country and language caused significant harm, along with the challenges around identity and reuniting with family.

This trauma has also been transmitted through generations and contributes to the life expectancy gap through high rates of suicide and injury and the interrelationship between chronic disease, psychological distress and poor lifestyle choices.

The *National Indigenous Languages Policy* does recognise Stolen Generations briefly as a special needs group, however these words need to be enlivened with concrete action.

Surviving members of the Stolen Generations are now mostly aged over 50 years. Time is running out for them to benefit from restitution measures as recommended in the *Bringing them home* Report.

As this Report found, the purpose of restitution is to re-establish, to the extent possible, the situation that existed prior to the perpetration of gross violations of human rights. It found that "children who were removed have typically lost the use of their languages, been denied cultural knowledge and inclusion, been deprived of opportunities to take on cultural responsibilities and are often unable to assert their native title rights."

NSDC is already party to government negotiations to develop the new *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework*, which it understands will form part of the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Equality Plan* announced by the Australian Government in 2011.

NSDC will convey that Stolen Generations members seek to be supported in designing their own social and emotional wellbeing measures – measures that are urgently needed to achieve health equality and healing in their lifetime. Supporting restitution through language and culture programs is critical.

In the Committee's deliberations and final report, we are seeking recognition that:

1. Forcible removal policies played a major role in the loss and endangerment of Australia's First Nations Peoples' languages from the 1800s to the 1970s.
2. Cultural connection, integrity and identity are critical protective factors for social and emotional wellbeing. They should be considered as a new 'building block' in the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Equality Plan* that was endorsed by the Prime Minister on 15 February 2012.
 - a. Cultural identity, connection and integrity go hand in hand with achieving health equality for Australia's First Nations Peoples living in urban, regional and remote areas. This area has not experienced a significant funding increase in a long time. The NSDC urges the Australian Government to embrace this opportunity to finally include these 'missing ingredients' in ongoing efforts to Close the Gap.
 - b. Treatment of this area as a building block will accelerate progress across a range of other policy areas by enhancing the ability of people to take advantage of new opportunities and lead change in their own families and communities.
 - c. The Australian Government should seek financial commitments from the States and Territories towards cultural and language-based strategies through the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Equality Plan* and associated Closing the Gap agreements. The States also had a direct role in forcible removal policies.
3. That the *National Health Equality Plan* and *Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework* contain distinct measures to support restitution and healing for Stolen Generations in their life time, recognising they have special and different needs to the rest of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.
4. Participation of the Minister for Arts and the Office for the Arts in the development of the *Health Equality Plan* and new *Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework* is critical.
5. That pursuant to recommendations of the *Bringing them home* Report:
 - a. (Recommendation 12a) That the Commonwealth expand the funding of Indigenous language, culture and history centres to ensure national coverage at regional level.
 - b. (Recommendation 12b) That where the Indigenous community so determines, the regional language, culture and history centre be funded to record and maintain local Indigenous languages and to teach those languages, **especially to people whose forcible removal deprived them of opportunities to learn and maintain their language and to their descendants.**

Yours sincerely

Helen Moran and Sally Fitzpatrick
Co-Chairs of the National Sorry Day Committee