

National Stolen Generations Alliance Supplementary Submission
(Please note the term 'National' has recently been added to the name of our organisation)

Senate Inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices

December 2011

Introduction

The National Stolen Generations Alliance – Australians for Truth, Justice and Healing (NSGA) has made 2 previous submissions to this Inquiry - the first submitted in March 2011 (submission 227) and another tabled at the Inquiry hearing in Adelaide on October 26th 2011 by Ms Heather Shearer. This second submission does not appear to have been listed on the list of submissions for this Inquiry on the website as yet and therefore the NSGA request confirmation of its receipt and consideration of its contents alongside this supplementary submission. NSGA representatives have also provided witness testimony to three hearings of the Inquiry in Brisbane, Canberra and Adelaide.

The purpose of this supplementary submission is to focus specifically on the second point in the terms of reference for this Inquiry:

(b) the potential role of the Commonwealth in developing a national framework to assist states and territories to address the consequences for the mothers, their families and children who were subject to forced adoption policies.

NSGA believes that its previous submissions, alongside other submissions provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their organisations, have contributed adequate information to address the other term of reference for the Inquiry to determine the role of the Commonwealth Government's policies and practices in contributing to forced adoptions. The NSGA believes this role has already been demonstrated as clearly significant and compelling evidence of the need for the Commonwealth Government to now take up a substantial role in addressing the issues that are a result of these policies and practices.

As stated in our previous submission – the (N)SGA believes the Commonwealth Government is better positioned than most, if not all, state and territory governments to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander needs are met as part of the overall response to this Inquiry. The NSGA wishes to contribute to this response and ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, needs and concerns are properly considered and included, especially those of the Stolen Generations.

Inclusion, exclusion and disregard for Stolen Generations needs and concerns

The NSGA is concerned that already some attempts to seek solutions have excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, specifically Stolen Generations. As an example of this we offer the following extract from our draft letter in response to the Final Report on *Impact of Past Adoption Practices*:

We are pleased the Australian Government commissioned this research review. We would like to congratulate the Australian Institute of Family Studies on conducting this research and providing another pathway for these issues to enter a more open national public dialogue that we believe has been largely suppressed until now.

Our organisation has limited ability to thoroughly contribute and respond to the consultations informing this report within the timeframes given. We have now considered the draft of the Final Report and would like to raise several points and queries. We understand that this contribution could be too late for your consideration or inclusion to the report and may need to be raised in future research and forums.

We understand that the report did not aim to include consideration of Stolen Generations' experiences specifically and of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences more generally. We believe there should be a clearer explanation of the scope of this report and its aim to only consider research of non-Indigenous experiences of adoption in Australia if this is the case. It would also be useful to know whether the statistics cited include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

We believe that such clarity and acknowledgement are crucial in any report that considers issues of such enormous significance and ongoing concern to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our representative, Heather Shearer, raised some of these issues during the teleconference held on April 1st 2011 to discuss the final draft report. The response given was there was already ample research concerning Stolen Generations. We would greatly appreciate your assistance in identifying the research referred to and why it was not considered useful in understanding the experiences, practices and impacts of adoption in Australia.

We would also like your explanation of the meaning of the term 'white stolen generations' cited in the report. We are concerned about the use of this term especially when the only explanation given is that it is 'analogous' to Stolen Generations. Is it intended a race based differentiation? What does it mean in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children removed because they were 'white'? Does it mean only pure 'Anglo-Saxon white' and how is this defined? What of possible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parentage of 'white stolen generations? What of adoptive children from non-white cultures other than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures?

We think it is crucial that term 'white stolen generations' is fully interrogated, negotiated and understood before it is considered as accurate terminology, especially in any context aiming for academic rigour. Currently its use could be seen as little more than yet another form of unacknowledged appropriation from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander intellectual property and experience without a full understanding of the original term that that has been 'borrowed' and/or 'stolen'.

