

National Apology for Forced Adoptions

[Senator CONROY](#) (Victoria—Leader of the Government in the Senate, Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Digital Productivity) (12:30): I move:

That the Senate support the apology given on this day by the Prime Minister, on behalf of the nation, 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.

With those words the Prime Minister this morning apologised on behalf of the nation to those people affected by forced adoption and removal policies and practices. The Prime Minister's address was followed by a speech from the Leader of the Opposition in support of the apology.

Let me begin by acknowledging the hundreds of people who have travelled to Parliament House today to witness our national leaders deliver an apology that has been a long time coming. Thank you for your presence today. I am sure that I speak on behalf of all senators when I express my sincere hope that today's apology, coupled with the concrete measures announced by the Prime Minister this morning, will go some way to healing the hurt and distress caused by the forcible separation of parents from their children.

A motion of apology will also be moved by our colleagues in the House of Representatives today. It is in the Senate, however, that the issue of forced adoptions has particular resonance. The catalyst for today's apology was the Senate Community Affairs References Committee report into the Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices. I acknowledge the hard work of that committee's members and congratulate them for what they have been able to achieve for those whose stories they chronicled in the report.

The wealth of evidence submitted to the committee can leave no doubt that many were treated appallingly. Mothers were not informed of their rights, did not provide informed consent and were given false assurances, denied care and support, and endured pressure, mistreatment and coercion. Mothers were left feeling stigmatised and disempowered. The committee rightly concluded that a national apology was a necessary and significant first step in the healing process for those affected. Words alone, however, are not enough.

The government recognises the importance of concrete measures to accompany the national apology as part of a national framework to address the consequences of forced adoption. As announced by the Prime Minister this morning, the government's response includes \$11.5 million over the next four years for concrete measures to ensure that those affected by forced adoption practices have access to effective support and counselling services. These measures are more fully outlined in the government's response to the Senate committee.

For now, let me echo the sentiments expressed by the Prime Minister this morning in offering an unreserved apology to those affected by forced adoption and removal policies and practices. I commend the motion to the Senate.

[Senator ABETZ](#) (Tasmania—Leader of the Opposition in the Senate) (12:37): In the life of any great nation, it is appropriate to pause and reflect and ask: are there things in the past we could have done better? Are there things we should have done better? Are there things we should not have done at all? A great nation, while celebrating its overwhelming achievements, should also find within its soul and conscience the capacity to ask the tough questions and reflect. Australia, being the great nation that she is, with a record second-to-none as a country of hope, reward and opportunity, nevertheless does not have an unblemished record. We have left people behind, and shamelessly so. And it is in recognition of that realisation that the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition made their heartfelt statements earlier today in the Great Hall: statements of apology on behalf of our nation for forced adoptions.

Let me recognise that people of good will can make errors and misjudgements. The most sincere can get it wrong. In recognising that to be the case, we can apologise to those affected by the errors and misjudgements of others without demonising all those that made those errors and misjudgements. I have no doubt that this generation of public policy makers in this place may well be similarly judged as making errors and misjudgements with the benefit of decades of reflection and hindsight. But let me be very clear: there is never an excuse to lie, to deceive, to bully or to coerce with harsh, unfeeling judgements, as occurred with the forced adoption policies.

Having reflected as I have, let it be in no way misunderstood as diminishing the impact, the consequences, the lifelong impact and the lifelong consequences on the parents, their children and their extended families. The impact of forced adoption is something that is hard to fathom by one who had the blessing of their parents throughout the full formative years of their life. Many who have not been as fortunate have been gracious and open by sharing their innermost private thoughts with me. I recall at university a mate who had his son adopted out without having a say and without acknowledgement on the birth certificate.

