

The Fulfilment of a Dream

Barbara Maison

“... help you in dealing with the pain and the anguish that you have handled and carried for so many years. Thank you Mr Speaker.”

The Premier of Western Australia Colin Barnett's words ended, and for a few seconds the silence in the beautiful high-ceilinged chamber was total, apart from stifled sobs - when suddenly, jubilant applause burst from both the Speaker's Gallery and overhead in the Public Gallery surrounding the floor of the chamber, seemingly never-ending, building in volume, so incredible almost fantastic!

I sat numbly in the Speaker's Gallery almost in disbelief realising it *had* happened – finally – after all these years! It was 4:03 pm on Tuesday, October 19th, 2010, history had been made and we were actually present to witness such a truly momentous occasion – the first of its kind in any state or territory of Australia, and I'm told, the world!

Slowly we looked at each other and rose to our feet as one, the murmurs and embraces started and tear-choked voices found themselves again after the almost reverent silence of the past hour as we had listened, interrupted only by intermittent applause for the wonderful words of recognition and bi-partisan support from the speakers of the Western Australian Parliament.

We moved together into the Aboriginal People's Gallery where the Parliament had arranged a delicious afternoon tea; mothers, fathers, adoptees, children, friends and relatives mingled with the politicians who joined us in our celebration. Excited chatter filled the air as the points of the apology were discussed and repeated over again in wonderment and incredulity: the precious words still ringing in our ears.

I stood back, coffee in hand, watching, listening, taking it all in – a sight I'd never imagined – seeing so many who had come to be part of this historic day, the tense anticipation gone, their faces now lit up with smiles as they mingled, as politicians listened to their stories.

Since the mid '90s in the Eastern States of Australia, some politicians had listened and sympathised, even made promises, but without support of their peers let our voices fade away – our pain remained unresolved. The dozen or so support groups that gave many the will to survive their grief, to keep on battling to be heard were tiring, mothers ageing and dying, until a visionary, Christine Cole - who had been instrumental in getting the support of NSW parliamentarian, Pat Rogan MP to call for an inquiry into adoption in that state which produced many recommendations but unfortunately were not implemented by the government – realised that an alliance of unified voices of groups COULD make difference!

Christine Cole established the Apology Alliance after former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's memorable apology to the Stolen Generation in February 2008. The Alliance consisted of support groups and individuals from all around Australia: psychiatrists, psychologists, doctors, lawyers, politicians, academics, journalists and playwrights. Most were affected by past Australian government removalist policies, many just emphatic, having heard first hand a mothers' distress and having observed the ugly fallout of a social engineering experiment that failed horribly – but all were supportive that an aging group of Australian citizens would finally see justice done and receive an apology as part of a restorative justice process. Janice Kashin, the Alliance's resident artist produced the 'Declaration of Profound Loss', published in *The Australian* in November 2008, officially acknowledging the Alliance was here to stay and a force to be reckoned with.

A West Australian group 'Mothers for Justice' whose convenors Sue, Judith and Marilyn (*mice who roared?*) gained the support of David Templeman MLA, the Labor member for Mandurah. David's empathy led him to Dr. Kim Hames, the Liberal Deputy Premier of WA, and from their collaboration grew the nucleus of an achievement that mothers, fathers, children and families separated by past practices of adoption never suspected would ever occur in their lifetime. The Alliance went into overtime, supported Mothers for Justice, and began to support the mothers push for a Western Australian apology.

Initially ALAS Queensland, gained an apology from Professor Ian Jones, of the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital, Queensland. Channel 7 was contacted to record this momentous occasion. Alliance members galvanised and alerted Channel 7 in their various States; a wild fire erupted and the news of the apology spread around Australia. A local issue had taken on national importance. After all this was the first time we had been officially acknowledged in a sincere and profound way for the government sanctioned theft of our children

After two parliamentary and Senate Inquiries, our hopes had been dashed. We never expected to live to see an apology for the past violations of our human and civil rights. Many mothers had disappeared into the background, hearts broken. They had bared their souls to three Inquiries only to be disregarded and dispensed with once again. Many mothers had said: "No more", I cannot keep speaking about his awful truth only to be ignored yet again. But, the winds of change were a blowing!

Wonderful and committed people, who supported our cause, seemed to materialise out of nowhere. Daniel Emerson, a journalist contacted Christine Cole, who furnished him with research she had been gathering since 1994. Daniel spoke with Western Australian mothers and was deeply moved by their experiences. He was angry at an injustice that had for so long been covered up, but most of all he was moved by the women themselves. He ran stories in *The West Australian*, probed politicians with his questions, and made sure Dr. Kim Hames honoured his promised apology.

At first, it was a whisper, then a possibility – mothers all over Australia held their collective breath in anticipation - then it became a promise. In August 2010, the West Australian government announced that an official parliamentary apology would be made acknowledging that past governments and their agencies had acted unlawfully, unjustly and inhumanely, in separating mothers from their babies!

A certainty, that at least one state government in Australia - the very first, and possibly world-wide in a society where the practice of systematically removing babies from their unsupported mothers was common - would courageously say 'sorry'. Then the Greens came on board. A new party, no skeletons in their cupboard, they called what happened to us what it was: state sanctioned baby theft. David Templeman MP, the ardent supporter of Sue, this principled man who will go down in history as being the driving force behind the first apology given by any State; to mothers who had been robbed of their babies.