It took nearly thirty years after it was coined for the term Stolen Generations to be included in national public policy so understandably ownership has built up around the term during this time. In comparison the term 'white stolen generations' is relatively recent and has been used with no formal consultation with, or permission from, Stolen Generations. Its use raises so many questions and concerns that we feel that it is highly premature to for this term to be used unquestioningly.

The Stolen Generations Alliance does believe, however, that it is highly important to investigate the analogies and differences between non-Indigenous experiences of adoption and those of Stolen Generations. Stolen Generations want to share their hard fought knowledge, experience, wisdom and compassion around these issues. They want to build collaborative partnerships and understandings across racial and cultural divides. They want to extend the hand of friendship and empathy to anyone affected by the forced, illegal, uninformed, deceitful or just plain damaging removal of children from their parents and families.

Stolen Generations want a place at the table in any research, policy direction or inquiry that considers these issues. They could be considered 'grassroots experts' in the field and those who provide services, or conduct research in this sector should also be consulted for their expertise. To leave this highly valuable input out of the equation fails to take advantage of significant expertise and knowledge and relegates Stolen Generations to a position as victims rather than resilient survivors, as a merely a problem ('the Aboriginal problem') rather than as significant contributors to the solutions.

As pointed out in your report 'in understanding the context and impact of past adoption practices, it is important to acknowledge that we are viewing past behaviour and judging it by the standards of today—with the benefit of hindsight'. The wholesale removal of children from their parents in Australia has largely been defined through a moral code that, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families still persists today even though we now have the supposed benefit of hindsight.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are being removed from their families at an unprecedented rate since the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. Many Australian states are now reporting removal rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children of more than ten times those of non-Indigenous removals. Some Aboriginal families are now experiencing their sixth generation of removal. It seems the benefits of hindsight are not benefitting them.

The SGA believes that identifying the analogies and differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous experiences of adoption and the subsequent, impacts is a research gap that needs to be acknowledged. It seems that current research and responses to child removals exist in almost parallel universes which only serve to increase the gaps between the two. The SGA believes these issues can only be addressed when we have a full understanding of the underpinnings of child removals through the benefit of properly interrogated hindsight.

Research into the impacts of past adoption practices and experiences can help to identify and interrogate the moral codes which saw unmarried mothers cast as aberrant in their behaviours and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents cast as aberrant through their race, culture and the challenges this posed to Australia's colonisation.

These moral codes did not exist in isolation to each other. They were informed by the same patriarchal, colonial and strict Christian worldviews. The issues became more intertwined, not less, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were removed based on 'welfare' determinations rather than the purely race based removals that were more common in the earlier part of last century. It seems the racist moral codes remained firmly in place but became unacknowledged determinants for removal rather than explicit ones.

In terms of adoption policy Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children along with non-Indigenous children were more likely to be adopted and/or fostered in the period examined in your report than previously when removal to institutions and missions was more common. The Stolen Generations Alliance believes that the justifications made to remove Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in this period supported the social mores that enabled the forced removal and subsequent adoption of many non-Indigenous children.

Stolen Generations know that one of their greatest achievements was the Bringing Them Home Report and the Inquiry that led to it. This enabled many Stolen Generations and their families to publicly name their experience for the first time. It also enabled forgiveness and understanding all sides of the experience, children realised that their parents did not willingly give them up and families realised that those taken had their culture and family heritage hidden from them so they could not return home.

It was important to have the basic understanding of Stolen Generations experiences before the National Apology was given even though the long delay between the two caused additional stress and trauma. The Inquiry was not only worthwhile for the therapeutic aspects it offered. It also helped us to understand the causes and practices leading to these abuses and why well-intentioned people were sometimes unwitting partners to what could be described according to UN definitions as a form of state sanctioned genocide.

These are some of the reasons why the Stolen Generations Alliance supports a national inquiry into past adoptions. A national inquiry should be conducted to examine the next general phase of child removal following institutionalisation. The Stolen Generations Alliance understands why there is a wish to have such an inquiry focus on non-Indigenous or 'white' adoptions as the issue of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adoptions has been covered to some extent through understandings of the Stolen Generations experiences.