I also recall one constituent a number of years ago who was handed out at birth—and I use that term advisedly. You see, she was never even given a birth certificate and was literally handed out to a couple to rear. Her whole life had been one of uncertainty as to her

background. There were the hints, the suspicions and the whispers as to what actually occurred that never resolved. My involvement began when this lady came to my office seeking proof and confirmation that she was an Australian citizen. You see, absent a birth certificate she could not get a passport. She had been fobbed off and treated shabbily by institution after institution—and, might I add, government institutions—in this and the last decade. No help was proffered. It was all too difficult. One of the things that I am extremely thankful for in my parliamentary life is that I was able to assist this person to undertake the research and collection of documentation that allowed her to obtain a certificate of Australian citizenship. As it happens, that certificate bears the signature of a senator who will be talking to us as a senator for the last time in a few hours. Senator Evans will never know how that certificate that he issued as Minister for Immigration and Citizenship changed this lady's life. The tears of joy when I presented the certificate made up for all the frustrations and the dead ends that the lady and I ended up in during our search of the bureaucratic maze. But this lady should not have had to wait for 40 years to get that simple official recognition that she was an Australian.

I am sure that all colleagues will have their own interactions to share, be they personal or professional, about the impact of the adoption culture of a time now, thankfully, in the past. I recall one client, back in the days of my legal practice, with whom we pursued the issue of whether the little coffin she was given to bury all those decades earlier actually contained the child she was told had died at birth. Long story short: there were no remains. She had been deceived, she had been lied to, she had been broken.

One of my personal staff gave me this brief statement which I will read out in full:

My brother and sister and I were all adopted as babies by our adoptive parents a year apart in Tasmania in the 1950s.

Mum and Dad never hid this from the three of us.

I can't recall when it was that Mum and Dad took me aside and told me but it seems as if I have known that I was an adopted child for as long as I can recall.

I do remember my Mum telling me that on the day she and Dad went to the hospital, there were four or five other baby boys there but they chose me.

For that I will always be grateful. I do sometimes wonder what ever happened to the others that were there on that day.

As my Dad always used to say to the three of us on those long driving holidays we'd take as a family together, 'Never forget, kids, we are a family and what do families do?' In chorus the three of us would reply, 'We stick together like glue.'

I guess it's for this reason that despite Mum and Dad having now passed away I have, out of great respect for my adoptive parents and the chance at life that they gave me, never attempted to try to discover my true identity.

Not that I don't think about it every day and will do for the rest of my life.

So there is no doubt that on this very, very dark cloud in our history there is the odd trace of a silver lining in those in society who gave these young Australians a real chance at and in life. But it will never compensate for the dislocation, the question of what may have been, whether there are siblings and all the other questions and uncertainties—all of which must impact heavily, manifesting in as many different ways as there were parents, children and extended family members.

There are countless stories of suffering and unbearable loss. But let us remember that these stories are not just stories; they are in fact real, actually lived out, accounts by individuals, who may be in or from our family, our workplace, our community organisation or sports club. The sense of loss for the mothers and fathers and the children is hard to imagine: the sense of abandonment; the sense of not belonging; the sense of being isolated; walking down the street wondering whether you had unknowingly passed your mother, father, child or sibling. Might I say, all of that has been excellently captured and compiled in the report of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee, on which the coalition had Senators Boyce and McKenzie.

Senator McKenzie will speak later on the coalition's behalf and in greater detail about the report. Suffice for me to say—I am sure on behalf of all senators—to all members of that committee: a very big thank you. You did yourselves proud as senators; you did the Senate committee system proud; and, yes, hard as it is for me to say, a Greens senator did exceptionally well. Congratulations to you, Senator Siewert.

Most importantly above those self-congratulations, the committee helped bring us to where we are today as a nation, by providing a sensitive and unthreatening forum for people to tell their stories and explain their hurt, which then formed the unassailable underpinning for today's national apology.

