

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE — STOLEN WAGES — APOLOGY

Motion

MR R.H. COOK (Kwinana — Premier) [1.02 pm]: I move —

That this house formally acknowledges and apologises to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who worked in Western Australia between 1936 and 1972 for little or no wages.

I acknowledge that here in the Speaker's gallery today are Mr Mervyn Street, and Mr Peter Salmon and his brother, Alan. I take the opportunity to acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have joined us in the gallery today.

Today's apology follows the settlement of a class action led by Mr Mervyn Street on behalf of Aboriginal people across Western Australia. The class action started in 2020 and sought justice for people who, over a long period of time, were subject to discriminatory legislation. This legislation was supposed to protect Aboriginal people, but instead resulted in hardship and exploitation. The controls imposed on Aboriginal people impacted on where they were allowed to work, travel and live. It also impacted on how much money they were paid, how they were paid and how they received their wages and entitlements. Legislation of this kind, particularly in the earlier period of WA's colonial history, resulted in Aboriginal people working long hours without receiving any pay or an appropriate amount of pay. Instead, they were often paid through rations such as flour, sugar, tea and tobacco. The "book down" system, in which people bought necessities on credit at the station store, also meant that some people never saw the money they were meant to be paid. Although the laws changed over the period, many controls remained in place until 1972.

Aboriginal men, women and children worked hard and made enormous contributions to the economic development of this state. However, they received only a fraction of their worth. I am the leader of a party borne out of the union movement—a party that embraces fairness, justice and equality. The fact that this mistreatment existed for Aboriginal workers for decades is a blight on the legacy of successive governments. The fact that our laws facilitated these outcomes brings great shame. For that, we are sorry. These workers—men, women and children—worked under oppressive conditions. In many cases, there was the threat of violence. The impacts of these laws were felt across the state in a range of different work settings. The issues in this matter were complex. I acknowledge that each individual Aboriginal person's work history will have been unique. However, as a community, many of these experiences were common. During the hearings in the class action proceedings, stories were told of Aboriginal people living and working in harsh conditions. We heard about men working 14-hour days as stockmen and musterers on pastoral stations; women working as domestics, cooking, cleaning and caring for children in homes all over Western Australia; and, on missions, young people working long hours before and after school, including in laundries or on farms attached to the institution.

In 2006, the commonwealth Senate Standing Committees on Legal and Constitutional Affairs called on governments across Australia to pay adequate compensation for the hardships and injustices in the stolen wages period. In WA, the 2008 Stolen Wages Reparation Taskforce report looked in detail at the laws and policies that were established to control the welfare and wellbeing of Aboriginal people. It is clear that it has taken too long for the implications of that report to be fully addressed. I also acknowledge that the 2012 reparation scheme was inadequate and excluded many workers who were impacted by these laws. I say to all Aboriginal workers that today, the government of WA recognises that those laws and policies were wrong. We acknowledge and apologise for the fact that those laws and policies caused great harm and disadvantage. An apology does not change what happened; it cannot. However, it recognises the importance an apology has as recognition, a move towards reconciliation and a step in a healing process.

In bringing a close to this shameful part of Western Australia's history, on behalf of the state of Western Australia, I apologise to the Aboriginal men, women and children who worked in Western Australia between 1936 and 1972, often for decades, for no pay or not enough pay. We acknowledge that many of these people have not lived to see this day. For their family members who remain, we are sorry for the hurt and loss that your loved ones suffered. Their strong shoulders carried the weight of their families and communities. Their strong hands built up this state's economy. Their strong minds and spirits pursued justice in the decades that followed, leading to this moment and the recognition they rightfully deserve.

To you all, we say sorry.

Members: Hear, hear!

DR A.D. BUTI (Armadale — Minister for Aboriginal Affairs) [1.08 pm]: I acknowledge all those Aboriginal people throughout Western Australia who were affected by the laws and policies we are speaking about today. I take a moment to recognise the strength and leadership of the lead applicant in the class action, Mr Mervyn Street, who I have had the great pleasure of meeting and talking with. He is in the chamber to bear witness to this apology.

