

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS — STOLEN WAGES

Statement

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [5.44 pm]: I want to make a few brief comments about the issue of stolen wages or, as I believe it is more appropriately called, government control of Aboriginal people's money. I do not know that I am prepared to smother my counterpart in this chamber, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, with quite as much love as Hon Helen Morton appears to want to smother her opponent, but in a similar vein I want to offer to work with Hon Peter Collier towards a resolution of this issue, which, as he conceded when he answered a question from me on Tuesday, is difficult and complex and raises a number of very vexed questions. It is in that spirit of working together towards a solution to this very important matter that I make these remarks.

Yesterday I attended a breakfast hosted by the National Native Title Council at which the guest speaker was Wayne Bergmann, the CEO of the Kimberley Land Council, who delivered a truly excellent speech. Members in this chamber know that in our job we have to listen to a large number of speeches, and every now and then we hear one that changes the way we see things. Yesterday morning's speech by Wayne Bergmann was one of those speeches. During the question time that ensued he was asked a question about the government approach to income earned and accrued by Indigenous people. He talked about his grandparents who themselves were victims of the stolen wages episode that this country went through over many, many decades—between about 1905 and 1972. We do not have to go back very far in history to find people who were directly affected by what was then government policy.

I want to give honourable members a flavour of what we are talking about here. I have noticed this week, as we have started to raise this issue in the chamber, that this has gone under the radar a little for some members of Parliament. I want to take the opportunity to read an article on the front page of the *Kalgoorlie Miner* on 3 December 2010 about Dorothy Dimer. She is one of the claimants in the stolen wages case. This is her story. I quote from the *Kalgoorlie Miner* —

Brought up at Mount Burgess Station, the 81-year-old, who now lives in Coolgardie, moved to Credo Station in 1942 with her family when the Kurrawang Woodlines Company her father worked for started to decline. At just 13, Mrs Dimer worked long hours on a wide variety of tasks, living in a tent and cooking in a hut.

“My work involved feeding 15 working dogs, raking up their droppings as well as bringing in the cows and milking them.

“Then during the wet weather I had to ride across to the next station and collect the mail on horseback,” she said.

“I also worked with my brothers mustering the sheep; you (have) got all day riding and when you come home late you have got to do all the cooking.

“Lots of the time I had to come home and do the cooking because my mother was ill.

For this work, she was paid about £1 a week (equivalent to about \$2) for the six years she and her family worked on the station.

In 2007 the Labor government set up a task force to look at this problem. The problem is well defined. It is about the taking of wages, the taking of savings; the taking, basically, of all entitlements of Aboriginal people during those decades. Sometimes this was due to over-control—the government simply moved in and effectively garnished the wages of all Aboriginal people. Sometimes the problem arose, though, from under-control; that is, there was simply non-payment of wages and no government agency to step in and put that right. That situation, I put to members, would be absolutely unthinkable in the case of the white community.

That task force worked very hard over the next 12 months. I am taking this information from the Department of Indigenous Affairs' website, which is well worth looking at if members want to get background to this issue. It held 62 meetings in 58 towns in WA. It received about 500 written submissions. It is estimated about 750 people are affected. That is not an enormous number of people. That is only a tiny proportion of the number of people, historically, who have been the victims of the stolen wages practice, which is estimated to be between 4 000 and 6 000. That task force reported in July 2008. As Hon Simon O'Brien is fond of pointing out, that was when the election was called. We are told that that task force report contains 100 recommendations and some highly specific details about what the payout figure might entail. Some two and a half years later, in February 2011, we still have not seen the report and we certainly have not seen a plan by this government to resolve the issue.

I agree with Hon Peter Collier that this issue is very difficult. However, very difficult is what we do in this chamber. It is not beyond the wit of a person of the calibre of Hon Peter Collier to come up with a plan. Equally, members will accept it when I genuinely say that it is not beyond the wit of members on my side of Parliament

to accept that report and make some constructive comments about how we can move forward. I plead to Hon Peter Collier to release the report and let the people who have something to say about how badly they were affected read it and digest its recommendations. Please let people like me, who want to help sort out the issue, see what problems we might have to resolve in the process of working towards a solution. As I said, it is a very difficult and complex issue, but that is what we in this chamber are good at, so give us a chance to do it.

There is, and has been for a few years, a lot of talk about one of the key issues in resolving Aboriginal disadvantage and failing communities; that is, to start creating intergenerational wealth. Think about that term. I do not have time in this short adjournment debate to go into details. Intergenerational wealth is something that non-Aboriginal Australians take absolutely for granted. It is part of our cultural system and familial expectation, yet Indigenous people have very little opportunity to create that. The problem of stolen wages is creating the reverse problem; it is creating intergenerational poverty. That factor has been recognised by Dennis Eggington, who said —

“Lots of Aboriginal people could have built an economy base for themselves, including the possible purchase of homes and all kind of things, and they lost that opportunity ...

They lost that opportunity directly as a result of the stolen wages issue.

In the moment that remains to me, I want to finish by telling honourable members another story so they can get the flavour of how absolutely crucial it is to resolve this issue quickly. We cannot just sit back and wait, because during that time the number of people who are able to receive some redress for the problems that have been caused will diminish. Frankly, they are dying of old age. Wayne Bergmann reminded us that the average life expectancy for an Aboriginal male living in Fitzroy Crossing is 45 years. Let us not leave this issue for another year before we resolve it. This is a story about Mr Munroe, who is claiming about \$80 000 in stolen wages, which is not a vast amount in the context of intergenerational wealth. For up to 10 years he was not given a wage per se when he worked as a stockman at several stations in the north eastern Goldfields. He was given money to return home once in a while or given food. In a letter to the *Kalgoorlie Miner*, he writes —

“I had to work in extreme weather conditions without proper gear. I could not leave the station to see family daily due to lack of funds so I left my children with my mother to take care of them,”

The article continues —

Mr Munroe said, if his claim was approved, he had no great plans with the money except to use it for food and accommodation purposes for himself and his family.