The coalition joins with this parliamentary expression of national apology to those impacted by the practice of forced adoptions. I conclude by using the powerful yet soothing words Mr Tony Abbott used in addressing the apology: 'May it bring self-respect where there was shame; peace where there was anger; and reassurance where there was reproach. May it be part of a healing process for our nation and all of us.' To that, coalition senators say: 'Amen', in supporting the motion moved by the leader of the government.

[Senator SIEWERT](#) (Western Australia—Australian Greens Whip) (12:47): I have been asked to speak on behalf of the Australian Greens and to offer our wholehearted, unreserved support for the apology the Prime Minister gave this morning. I thank Senator Milne in particular for letting me speak now. I also would like to say in advance: please forgive me if I stumble over a few words here.

It is not very often that you can get up in this place and know that this place has done such a wonderful job collectively together. To offer such a fulsome apology to those affected by the most appalling past practices and policies that affected so many mothers, fathers, children, who have now grown into adults, grandparents, siblings—it shows the best of this place; that we have been able to work together to support people so terribly affected by these practices.

Less than half an hour ago, I left the Great Hall where the apology was given. I know many of you would have been in there sharing the emotion of that moment. If you were not, you missed something; because it has made a real difference to the people who were in that place.

I have met some of them many times before; others for the first time. People came up and said 'Thank you'. You could see such a difference in their faces, in their body language, in terms of what this apology has meant. This apology has meant so much. For many it is the start of their healing journey.

I will also now—and I will go into it later—acknowledge the commitment the government has made to concrete measures. Recommendation 6 of the Senate committee inquiry said if you are going to make an apology you have to put concrete measures in as well. Apology is part of the journey but concrete measures to help those who have been affected by these past policies and practices are so important. The government has done that and I thank them for that because the sorts of measures they are putting in place will also help so much those affected by forced adoptions.

When I tabled the report on behalf of the committee—and I want to also come back to the committee process in a minute—I quoted Charlotte Smith. I met her this morning in the Great Hall and I quote her again because to me it sums up what we are talking about. She said:

A mother whose child has been stolen does not only remember it in mind, she remembers with every fibre of her being.

Of the mothers and the fathers that I have met, you can tell that sums it up for them: every fibre of your being. Imagine never having held your newborn baby, never seeing it and, in some instances, never hearing it cry. This is what these mothers and fathers, but in particular the mothers, have lived with for every day of their lives and will continue to live for every day of their lives. Unfortunately, some people felt it so strongly that they are no longer with us. The Prime Minister acknowledged those people today and I do so as well.

These practices had permanent, ongoing impacts and are still having those impacts on people's lives. That has been acknowledged, and that is why we need these concrete measures. These practices happened, and that was what the mothers, fathers, siblings and grandparents wanted acknowledged. First off, we did not even acknowledge that and now we have. We have acknowledged it and we have apologised for it, and it is very important to have that acknowledgement. But the first step was to actually acknowledge that these things happened because all their lives some mothers thought that it did not happen, that they may have imagined it.

Our Senate committee heard the accounts—remember, I always use the words 'accounts' of mothers—and one mother told us that she thought she may have imagined this horrible episode, and it was not until she went back to the hospital that it came back to her. Another mother had blocked it out, and it was only when she saw another program on TV that it all came back—20 years later. Fathers have been left off birth certificates while wanting to acknowledge and take responsibility for their child. They were knowingly left off birth certificates, locked out of their children's lives. Mothers have never been able to hold their babies. They were drugged, had their breasts bound, had curtains put up in front of them, pillows put over their faces, and were physically restrained from seeing their child. They had their signatures forged on consent papers. They were lied to about what consent papers were for, never being told that they could actually change their minds, never being told what social security was available to them so that they could have kept their child. Mothers were sent interstate with no support, were put into homes and forced to work for no wages, were

punished and made to kneel on the floor to scrub floors as a punishment. They were put on beds in labour with no support whatsoever.

