



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

MOTIONS

National Apology for Forced Adoptions

SPEECH

Tuesday, 14 May 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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Questioner
Speaker Milne, Sen Christine

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Senator MILNE (Tasmania—Leader of the Australian Greens) (12:33): I rise today to offer my profound and wholehearted support for this apology to everyone who experienced or was affected in any way by the practice of forced adoption in Australia. That includes, of course, the mothers and fathers, the families who were affected, the children and the siblings. It was a terrible period in Australian history when people who so badly wanted their child and wanted to keep their child were subjected to practices that led to them being forced to give up their children.

It is rare in parliamentary life that you can be part of an occasion which is not only dignified but profoundly important and a day that is shared by everyone across the whole political spectrum. I thought the day that we were all in the Great Hall with so many people gathered from around Australia to hear the apology being offered by the Prime Minister and on behalf of the parliament was an incredibly special occasion to be part of. I was reminded that in my own political career there have only been two other occasions when I could say the same thing. One was in Tasmania when the Tasmanian parliament gave an apology to the stolen generations, and there was the same at the federal parliament when Prime Minister Rudd was in power—and then there was this apology to people affected by forced adoption.

I am really disappointed that the day was marred by the politics of the hour, when this was such an occasion for so many people and meant so much to families and to people who had suffered for generations. I just want to say to everybody who came that, as hard as it might be to put aside the politics of the day, the parliament genuinely did come together to apologise and does stand together in apology, and we do stand together to say that not only do we offer this apology but we are all behind the measures that have been taken to assist people who have been affected and who, to this day, are struggling to come to terms with the impacts of what occurred then.

I also wanted to stand today and thank my colleague Senator Rachel Siewert for the incredible commitment she demonstrated in bringing this issue to the parliament, in pursuing it in the Senate on several occasions, in securing the inquiry and in the work that she and her fellow senators on the inquiry put into what was really comprehensive listening across Australia,

as people came forward to tell their stories. I also congratulate the people who did have the courage to come forward and speak, because it was not an easy thing to do. It was incredibly brave for people to be able, sometimes for the first time in decades, to talk about the awful experience that they had not only had but had had to live with ever since.

As someone who was growing up in the late fifties and sixties in Australia, I am very, very well aware of the level of pressure that was put on young women who became pregnant, of the shame that was transferred to them and of the sense of their being made to feel as if they were in some way to be punished for the fact that they were pregnant and unmarried. They were made to feel as if it were in the best interests of the baby to be taken away when that baby was so wanted by their young mother. I grew up in that era of shame being transferred and of fear of retribution in the community. Young women went away, no questions asked, and when they came back they were told never to mention it again. People chose not to speak about it again. It was like a shameful episode in someone's life. That has carried on through the generations in many families.

I think it is so good that at last this period has had a light shone upon it and that people have been given an opportunity to talk about just how it has impacted their lives. It is fantastic that they have been able to say to the children who they were forced to give away that they never wanted to give them away, that they loved them throughout, that they loved them from the day they were born and they loved them throughout their lives. That is such an important thing, because so many adoptees were told that their mothers had not wanted them, so these young people were growing up with this idea that they were given away. This is an opportunity for mothers to say, 'I always wanted you,' and that makes so much difference in the way that people will be able to at least try to come to terms with and deal with the experience.

I want to congratulate everyone concerned. As I said, it is not often in a parliamentary career that you can stand up and feel really proud of the efforts of your colleagues in addressing an issue that needed to be addressed, an issue that was a longstanding wound in the soul of the nation. It is particularly good as a female member of parliament to feel that, of those issues which have been long ignored, this one has now been

brought forward and given the kind of consideration and serious thought and compassion that led to such a day as we had in the Great Hall, where we all felt that, at last, justice was being done and being seen to be done, with the opportunity to move forward for all of those people directly and indirectly affected. In fact, the whole community has been affected, because we have all been impacted by the fact that this practice went on around us in our community, and it has taken till now to name it for what it was and to change the practices and offer the support that is necessary for people who have been impacted.

I conclude by saying that the Greens, as a party, one and all, profoundly and wholeheartedly support the apology to people who experienced or were affected by forced adoption.

Question agreed to.