The Stolen Generations Alliance understands that non-Indigenous mothers affected by past adoption practices still need recognition for the forced, or in some cases illegal, removal of their children and for the possible pain and lifelong trauma as a result of any adoption even when a child was supposedly willingly relinquished. The Stolen Generations Alliance believes that a national inquiry and further research should also begin to consider the parallel experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences with of non-Indigenous communities. To continue in isolation from each other is counterproductive and only serves to exacerbate racial divides.

The NSGA believes this extract clearly outlines some of the concerns its members have regarding both research scope and focus and the emergence of groups using offensive terminology such as 'white stolen generations'.

The NSGA asks that this Inquiry recommend the use of the term 'white stolen generations' not be endorsed by the Commonwealth Government or any of the agencies it contracts or funds to deliver services and programs, conduct research, act as representatives or advocates or are in any other way supported by the Commonwealth Government. This would obviously include the Australian Institute of Family Studies As stated in the extract above the NSGA recommends the term 'white stolen generations' needs to be fully interrogated, negotiated and understood before it is considered as accurate terminology.

This confusion is also obvious in other related areas dealing with childhood removal Consultations to assist develop into the Forgotten Australian Aged Care Education Package for workers in the sector are a good example with both Former British Child Migrants (Lost Innocents) and Stolen Generations being classified as a sub-category of Forgotten Australians. Representatives of Stolen Generations such as NSGA and Former British Child Migrants objected to this on the grounds that it was likely to gloss over the differences and could lead to inappropriate responses to both these groups.

The following extract is from a letter sent to those organising the consultations in regard to these issues

- 1. **Stolen Generations are not Forgotten Australians** even though they shared some of the same experiences as Forgotten Australians. Many Stolen Generations would find it highly insulting to be called Forgotten Australians as they have already spent many years being told who and what they should be or in fact are. There is no way Forgotten Australians would take kindly if this situation were reversed and all the references to them came under the heading 'Stolen Generations';*
- 2. **Stolen Generations include those who were fostered and adopted** - not just those institutionalised and while Stolen Generations shared some institutions with non-Indigenous children they also were placed in specific Aboriginal institutions such as the Kinchela Boys Home and Cootamundra Girls Home and this creates a feeling of difference from Forgotten Australians and a strong identification that only relates to that institution - trying to force or insinuate a commonality with survivors from other institutions could be highly distressing and insulting;*
- 3. **Stolen Generations did not only lose their cultural identity** - they were taught to hate and fear it - the specific cultural aspects of Stolen Generations loss of identity are glossed over in the DVD but in addition Stolen Generations were also told that their peoples, culture and communities were bad, lazy, hopeless and a list of other negative terms that went further than losing their identity by being taught to fear, hate and feel shame for their Aboriginal identity. Stolen Generations were also told they would never amount to anything due to their cultural identification - experiences not shared in the same way by Forgotten Australians;*

4. **Stolen Generations also lost their language/s** - and still do not have the ability to reclaim their language or other cultural knowledge - an experience not shared by Forgotten Australians;
5. **Many Stolen Generations were removed for different reasons and under different policies than Forgotten Australians** - the most significant being the motivation of assimilating Stolen Generations into non-Indigenous Australian society and was also interrelated to many other injustices suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and this context also needs to be understood especially for the way the even under welfare policies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were more likely to be removed due to racist assumptions and judgements. And in addition due to all the different policies in different states and territories the definition of Stolen Generations differs from place to place and person to person and it is best not to assume they are all the same;
6. **Stolen Generations continue to face racism** - from both non-Indigenous Australians and sometimes from their own people and communities. These issues are often presented as things that happened in the past when the truth is that racism toward Aboriginal people is still prevalent in Australia and in addition many Stolen Generations have still not been accepted back into their communities. The reality and impacts of these continuing rejections must be acknowledged as well as the fact that intergenerational trauma and systemic racism are key reasons behind the continuing high rates of removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to this day with some families experiencing 6 generations of removal and Australia currently removing more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children today than ever before - this reality and the reasons behind it still impacts strongly on Stolen Generations;