You would think, if you did not know better, that perhaps I was making this up. But that is what some mothers were told: 'That didn't happen.' That is why it is so important that this acknowledgement is being made, because it did happen. These things did happen. Some of it was not technically illegal—it was unethical and immoral—but it did happen. Some of what happened was illegal; I am absolutely convinced from the evidence that it was illegal. But, overwhelmingly, we have now acknowledged what happened to the mothers and fathers and siblings.

I take a moment here to talk about both the adoptees and the siblings. Many adoptees have lived, as Senator Abetz highlighted, thinking that their parents did not want them, that they gave them away. They did not. That was another thing that mothers so strongly wanted their children—who are now adults—to know. They did not give them away; they did love them. Their children, their babies, were loved. I have had several mothers tell me—those who could chase their records—that when they eventually went to meet their child that in their minds they expected to see a baby. This baby was now up to 50 years old. Imagine that: wanting to see your child and until recently you could not get access to your records. Deliberately, you could not get access to your records. And for mothers who transferred interstate, it was even more difficult because they had to go through state and territory boundaries.

Many adoptees—not all of them, I am aware of that—grew up thinking that their parents did not want them and gave them away. That is not a good foundation for life, even when your adoptive family is very supportive. You will be aware that in the Senate report we had many accounts of where, unfortunately, children were put in families where they did not have a good home life and were abused. That adds to the pain of the mothers and fathers of those children, now adults.

This plays out then to their siblings. One person said to me during the inquiry, 'Now I understand why my mother was so protective of myself and my siblings, because my mother had had a child taken and that was never going to happen to her again.' It helped explain to them why their mother was so protective. It had an impact on grandparents, many of whom were also lied to and misled.

I vividly remember the evidence we received in my home state of Western Australia—this scarf is from the mothers in Western Australia: I promised I would wear it in the chamber. There was one there, a very young woman—and this was in the early eighties, so this was not confined to the 1940s, fifties, sixties and seventies; it happened in the eighties as well—her partner wanted to stand by her, she did not want to adopt out the baby and her parents wanted to help look after the baby. When her parents went to the nursery they were threatened with the police if they did not leave the premises. That child was adopted out.

To make matters worse, this young woman did not find out that her parents had been to the hospital and had tried to support her, and had tried to assure the authorities that they would help look after the baby. They thought the young woman had agreed to have the baby adopted out. It was not until years later that they both found out, because it was something that you did not talk about. It was not until years later that the mother and her parents found out what had gone on. These parents were tricked, coerced, drugged—people signing consent

forms in a drugged state—and there were obviously false signatures because the name was spelt wrong on a consent form. All these things happened.

I am not supposed to bring props in; I am sorry, Mr President, but I did. This is the apology from the Prime Minister, and every person who was in the Great Hall today got one of these. For those mothers, fathers, adoptees and grandparents, this will be one of the most important pieces of paper of their lives. As I said earlier, it is not often in this place when we can all, as one, offer this sort of apology and when we can work together the way we have to ensure that this apology came about. I thank in particular the members of the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs. More often than not, we as a committee issue consensus reports. It is a pleasure to work with people across the chamber on that committee, because we usually get the pretty tough questions, and this was the toughest inquiry that we have done. There was never a dry eye in any of the hearings for this inquiry. We always had to have boxes of tissues there for ourselves, the witnesses and the members of the audiences. There were some mothers, fathers and adoptees who came along just to hear the evidence. For many people who gave their accounts to the inquiry, it was the first time they had spoken publically about what had happened to them. When you think about it, some of the women who shared their stories were in their 50s, 60s or older. For that long in their lives they had held onto their account. In some instances they had only very recently told their families. For those women and men who came along to share their accounts, I acknowledge, and encourage everybody to acknowledge, their bravery in sharing their accounts. It made such a difference for us to be able to hear the evidence that they gave the Senate inquiry. It makes me feel very proud and honoured to have been able to work on the committee and on this issue.

