

Australia's supposed Aboriginal 'stolen generation'

By Dallas Scott, 5 August

I will admit that I cringe when I hear the words "Stolen Generations". It makes me uncomfortable, because like most of the issues surrounding Aboriginal affairs, what I have to say will affect those who are close to me, and not always in a positive way. Offence can be taken in just a few words, and although I am loathe to cause any harm to those I love, it has become a choice between a moment of possible offence, vs a much greater harm and problem we need to face. Unlike most of the topics that come up with regard to what we should be ashamed about when it comes to Aboriginal affairs – domestic violence, drug or alcohol addiction, imprisonment, poverty, racism, homelessness – I don't know anybody that qualifies as 'stolen', nor am I related to anybody who is, yet I am familiar with the term, and know people that use it to describe their own situations.

For anybody who wonders, I want to clarify my understanding of the term 'stolen generation' for you. The "Stolen Generation", in simplified terms, refers to a policy of removals of Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal children from their families and cultures, to be raised in white society as a means of eventually 'breeding out the Aboriginal'. At first, it was claimed to be a 'White Australia' policy, but then after the public failure of several court cases, justification for the claim – despite the lack of legal success to back it up – came by widening the narrative a little more, to explain how a law that did not exist was actually a secret conspiracy to falsify tales of neglect, and carry out their diabolical plan with the full support of the legal system instead.

'I was not stolen'

As those who have read my blog before would know, I was raised in foster care, by parents who were not Aboriginal and had white skin. I was not stolen, but instead I was given with open arms by some of my relatives to the Mum and Dad who raised me. They raised lots of foster kids, some who even had a non-Aboriginal parent and were much lighter-skinned, but they stole none of them. Instead, the phone would normally ring, often in the middle of the night, with a desperate parent on one end begging for Mums help and the next day we would have a new family member. Sometimes for a week, other times a few months, sometimes years.

Where the 'stolen generations' story becomes a dangerous narrative, is when you have those who use its inability to be debated, due to the highly sensitive matter of the subject, as a means to gain sympathy for those people who should otherwise be encouraged to get help and face the demons of their past. From my own personal experience, of those who have claimed to be stolen, but instead are easing their need for sympathy for their suffering with a label instead, going along for the ride is not a positive experience. While the label might earn you quiet respect, and immediately paralyse most people into asking no questions and instead letting you share as much or as little as you like about your background, the longer you avoid your real story – whether that be in order not to have to face some hard truths, or ask some harder questions of yourself – things aren't going to get better for you. Having a name for your pain means nothing if it's a misdiagnosis.

I know how frightened she was of being accepted

I cannot imagine how difficult it would be to have been completely abandoned, but I do know what it is like to be denied parts of your history. My biological mother chose to share little of herself and her history, leaving me with gaps that I have spent years trying to fill - but am yet to feel like I've succeeded at accomplishing. I've walked arm in arm with my biological sister as she made her first tentative returns to Lake Tyers. I know how frightened she was of being accepted, and we sat for many nights where I repeatedly reassured her not to be afraid, that so many people could not wait to see her and just wanted her in their presence again, but until she had seen it for herself, her apprehension could not be eased by my words alone. I know this because I feel this way about going to Wallaga Lake - where my mothers family are from - and where I have been only as a very small child.

This is the downside to Adoption and Foster Care for some kids, regardless of skin colour. Reconnecting can be difficult, heartbreaking, or wonderful - there is just no guarantee of which outcome you're going to get, and the fear of rejection can be so overwhelming for some that it takes them years to even try. When the biological parent passes away before the answers can be had, it is a horrible emptiness and regret that cannot be undone, and makes the journey to find resolve seem that much more difficult and insurmountable. We should provide support and counselling to any people who are affected by these issues, rather than funding a label or narrative that is failing to deal with the deeper issues that are underlying these claims.

Blaming the white man, or the government

Blaming the white man, or the government for taking your kids away is easier for some of my relatives because they can be supported by others for being a victim, yet I am starting to realise that this is having a terrible cost to the younger generations, as they fall prey to the same answer of covering the pain and suffering we won't or don't talk about and resolve with honesty, by easing their confusion or emptiness with alcohol or drugs. We've done ourselves no favours by trading our need for sympathy for that sense of loss or displacement by letting people class us with a label that will explain away our sadness or dysfunction or failures, to avoid talking about the things that are painful and causing us to repeat that pattern again and again. The problem is, that sympathy is based on a lie, and the real sympathy, understanding and help they need never comes because the trade off for that comfort of a label that explains all your ills without having to look deeper is the eventual realisation that the questions never go away.

Parents who surrender their children face a suffering all their own. Since becoming a father myself, I am more in awe of what my biological father did for me, and am thankful that he didn't pass away before I got to tell him just how much I appreciated how hard it must have been for him to give us away to give us a better life. I hope never to be in a situation where my life has spun out of control to the point where I have to hand my children to someone more stable than myself to care for them. But if I had to, I would. I love them too much to have them suffer along with me when there are options for a better life for them.

I would not be surprised to learn that my biological mother would have considered us 'stolen' from her at some point in her life. From where she stood, it would have seemed the most adequate description of what she was going through during that time. She did not get a say in where we lived, in fact, was quite vocally opposed in the few small encounters we had during my childhood, and we grew up without a connection to her heritage and culture. I can only hope that she didn't go along with the narrative though, because it wouldn't be true, and it wouldn't have allowed the real culprits for her suffering to wear the blame.

Who were those culprits?

Who were those culprits? Not a secret conspiracy, but instead a culture that valued the opinions of one family over another, over those of the woman who gave birth to us and held us in our arms when we arrived into the world - when it came to making decisions about their children. A society that was less tolerant, less understanding, and less welcoming of Aboriginal people back then, that resulted in her isolation and allowed her own prejudices against white people to be forever formed and one day drive a wedge between us and cause our estrangement. It was painful for her, and it must have been awful, and I have no doubt that her suffering led to her struggles with alcohol. What I can't make excuses for anymore, is that for decades her choice to slowly kill herself with grog was allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged, excused by those who wanted to ease her suffering with an easy answer that seemed to make her happy but ultimately, didn't help her into anything more than an early grave. Heavy drinking devastated her life, and resulted in her enduring her final years spent missing a limb and pushed from place to place in a wheelchair as a result of the diabetes that ravaged her body. It could have been different, and if we don't focus on making sure it isn't for those who are still with us and suffering, then we're going to continue the cycle of broken hearts, misplaced hate, and never moving forward and closing the gaps that count.

I am also sad that my father didn't get the help he needed. Those who did encourage him to do so were shouted down and often ignored, as others around him enabled him and made excuses for him too. They should have to wear some of the guilt and regret that he felt, for they helped to directly cause it by their actions. Sad stories don't need a blame narrative, they need to be dissected, understood and the right help found for the people who are suffering.

I apologise for all the times I have stood silent and let the narrative go unchallenged in my own circles. I've helped nobody by standing by and letting people focus on finding someone to blame, rather than healing and moving forward.