Ways Forward

The NSGA is keen to ensure that there are constructively, collaborative and effective ways forward on issues raised by the Inquiry. In regard to the issues raised regarding the use of the term 'white stolen generations' or even Forgotten Australians there is the potential for this to become divisive rather than creating opportunities for cross cultural understanding and support. The NSGA would like to offer the following suggestions as ways forward to promote best practice cross cultural partnerships and solutions

- **Australian Childhood Removal National Conference**

The NSGA recommends that a national conference is funded to enable all groups affected by removal as children to come together and begin the process sharing stories, learning from each other, identifying common issues and solutions and tackling some of the challenges inherent in working together. The NSGA believes the benefits of such a conference would be multiple and extremely timely given the recent rise in public awareness of these issues and the continuing confusion regarding the differences in experiences and needs.

The NSGA recommends that this conference is convened by a steering committee of all related groups in cooperation with professional conference organising team, government representatives and academic advisors.

The NSGA also believes that mainstream service providers previously involved in child removal be invited to attend the conference but not necessarily to join the steering committee for the conference to ensure they do not dominate the direction focus, content or speakers for the conference.

NSGA firmly believes those affected by childhood removal should be supported through means and opportunity to lead, shape and own such a conference. This in itself will contribute to their healing process. Stolen Generations are very aware of the importance of the healing benefits of self determination both culturally and as a result of years of campaigning for their voices to be heard.

- **Cross cultural services and programs**

The NSGA is aware that there are a number of positive examples of cross cultural cooperation and partnerships already in existence. Both SA Link-Up, based in Nunkuwarrin Yunti, Adelaide and Link-Up Qld Aboriginal Corporation based in Brisbane have demonstrated willingness and successful partnerships with a range of post adoption services, as well as Forgotten Australians groups and services. Link-Up services are also experts in the full range of forms of childhood removal as they cover all of these within their own service provision.

Unfortunately it seems that the knowledge and expertise of Link-Up services, staff and boards has been assumed to be only relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The truth is that Link-Up services are leaders in what for many others dealing with childhood removal is an emerging sector. Link-Up services have established best practice through many years of experience in responding to these issues and while some aspects are culturally specific their expertise also could be extremely useful to others in the sector as the more progressive mainstream services have discovered.

The NSGA therefore strongly believes that expertise built up by Link-Up services is properly acknowledged, documented and better utilised that it has been previously by government agencies and mainstream services. In line with this the NSGA believes that Link-Up services are better supported to provide evidence based research in regard to the expertise it has gathered in nearly 30 years of operation for some Link-Up services.

Similarly the expertise of individuals such as Aunty Lorraine Peeters, a Stolen Generations woman from Cootamundra Girls Home is world class and highly specialised. Ms Peeters developed and delivers the Marumali program nationally. Marumali is program devised to create awareness and understanding for both Stolen Generations themselves and their service providers and is offered to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous peoples in separately tailored workshops.

In addition there are a number of academics working in the field of social and emotional wellbeing, a term developed out of the Stolen Generations sector and now being utilised more widely often without an understanding of its origins. These academics have a great deal to offer in terms of universal understandings and the NSGA would like to see far better support for and inclusion of their work.

The NSGA believes the cultural cringe apparently inherent in many mainstream services in regard to considering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and expertise as automatically inferior needs to be challenged and discredited. That Link-Up services, the Marumali program and identified academics in the sector are acknowledged for the expertise they offer and supported to develop evidence based research for the overall sector in regard to addressing the issues, needs and concerns of those removed from family.