SORRY: A small word, with sincerity, a precious glorious word!

The day's events had started around midday on the front steps of Parliament House where groups of women gathered to introduce themselves to the names and voices, previously only known to each other on the internet or phone.

Television crews arrived with cameras, soundmen, and reporters recording an interview with Sue, strongly supported by her daughters, together with her two close friends and allies who had worked so hard, for so long to bring this day to fruition. Then they filmed two pairs of reunited mothers and daughters, hugging, holding each other under the colonnade at the front of Parliament House: a precious memento for them.

At 1:00 pm, we walked to a Rotunda in the park behind Parliament House. The welcoming West Australian groups, Jigsaw and ARMs, greeted us with baskets of rosemary, banners and balloons. People mingled to find familiar faces and speak their names, relaxed in identifying with the camaraderie of that cruel, unique bond, only fully comprehended by those who have experienced our particular pain and grief; the separation from loved ones, that merciless "not knowing" grief.

From there we moved together to pause in the Sunken Garden in the Parliament House grounds, for a welcome and speeches by an adoptee and two mothers, with a call for remembrance to those mothers and children who could not join us, for reasons of distance and/or death. Flowers, tiny bouquets and significant items were placed in the gardens, balloons were released and flew freely, like a giant butterfly soaring up into the blue sky in memory of our lost children, finalised this part of our journey in the search for healing.

As we entered the chamber and galleries the mood was quiet and full of anticipation as we sat listening to the remainder of question time, waiting almost in disbelief, for this wondrous moment to arrive. Many more witnesses

had attended than anticipated, so were seated in the Aboriginal People's meeting room which had a TV screen to view the Apology.

Screens positioned in the Speakers' Gallery enabled us to sit enthralled, absorbing every word of the speeches and also to view the faces of the parliamentarians from both sides of the house, who were united in speaking those all-important, much longed-for words of acknowledgement and recognition of our need for healing.

As many interstate venues ageing mothers who wished to attend but for various reasons could not, due to ill health or been unable to afford the luxury of travel, arrangements were made to view this historic event via web-mail streaming - a wondrous means of being able to be involved and joined through cyberspace despite being thousands of kilometres from their sisters-in-grief.

Congratulations, Western Australia!

Congratulations, Dr. Kim Hames and David Templeman, MLA, supported by Premier Colin Barnett, for standing up to the opposition ingrained in Australian society to recognise publicly the grief suffered by all participants of our stolen generation.

The very first state or territory in Australia to admit that *'the previous parliaments and governments were directly responsible for the application of processes that harshly and cruelly impacted on unmarried mothers whose children were stolen for adoption.'*

Let us hope that this will create a precedent so that all states and territories together with the Federal Government of Australia will follow suit. That they will also admit the truth, so necessary for us as mothers, and that our children know, *'we did **not** give our much-wanted, much-loved and so inconsolably-grieved-for babies so carelessly away!'*

Finally, congratulations to all who have supported the dream - your long hard, often emotionally draining efforts made this very precious day come true - one I never ever dreamed would eventuate in my lifetime, where I could sit in such exalted surroundings and hear those precious words now sealed in my soul forever.

The dark clouds have lifted - my bereft heart is lighter today!

Thank you all.

Christine Cole concludes this four part compilation:

West Australian has led the way, hundreds of women travelled from all over Australia to hear those very precious words: "I am sorry". I received lots of emails from mothers and their adult children who had taken the journey, and many expressed similar sentiments: "I feel like a great weight has been lifted from my shoulders"; "I feel a part of the broader Australian community, I don't feel so alone"; "I don't feel that awful sense of disconnection, I feel like someone cares, I haven't felt like that for years."

Why is the act of contrition so important? If one has been a victim of trauma they also carry shame, guilt and blame. It is a very heavy load to carry and one that can only be alleviated if the perpetrator takes responsibility for the damage they have inflicted on the victim. The only way we as traumatised individuals can truly move on and begin our healing process is when there is a sincere acknowledgment that a wrong has been done and a genuine apology given. An apology is a gift, a gift to the recipient as well as the giver. It allows both to move forward. It gives one the opportunity to say "I am deeply and sincerely sorry." It gives the one injured the opportunity if they so choose to say "I forgive you". Prime Minister Rudd so eloquently apologised to the Indigenous stolen generation, for the brutal separation of children from their mothers, fathers and families. 17% of the Indigenous stolen generation were taken from their mothers from the same hospitals, by the same people, under the same laws as we had our children stolen. There is a white stolen generation in Australia, it needs to be acknowledged and apologised for; we were Australia's most vulnerable citizens: pregnant women, mothers and infants but instead of being offered special protection we were left at the mercy of a rapacious adoption industry that was initiated and promoted by the Federal government and its practices and policies enacted via state run institutions, whether religious, or non-religious. Laws were enacted that, rather than protect our rights, eliminated them. Some say why should we apologise for something that happened years ago and for which I wasn't a part? But neither did you intervene and stop it, and if a country is going to take credit for its past glories it must be mature enough to take collective responsibility for its past injustices as *"every time history repeats itself, the price of the lesson goes up."* (Anonymous)