

National Apology for Forced Adoptions

[Mr DREYFUS](#) (Isaacs—Attorney-General and Minister for Emergency Management) (12:44): by leave—I move:

That the House support the apology given earlier today by the Prime Minister to people affected by forced adoption and removal policies and practices in the following terms:

Today, this Parliament, on behalf of the Australian people, takes responsibility and apologises for the policies and practices that forced the separation of mothers from their babies, which created a lifelong legacy of pain and suffering.

We acknowledge the profound effects of these policies and practices on fathers.

And we recognise the hurt these actions caused to brothers and sisters, grandparents, partners and extended family members.

We deplore the shameful practices that denied you, the mothers, your fundamental rights and responsibilities to love and care for your children. You were not legally or socially acknowledged as their mothers. And you were yourselves deprived of care and support.

To you, the mothers who were betrayed by a system that gave you no choice and subjected you to manipulation, mistreatment and malpractice, we apologise.

We say sorry to you, the mothers who were denied knowledge of your rights, which meant you could not provide informed consent. You were given false assurances. You were forced to endure the coercion and brutality of practices that were unethical, dishonest and in many cases illegal.

We know you have suffered enduring effects from these practices forced upon you by others. For the loss, the grief, the disempowerment, the stigmatisation and the guilt, we say sorry.

To each of you who were adopted or removed, who were led to believe your mother had rejected you and who were denied the opportunity to grow up with your family and community of origin and to connect with your culture, we say sorry.

We apologise to the sons and daughters who grew up not knowing how much you were wanted and loved.

We acknowledge that many of you still experience a constant struggle with identity, uncertainty and loss, and feel a persistent tension between loyalty to one family and yearning for another.

To you, the fathers, who were excluded from the lives of your children and deprived of the dignity of recognition on your children's birth records, we say sorry. We acknowledge your loss and grief.

We recognise that the consequences of forced adoption practices continue to resonate through many, many lives. To you, the siblings, grandparents, partners and other family members

who have shared in the pain and suffering of your loved ones or who were unable to share their lives, we say sorry.

Many are still grieving. Some families will be lost to one another forever. To those of you who face the difficulties of reconnecting with family and establishing on-going relationships, we say sorry.

We offer this apology in the hope that it will assist your healing and in order to shine a light on a dark period of our nation's history.

To those who have fought for the truth to be heard, we hear you now. We acknowledge that many of you have suffered in silence for far too long.

We are saddened that many others are no longer here to share this moment. In particular, we remember those affected by these practices who took their own lives. Our profound sympathies go to their families.

To redress the shameful mistakes of the past, we are committed to ensuring that all those affected get the help they need, including access to specialist counselling services and support, the ability to find the truth in freely available records and assistance in reconnecting with lost family.

We resolve, as a nation, to do all in our power to make sure these practices are never repeated. In facing future challenges, we will remember the lessons of family separation. Our focus will be on protecting the fundamental rights of children and on the importance of the child's right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.

With profound sadness and remorse, we offer you all our unreserved apology.

We reflect on these words spoken by the Prime Minister earlier today and we come together as a nation to acknowledge and apologise for the pain and suffering experienced by so many in our community as a result of forced adoption and removal policies and practices. As we acknowledge the insensitivities of these practices, we also ensure that the experiences of those affected are committed to the national record.

There are many people who have worked tirelessly to bring us here today. The Prime Minister acknowledged some of these people this morning. In particular, I would like to recognise the work of the chair, Senator Siewert, and members of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee for the development of their report into the Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices. It was this report which confirmed the need for the Australian government to acknowledge and apologise for the suffering of all those involved.

I would also like to recognise the hard work done by the chair, Professor Nahum Mushin, and the members of the Forced Adoptions Apology Reference Group in their development of the apology wording and ongoing advice in preparations for today's event. The reference group had an important and challenging task and I thank them for their efforts.