Mr Street is a Gooniyandi man and a traditional owner from the country around Fitzroy Crossing. Mr Street worked as a stockman on sheep and cattle stations and is a well-known and respected leader. In my meeting with Mr Street, he told me some of his story, including the hardships endured by his mother and his father, Mr John Cox. Some members may be familiar with his artwork, which has featured in many prominent galleries, including the collections at the National Gallery of Australia. I thank you, Mr Street, for being here today. I want also to acknowledge other Aboriginal people who have been involved in this fight to address a historical injustice. I thank them for helping to bring this matter to a resolution. I also acknowledge and welcome other class action members who are in the chamber today, including Mr Peter Salmon, who travelled from Carnarvon today. To all other class action members who may be listening, I pay my respects to you all.

We have just heard from the Premier, Hon Roger Cook, who gave a formal apology to those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Western Australia, who between 1936 and 1972 lived and worked under laws and policies that resulted in them receiving little or no pay. This violates a core value of the labour movement—a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. The policies and practices that saw Aboriginal people being exploited or, in true Australian language, “ripped off”, must be seen in a broader context. The underpinning philosophy of those laws and policies was based on a settler Australian society view that Aboriginal people were not as worthy of equal rights as other Western Australians. Through much of this period, Aboriginal people were not allowed to vote. They did not have freedom to move from place to place. Their families were broken up through forced removal of children. They had to get permission from white authority about who they could marry, and they were granted citizenship rights on the condition that they would not speak their language or practice their culture. This was a shameful period of our history. It is not about guilt that we view this history; it is about doing the right thing as contemporary Western Australians who believe in a fair go for all. That is why our government has reached a settlement on this appalling and, up until now, unresolved chapter of our history.

The legacy of these laws and policies continues to affect Aboriginal people and communities today. This legacy has contributed to the gap in life outcomes between Aboriginal people and other Western Australians, causing broad social and economic harm, including intergenerational impacts on Aboriginal people, their families and communities. The Cook Labor government recognises that this gap marks a deep injustice and is committed to addressing it through the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. I also acknowledge that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers are no longer here to witness the Premier's apology. Sadly, this moment has come too late for many.

The Premier highlighted some of the common experiences of the many Aboriginal men and women who provided evidence in this case. I want to give special mention and thanks to those Aboriginal men and women who gave evidence in the hearings back in June and July 2023, in Broome, Fitzroy Crossing, Beagle Bay, Bidyadanga and New Norcia. I acknowledge the courage and determination it took to give this evidence and the toll that reliving those experiences has taken on them and their families. I thank those people who shared their experiences, even when telling their stories would have been distressing. I acknowledge the great strength they had in telling their stories. I also want to acknowledge the sadness they may feel for relatives who are not still living to witness this apology.

In a society in which so much value is placed on economic aspirations and the drive to build a better life for oneself, it is important to acknowledge that for these First Nation workers, state laws and policies worked against those kinds of aspirations. Aboriginal people were unable to build wealth. They were unable to buy their own homes. They were unable to pass accumulated wealth and capital down to their children. These laws and policies limited their potential for a dignified and prosperous life. Aboriginal people were denied the opportunity to create meaningful and comfortable lives and to create future opportunities for their own families. This settlement is an opportunity to acknowledge the valuable contributions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have made to our state, both past and present.

I hope this moment can create a foundation for moving forward together. I acknowledge the enormous contribution that Aboriginal people have made to the economic development of the state, which has never been properly recognised. My hope is that this historical settlement provides some measure of recompense and some measure of hope that the Western Australian government can continue to work together with Aboriginal people to listen to their experiences and to learn the lessons of the past.

Members: Hear, hear!

The SPEAKER: Just before I give the member for Kimberley the call, I did say at the start that we are allowing photography for the first 10 minutes. I am prepared to continue to allow that approved photography to continue for the duration of this motion.

