

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS BY SENATOR BARTLETT

1.1 As the initiator of this Senate Committee Inquiry, I would like to make a few additional comments.

1.2 Firstly, I would like to add a personal thanks to all those who provided evidence to the Inquiry, particularly those who told their personal stories. It was the continuing expressions of serious dissatisfaction and deep hurt and anger from Indigenous people in Queensland, combined with the details of methodical archival research already done which made me believe this issue deserves further scrutiny and attention.

1.3 While I have been and remain critical of the Queensland government's approach to the Stolen Wages issue up to now, it was not my intention to have an Inquiry which would serve simply to provide more criticism of the Queensland government. A growing body of work suggests that very similar injustices and practices occurred in other states. Controversy over the way the issue has been handled in Queensland should not obscure the fact that in some other states, and at federal level (in regards to past practices in the Northern Territory), there has been no response or action taken at all.

1.4 For all the flaws in the Queensland government's response, there has at least been an acknowledgement, albeit sometimes rather begrudging and inadequate, that serious injustices occurred. I also appreciated their preparedness to participate in this Inquiry, something which a number of other state governments failed to do.

1.5 Whilst this Inquiry has been brief and the many competing demands on Senators' time has meant there was less opportunity than I would have liked to dig into the details, the evidence provided has still been sufficient to clearly demonstrate that Stolen Wages is a national issue, not one isolated to Queensland and New South Wales.

1.6 While there are valid arguments for a comprehensive national Inquiry, such as could be done by HREOC or Royal Commission, the simple fact is that the time for action is now. Governments at state and federal can, at a relatively small cost, facilitate the necessary research now, if the political will is there.

1.7 The urgency of the matter is clear, as the age of many of the direct victims is advanced. This has been brought home in a sad way just during the course of this brief Inquiry. Pastor Collins gave passionate and compelling evidence as a member of a delegation of Aboriginal people who travelled from Cherbourg to appear at the Committee's hearings in Brisbane on 25th October, 2006. He passed on before this report was tabled on 7th December, 2006. I hope the record of his evidence and his commitment, right to the end, of achieving recognition and justice for his people,

serves as a both reminder of the urgency for proper action on this issue and a motivation for governments and society to deliver it,

1.8 The extent and depth of injustice inflicted on Indigenous Australians through the twentieth century is enormous. This Inquiry touched on and revealed just a small, but important component of it. The concerted exploitation of thousands of Indigenous people over decades was a building block of the prosperity which Australia as a nation enjoys today.

1.9 The report shows a pattern of behaviour over many years by authorities in many parts of Australia which had a direct consequence of leaving many Indigenous people in poverty. The 'consequential' and intergenerational poverty resulting from this should be acknowledged, as it relates directly to the conditions many Indigenous people live in today.

1.10 While it will not be possible to directly recompense every injustice, it reinforces the obligation on federal, state and territory governments to implement properly funded employment and education programs targeted to assist young Indigenous people overcome the intergenerational poverty that is a legacy of 'stolen wages'. The details and operation of such programs should be done in conjunction with Indigenous community representatives in each State and Territory.

Senator Andrew Bartlett

Australian Democrats