Most importantly, I would like to acknowledge all of those affected by forced adoption and removal policies and practices who have gathered in parliament today. I admire the courage

of those who have shared their stories and experiences. Your determination and advocacy has culminated in today's events and given others the courage to come forward.

Earlier today, the Prime Minister emphasised the ongoing trauma and suffering experienced by many parents whose children were forcibly removed and by those children, now adults, who were separated from their families. In reflecting on these stories, we recognise the diversity of people's experiences and the different paths their lives have taken.

Mothers have recalled the shame, stigma and social isolation inflicted upon them and the grossly unethical behaviour of many professionals whose care they were under. Many were not able to touch or hold their babies. Some had pillows placed over their heads during birth to prevent them from even glimpsing their baby. Many provided consent under duress and some did not give consent at all. Many continue to experience trauma as a result of these very experiences. It is difficult to comprehend the enormity of your struggles.

In highlighting your experiences today, we hope that we can help reduce some of your pain. Adoptees have relayed their constant struggles with identity. Many have told of their feelings of abandonment and some have only recently discovered their truths. We recognise that, for many, your birth certificates were changed and current laws have made it difficult to reconnect with your families of origin. I regret the pain these barriers have caused.

I know that many extended family members have struggled to understand the experiences of their loved ones affected by these practices. The love and commitment you have provided to this day has not gone unnoticed. I offer my thanks to those who have shared in the life journeys of their loved ones. Understandably, these experiences have had lasting effects, many of which have been misunderstood, and have also impacted the lives of fathers, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins and other family members.

It is time that we as a country, as a parliament and as a government take responsibility for these terrible wrongs and injustices. This is why today as a nation we are saying sorry.

Many people have told us that words alone are not enough and that an apology is only effective in the context of other actions. This was made clear in the Senate committee report, where it states:

“Every government and institution has a responsibility to match the words of apologies with appropriate actions.

We understand that concrete measures that accompany an apology are central to ensuring the apology is meaningful and assists people in their healing. Later today, the Australian government will table its response to the Senate committee report in the Senate. It announces an investment of \$11.5 million over the next four years for concrete measures to assist those affected by forced adoption practices. Together with the work of the states and territories, this will provide a national framework of counselling and support services to address the key recommendations of the Senate committee report.

The package announced today will ensure that a range of effective services are available to mothers, fathers and adopted people, on the understanding that people affected by adoption are individuals with different needs. Five million dollars has been allocated to improve access to specialist support services, peer and professional counselling, and records-tracing support

for those affected by forced adoptions. A further \$5 million will provide for the development of guidelines and training materials for mental health professionals to assist in the diagnosis, treatment and care of those affected by forced adoption practices, and increase the capacity for general practitioners to refer those affected to mental health professionals who deliver focused psychological services.

Many people have acknowledged that the content of any apology is only part of the story. The Senate committee report reiterated this by stating that an effective apology must be 'widely heard and understood' to ensure greater public awareness of these practices. In response, \$1.5 million has been provided to the National Archives of Australia to record the experiences of those affected by forced adoption and to increase awareness and understanding of these experiences in the community. The Australian government will also continue discussions with the state and territory governments to improve access to and amendment of adoption and birth records. These are positive steps which demonstrate the Australian government's commitment to redressing its mistakes and providing specialised support and assistance to those who seek it.

Today we have reflected on the stories and experiences of those affected by forced adoption and removal policies and practices. We hope that today's events will assist families to heal and signify a day of remembrance to acknowledge this shameful part of our history.

On behalf of our nation, we offer you our unreserved apology for the grief and pain these practices have caused and vow to ensure these practices are never repeated. I understand that today will mark the beginning of a journey for many of those affected by these practices; I hope that it will also begin the journey for Australia as a nation.

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[Mr IRONS](#) (Swan) (12:58): On behalf of the Leader of the Opposition and the coalition, I rise to respond to the Attorney-General's motion. I heartily endorse his words and sentiments, and acknowledge the commitment by this government of the \$11.5 million to assist people in their journeys from this time forward.