MS D.G. D'ANNA (Kimberley — Parliamentary Secretary) [1.15 pm]: I rise today to add my voice to this important apology. This settlement agreement is an acknowledgement of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who worked between 1936 and 1972 but were paid little or no wages. As the Premier and the Minister for

Aboriginal Affairs mentioned before me, these wages were not stolen by accident. The stolen wages were a result of legislation and policies inflicted onto Aboriginal people by governments of the day. In fact, many of those atrocious laws were agreed to right here where we are standing today.

The class action had been ongoing for many years, and I am very proud of Mr Mervyn Street, a Gooniyandi man from my electorate in the Kimberley, who was the lead in this charge. Both of Mr Street's parents worked on the same station for most of their lives, but they never earned a wage. Mr Street has been tirelessly working to have this past discrimination acknowledged, and I look forward to catching up with him again in Fitzroy Crossing soon.

In the Kimberley, a lot of Aboriginal people were displaced from their homelands and ended up living and working on cattle stations. Many Aboriginal men and women worked on these stations for little or no money. Even the Chief Protector of Aborigines, Mr Neville, linked the reality of what was happening on these stations to slavery. In 1925, he wrote that many Aboriginal workers in Western Australia existed under a system of semi-slavery.

The pastoral industry remains a part of the Kimberley's contemporary identity to this day, and the immense contributions of Aboriginal stockmen and women must be acknowledged and celebrated because the reality of the history of the state is that Aboriginal people have been the backbone of the cattle industry. Business and non-Indigenous people have gained financially off the slavery of Aboriginal people. Former chairman of the Kimberley Land Council, John Watson, described it this way; these are his words —

From the early days Aboriginal people were forced to work on the stations. All the stations came to depend on cheap Aboriginal labour. The Aboriginal people knew they were being exploited, but they didn't have any choice. Then during the 50s and 60s, Aboriginal stockmen started pushing for better wages. They didn't realise the drastic effect it would have on their lives.

Some very distressing stories about inhumane treatment and conditions for so many Aboriginal men and women have come out of this case. As distressing as they are for our people to hear, they need to be told because I do not think our country knows the extent of our history. The true history of this country and this state includes these atrocious stories of discrimination, cruelty and violence. Moments like these are important because we cannot heal from these deep wounds if we do not acknowledge what went on in this country. Financial compensation is one tool that the government has to acknowledge the injustices and suffering caused by past government policies. It does not correct what has happened, but it offers a way forward. The settlement agreement provides for an amount of up to \$165 million for up to 10 000 or more eligible claimants. This will be paid into a settlement fund. An additional fund of \$15.4 million has been set aside for some of the applicants' legal costs.

It is a significant step, but it is not just about financial compensation; it is about recognising and rectifying a grave historical wrong and is just the beginning of a path towards healing and reconciliation. As we navigate the significance of this decision, let us embrace truth-telling as a guiding principle. It beckons us to listen and understand and acknowledge the stories that have been obscured. In truth, we find the foundation for justice and reconciliation, a foundation laid by brave individuals like Mr Street who stepped forward to share their experiences. I also acknowledge Mr Salmon, Mr Newry from Kununurra and the many others who contributed to this case.

May the truth revealed through the stolen wages decision serve as a catalyst for a more compassionate and equitable future in which the power of storytelling fosters understanding, empathy and a collective commitment to justice. Let this be a beacon guiding us towards a future in which the resilience of our Indigenous communities are celebrated and their contributions to our state and nation honoured.

In closing, I also acknowledge this government for its apology, and I offer my sincere apology to all those who have been affected. I hope that the families who are hurting are feeling a sense of healing today, and let our journey towards truth and reconciliation be guided by the light of a shared understanding and mutual respect. Thank you for your leadership and your guidance. I am sorry, too.

MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Leader of the Opposition) [1.21 pm]: Most Australians, if not all, would agree with the expression “a fair day's pay for a fair day's work”. Today, this house acknowledges a group of people who did not receive fair pay for their many days of work. Today, we acknowledge and apologise for the longstanding injustice experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Western Australia. Between 1936 and 1972, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders worked across our state by providing labour that was crucial to our state's development, yet their compensation was woefully inadequate. As the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Nationals WA, I support the motion for a formal apology to those who were affected. This apology represents an acknowledgement of those past wrongs.

I acknowledge in the Speaker's gallery the presence of Mr Mervyn Street, a Gooniyandi man and traditional owner, who I had the pleasure to briefly meet today. As the lead applicant in the stolen wages class action, Mr Street embodies the resilience of his people. His life story, marked by years of unpaid labour on various stations, is testament to his unwavering spirit. Despite these challenges, Mr Street has become a prominent figure in his community and

is celebrated for his commitment to culture, art and advocacy. Through his art, Mr Street has pointedly captured the essence of his people's struggles and triumphs, preserving the rich heritage of Indigenous culture. His leadership in art and cultural organisations highlights the importance of maintaining culture and the benefits of Indigenous people living in their traditional homes.

The announced settlement agreement amounting to \$180 million is a substantial acknowledgement of past injustice. Although the opposition was not privy to the discussions that arrived at this amount, it recognises this significant step towards acknowledging the suffering endured. I trust that this apology and the settlement will bring a sense of recognition and respect to those who were treated so poorly.

MS L. METTAM (Vasse — Leader of the Liberal Party) [1.23 pm]: I also start by acknowledging Mr Mervyn Street, who led the stolen wages class action, for his extraordinary efforts in this space on behalf of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this state. I rise to speak on this matter of great significance, one that speaks to our shared history, our commitment to justice and our responsibility to right past wrongs. Our nation's history is marked by moments of triumph and progress, but it is also stained by instances of injustice and great shame. One such dark chapter is the systemic withholding of wages from Indigenous workers in Western Australia. These workers who toiled on stations and farms contributed to our state's economy, yet they were unjustly denied their rightful earnings.

The 2019 stolen wages taskforce played a pivotal role in uncovering the truth. Comprising historians, legal experts and community representatives, the taskforce examined archives, oral histories and government records. Its tireless efforts revealed the extent of the injustice inflicted on our Indigenous communities. Through its work, we learnt that the exploitation of Aboriginal labour was not an isolated incident, but a systemic practice. The taskforce documented cases of wages being withheld, misappropriated or outright stolen. It traced the threads of this injustice across decades, connecting it to policies, institutions and discriminatory practices. The stories it unearthed are heartbreaking; its report laid bare the truth. It revealed that the wages of thousands of Aboriginal workers, often meagre to begin with, were systemically siphoned away. These workers faced not only economic exploitations, but also the erasure of their dignity and agency. Today, we acknowledge the pain, loss and resilience of those affected, and we are sorry.

The stolen wages reparation scheme recognises the need for restitution and seeks to address the economic injustices of generations of Indigenous Western Australians. It is a step towards acknowledging the profound impact that the withholding of wages has had on individuals, families and entire communities. We acknowledge the courage of those who came forward to share their stories, shedding light on a painful history that many would rather forget. It is our responsibility as a society to confront this truth, learn from it and ensure that such injustices are never repeated. In implementing this scheme, we are committed to ongoing dialogue with Indigenous communities to ensure that their perspectives are respected and unique needs are addressed. True reconciliation requires a collective effort. It requires us to confront uncomfortable truths, emphasise the experiences of others and actively work towards a society in which every individual is treated with dignity and fairness.

In closing, I want to express my gratitude to all those who played a role in bringing the stolen wages reparation scheme to fruition. Formally, I would like to apologise to Mr Mervyn Street and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across this state. On behalf of the Liberal Party, we are sorry for the harm and disadvantage caused to the Aboriginal men and women across Western Australia who worked for no pay or not enough pay. This is a sorry chapter of our history and we sincerely apologise.

Question put and passed.

[Applause.]