- **Cross cultural representation and advocacy**

The NSGA also believes there is a need to support best practice and proven cross cultural advocacy and representations for those affected by childhood removal. Again the NSGA is aware of a number of examples where this is already occurring. NSGA affiliate in Perth the Western Australian Bringing Them Home Committee is currently working with Forgotten Australian groups in Western Australia on a joint project

The NSGA is also aware of some instances in which it seems opportunities are being overlooked. For example the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles and the work of organisations such as SNAICC (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care) should also be respected and utilised across childhood removal sector.

The NSGA believes one of the best examples of ongoing cross cultural representation and advocacy is in its own partnership with Origins. This partnership was begun at the inception of the NSGA and have continued until the present growing stronger and more effective along the way. The teamwork between NSGA and Origins in preparing submissions for this current Inquiry has helped to develop an even stronger bond and deeper understanding of the issues for our organisations.

In fact it has now reached the point where both organisations feel confident they can work even more closely together for the benefit of Stolen Generations and those removed through forced adoption practices as well work constructively with Forgotten Australians and Former British Child Migrants. The NSGA and Origins both support the concept of establishing a joint national office to enable their work together to be strengthened.

It is envisaged that this office would ideally be located in either Canberra or Sydney to ensure access to both Federal politicians and other national agencies such as the Human Rights Commission and the Congress of Australia's First Peoples. The NSGA and Origins are seeking support to achieve this aspiration as a way forward to encouraging cross cultural advocacy and representation at a national level. The NSGA therefore recommends that this inquiry supports funding to be provided for a jointly operated national NSGA and Origins national office to ensure effective national cross cultural representation and advocacy on issues related to childhood removal.

Both organisations bring a wide range of expertise, energy and willingness to work together. Both have networks across the country and are focused on ensuring they are responsive and accountable to those they represent. The NSGA believes that some of the issues raised earlier in the submission are a result of an extremely underfunded and under resourced sector and this has resulted in an inability to draw disparate groups together to resolve their differences as well as a very competitive environment in terms of attracting and retaining resources and funding.

The NSGA firmly believes that establishing a joint national office with Origins will greatly contribute to bringing together what are now unrelated groups across the Australian community. Of course this diversity is to some extent welcome and necessary as needs and aspirations differ but the benefit of further pioneering sought-after cross cultural partnerships is that it can provide an example to others that these kind of partnerships are possible and can enrich the understanding, support, networks and healing processes of all involved. It will also demonstrate that it is possible to both retain individual identification and focus on issues specific to one group while working together on other issues where there is much common ground.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The National Stolen Generations Alliance recommends that the Senate Inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices:

1. The use of the term 'white stolen generations' not be endorsed by the Commonwealth Government or any of the agencies it contracts or funds to deliver services and programs, conduct research, act as representatives or advocates or are in any other way supported by the Commonwealth Government.
2. The term 'white stolen generations' needs to be fully interrogated, negotiated and understood before it is considered as accurate terminology.
3. A national conference is funded to enable all groups affected by removal as children to come together and begin the process sharing stories, learning from each other, identifying common issues and solutions and tackling some of the challenges inherent in working together.
4. This conference is convened by a steering committee of all related groups in cooperation with professional conference organising team, government representatives and academic advisors.
5. That Link-Up services, the Marumali program and identified academics in the sector are acknowledged for the expertise they offer and supported to develop evidence based research for the overall sector in regard to addressing the issues, needs and concerns of those removed from family.
6. Funding to be provided for a jointly operated national NSGA and Origins national office to ensure effective national cross cultural representation and advocacy on issues related to childhood removal.

The National Stolen Generations Alliance would like to thank all members and support staff of the Inquiry team for your work and determination to ensure this Inquiry is thorough and recommends meaningful outcomes. We are aware of the numerous pressures and expectations that have been placed on this inquiry and would like to take this opportunity to express our appreciation for your commitment. We look forward to the final report and of course hope that you find ways to ensure genuine inclusion of Stolen Generations and cross cultural partnership with them