Today we saw the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition deliver formal statements of apology, on behalf of the nation, to the parents and children who suffered harm when those children were forcibly removed and separated from their parents. Since my election in 2007, this is the third apology delivered on behalf of this nation to people who have suffered under a system that we could all say would not be acceptable in today's society.

I want to start by paying tribute to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition for the warm-hearted sentiments they expressed in the Great Hall this morning. For me, personally, it is a privilege to be able to respond on behalf of the coalition—and, after this morning's experience in the Great Hall, I feel greatly humbled to be responding on behalf of the coalition. To those who have been affected by these policies, you deserve nothing other than an unequivocal and formal apology in this place, and I hope many of you will be happy and relieved this day has finally come. This day is about you.

This apology, along with the apologies to the stolen generation in 2008 and the forgotten Australians in 2009, provides a substantial window into the humanity of this parliament. All members in this place know that we work in an adversarial environment, and these three

apologies, which have dealt with some of the most misguided, shameful and regrettable actions of our 20th century social directions policies and programs, enable us to open our hearts and minds to the suffering and experiences of many people in our Australian population.

For those people who have lived the experience of forced removal and the secrecy that surrounded the process and outcomes, you now have had the opportunity of coming out into the open with your experience and this gives legitimacy to what happened to the mothers, fathers and their children. No longer do you have to feel as though you have a secret that will not be believed. This parliament is recognising that, and that is our message to you today. I can only begin to imagine what the parents of the children removed may have felt. The evidence given in the Senate report in 2012 on the forced adoption policies and practices gives us an intimate insight into those experiences.

I would like to relay to the House my own personal experiences that may assist other members understand in some small way the issues and understand the feelings that the parents and children of forced adoption felt and feel. I know that this House has people from many varying backgrounds, and these life experiences contribute to our ability to understand the emotions and trauma of people who have been through the forced adoption process. I am aware that at least one person in this chamber is an adoptee and, as I have stated before, I was a ward of the state. The feeling of disconnection from my family left a void in my life that was hard to explain and I can only guess that any child who had been removed and was aware they had been removed must have had similar feelings.

As a six-month-old baby, I along with two of my siblings was removed from my family due to financial circumstances. We went to stay in institutions. At that point, I was separated from my other two siblings. Growing up in the Irons household, I often thought about my family—'Where were they? What did they look like? Was I the same as them? How many of them were there?' I used to walk into shopping centres or football games and wonder if my brothers or sisters might also be in the same place I was and how close they might be. But I knew I would not know them even if I bumped into them.

Speaking to my mother about these issues years later, she spoke to me of the pain and the sorrow and feelings of hopelessness she experienced after having four children taken away from her. I mentioned earlier that three children were removed, but the next child after me, Richard, was actually adopted out and spent his whole life in a family growing up with two adoptive siblings who were significantly older and thinking he was just a late addition to that family.

When his adoptive mother passed away in 2011, Richard by then knew he had been adopted and, at the tender age of 51, sought out his original birth certificate and then discovered he had nine siblings. So in early 2012 I met my brother for the first time. He was 51 and I, along with our older brother Robert, were the first contact he had had with his family since he had been adopted. Richard—or Rick, as he prefers to be known—felt an enormous range of emotions prior to meeting us, and then his world changed on the day he met with us. Rick had the characteristics I have seen in many of my fellow forgotten Australians, ranging from insecurity to socially inhibited interactions that can only come from the type of experiences they have been dealt. It was a surreal feeling to be sitting there with two brothers who looked similar when none of us had the same surnames. We all had the same smart alec sense of humour and we shared not only physical similarities but similar idiosyncrasies. I wonder

what it would have been like to grow up together. Should I see this as lost years or should I approach it from the angle that we still have many good years to share in the future? I also wonder what it would have been like to grow up in a family of 10 children and what could have been.

Are these the thoughts or similar of people who have been through the forced adoption process? From the evidence given to the Senate inquiry, the shroud of secrecy that surrounded the process young mothers went through and the lifetime of bitterness and feeling of disconnection would have been a continual mental blight on their lives.