Many people came up today and said: 'Thank you. You did this and you did that.' No, the committee inquiry presented, on their behalf, the evidence. People have been working on this issue for decades. It is the culmination of their work that has achieved this apology, and I acknowledge their years of hard work. It is only recently that this has become fairly public. It has taken years to get this on the agenda, and it is on the agenda. We have the government's response, and I am going to read the response to each of the 20 recommendations. I know the government has gone a long way in the concrete recommendations and that is really good. Our job now is to make sure that they get delivered and make sure the recommendations are implemented, because this apology is one step on the healing journey. It has been my privilege to walk some way of this journey with those who have been affected by these horrible past policies and practices and to share that journey with members of this place who have worked so hard. I particularly acknowledge Senator Moore, Senator Brown, Senator Boyce, Senator McKenzie and Senator Adams, who all shared this journey as well.

On behalf of the Greens, I offer our profound, wholehearted support for this apology.

[Senator MOORE](#) (Queensland) (13:05): Today the Senate and the parliament as a whole have done their job, and we have heard that from previous speakers in this place. In terms of what has occurred in this area, we have had a group of Australian citizens who were wronged. What happened was that they came to their state and federal parliamentarians and said that something had gone wrong, they had been hurt and someone should do something about it. This struggle has been going on since the 1960s, when the women first started saying that what had happened was incorrect. What had happened in that period up until when we first got this reference in 2011 was that there had been a series of state inquiries, as far back as 1999 in Tasmania, and also in Victoria and New South Wales. The sad thing, amongst so many sad things, is that each of those inquiries reported back, identified the wrongs, showed

that these issues were in place and heard lots of sad stories, and nothing happened. That is the true sadness of what has happened since 1999.

But, in this case, finally women from across this country—every state—spoke out in that period. Every single state and territory had women who had been carrying the hurt for years but moved forward and never gave up. They came to their Senate and said there should be an inquiry. After a lot of discussion—because I have to admit that the first time the request came there was not an immediate response, which is sometimes what occurs—and ongoing effort, there was an agreement from every group in this place that there should be a Senate inquiry into the area, and then the process began.

We travelled the country. We talked with women. We listened to women. We listened to young people who identified that they had been adopted and had not met their parents. I am not going to go back through all the accounts that Senator Siewert has mentioned. The important thing is that people should read the inquiry. They should read the report, which is not that large, and they should not have people telling them what was said; they should read it themselves. They should hear from the people who had the courage, the commitment and the anger to come forward and tell us what was wrong and what should be done about it. They were not backward in coming forward. In fact, they gave us chapter and verse about how long they had been speaking about these issues and how their anger and betrayal were made worse because no action had been taken previously. It was as though we were the court of last resort when they came to see us, and no-one could be unaffected by what we heard. But there was more than that: they wanted action taken.

I also want to commend all the senators who took part in this event. Sometimes at the committee itself it is just given as a matter of course that senators do their job, as we do, and come up with reports, some of which are read and some of which are not, and recommendations, some of which are picked up and some of which are not. However, in this case, as in many in the community affairs committee, there was more than just coming and listening and putting our report together; there was a personal connection and a personal commitment that we had work to do and that it was important that it should happen. So naturally I acknowledge Senator Siewert, who chaired through the whole process; the late Senator Judith Adams, who actually attended two of these inquiries and at one stage really should not have been there but was determined to be there; Senator Sue Boyce, who is unable to be with us today because she is unwell but has emailed all of us to say she wants to be here—and I can guarantee that many times in the Senate in the future we will hear from Senator Boyce on this issue; Senator Carol Brown; Senator Bridget McKenzie, who is going to speak in this discussion; Senator Helen Coonan, who attended one committee hearing in Sydney and also read many of the submissions; and also Senator Catryna Bilyk, who came to a couple of the committee hearings, particularly in her home state of Tasmania. That group of senators were able to work with our amazing secretariat. As Senator Siewert pointed out, there was lots of emotion and lots of tissues at all these hearings—because there had to be; because we were sharing. It was not a matter of someone giving evidence and people on the other side of the table listening to that evidence and people recording and then for that evidence to go away into the ether. This was a discussion with people who cared.