Anyone who has ever felt they have let their children down by not being able to attend a school play or a game of sport will know that in itself that one experience can play with your emotions for days. Can we even begin to imagine what it must feel like to carry that with you your whole life? I know my wife, Cheryle, who lost her daughter Lauren at the age of 10, carries with her the nagging doubts about whether she did enough to save her child. For those mothers who had their children forcibly removed, I am sure the thoughts 'Did I fight hard enough?' or 'Could I have changed things and kept my child?' must continually be with them daily in their lives. Well, the answer is you had no choice, and for that this parliament has apologised to you today.

In the Senate report, evidence was given about forced removal, and I would like to quote from one of the many pieces of evidence as an example. The evidence was from an unnamed witness who was in the Royal Women's Hospital in 1959:

On the sixth day a nurse came to my bed and told me that someone wanted to talk to me in a nearby room. I went to this room and I now realise the person in it was a social worker. She started talking to me about my baby son. I can't remember what she said to me except these words; 'I should not have been breast feeding him and I had no rights to him.'

I was extremely shocked, I believed that he was mine. She then placed in front of me some papers and told me to sign them: they were adoption papers.

Numbly I signed them.

As I was in complete shock I returned to my bed immediately, my baby was taken away and a nurse bound my breasts tightly and painfully to dry up my baby's milk.

I never saw my baby again.

Can we as a parliament or as individuals even begin to imagine what that must feel like? Many young women were traumatised by the harsh treatment they received under these policies. I am sure all in this place will agree the delivery of a national apology for forced adoption was well overdue.

The Senate report says that forced adoption affected not only mothers who were compelled to have their children adopted but also fathers, husbands, subsequent children, the adopted people themselves and their adoptive families. Some adopted people indicated in their submissions that their adoptive parents cared for them very well, and I quote from a witness:

I wish to state right here and now that I categorically feel no hatred or bitterness towards my birth or first adoptive families!!!!

Most adopted people who made submissions did not have positive experiences with their adoptive parents, or at school, and that is why this apology needs to deal with not only the parents who lost their children but also those who were actually removed and all the other people who were affected by these removals. Again I quote personal experience that my older brother Robert relayed to me when I met him later in life. He said he came home from school and his three siblings were gone. He did not know where they had gone and if he would ever see them again, and this had an enormous effect on him.

Approximately 150,000 to 250,000 babies of unwed and mostly teenage mothers were adopted by childless married couples from the 1950s until the mid-seventies in Australia. It is important that today we as a parliament have acknowledged the pain and suffering separated parents and their children experienced. We as a parliament have apologised, and I recognise that we can never, ever make up for the trauma, the pain of loss and the disconnection and separation caused by the forced adoption process you went through. Our apology is to recognise that pain, and hopefully for many you can now move into a phase of your lives that sees you and your families start to heal. We have heard the Prime Minister commit to funding mental health services, and that is a good thing. I hope those funds find their way to those services that will assist you.

In a nation like ours, where our expectation is that we nurture, care for and love our children and provide them with the security of a safe, happy life in their formative years, we have seen many examples of that not happening. We have seen the abuse and torture visited upon institutionalised children that we now have a royal commission into. Today in the Great Hall we heard the recognition of and apology for the forced adoption policies of the 1950s through to the 1970s. In this place, along with state governments, we are charged with the responsibility of implementing policies that meet the expectations of child care throughout this country. We must remain vigilant and be prepared to action the wrongs and abuse we become aware of immediately and not decades later. If we do not, we have failed those who are here today who have been through that process and we will fail our children in the future—if we are not vigilant.

I support this motion. In closing, I would like to say to all the people who have been harmed by the forced adoption process and to those that have made the journey today: we have heard you, we believe you and we feel for you. I hope today's formal apology, even if only in a small way, can contribute to lighten the burdens of your past.

Honourable members: Hear, hear!

Debate adjourned.