I want to particularly acknowledge the secretariat, because it is sometimes forgotten that the emotion, the passion and the strain is shared fully by the secretariat members—all of them. The secretary of the committee is Ian Holland, and I acknowledge him and all the members of that team. What happens in these inquiries is that people who want to talk with us find a

need to consistently ring up and email and find someone on the other end of the phone with whom they can talk and just make sure that things are happening and things are being done correctly. Often it is not the senators but the secretariat who are the ones who can tell you whether, for example, a woman from Victoria who was promised that she would have extra time to put in her submission but was unwell and too scared to come would have a chance to talk with us at another time.

People would send in inches of paper. I know when the Archives are looking at it there will not just be some small areas put aside for the work that happened in this committee, because there will be boxes. That was the way that people gave their evidence. They were not very often small, typed letters in the form with which we are familiar; there were boxes of photocopied documents that went back, in some cases, to 1953. People had photocopied things that were important to them and which showed clear evidence for them that they existed. One of the elements of this inquiry was that people wanted to make the statement that they existed and that their pain happened—and they wanted the world to know that.

I particularly also want to acknowledge the work of Professor Mushin, who took on the job from the then Attorney-General, Nicola Roxon, to move this process forward. What happens so often in this place is that we have inquiries and recommendations and then there is that little gap between when we have the process and when action takes place. The then Attorney-General, Nicola Roxon, was caught up in this process, because so many of the elements of the recommendations talked about basic things, like proof of identity, Births, Deaths and Marriages, whose name was going to be on certificates and legal responsibilities.

We know that while these processes were often shameful and painful, they were also illegal. They were illegal, and we needed to have that focused through the Attorneys-General of states and territories and through our federal Attorney-General. Then Attorney-General Roxon gave the job to Professor Mushin to move forward, and he and his team from the Attorney-General's Department brought the same commitment, passion and care to this whole process. The comments that I made about our secretariat I share with the people who worked on this process in terms of the linkages they made.

We heard powerful words this morning and we heard commitments about future actions. We will continue to watch those future actions to ensure that they fulfil the challenge that was given to us by the people who trusted us to take this issue forward. I particularly want to acknowledge the women, the men and all the families who have been caught up in this journey—and it is a journey—and I especially want to thank the women who gave their trust to their parliamentarians, their senators. They shared with us painful and special parts of their lives. I also want to commend them for their resilience, their anger and their determination that this was going to be a Senate process that would not just disappear into the realms of academic research or onto the shelves to gather dust—that the 20 recommendations that came out of this report were going to have some response and action was going to be taken to the right the wrongs, of which there were many.

But still the most poignant for me is the statement that I have repeated many times: 'I want my child to know that I love them.' Whilst we will not be able to personally go to the unknown numbers—again, one of our shames is that we will never know exactly how many women, children and families were caught up in this horror—through this process, through our parliament we will be able to ensure that our government has said, 'We're sorry,' our government has said, 'We believe you,' and our government has said, 'We share your pain.'

For all the children who did not know their mother or their father, know one thing: they loved you.

[Senator McKENZIE](#) (Victoria) (13:15): I follow two great leaders of all those community affairs issues and would like to pay my tribute to both of them today on the leadership they have shown through this whole process. I rise to speak on this very historic day to acknowledge the many people who have been impacted by the policies of forced adoptions: the mothers, the fathers, the children and, indeed, the communities right across our nation over decades of the practices of forced adoptions. I was very privileged, humbled and moved to attend this morning's formal apology on behalf of our nation by the Prime Minister, fully endorsed by the Leader of the Opposition. We are never stronger as a nation than when we stand together, all sides united, as it was today with the national apology for forced adoptions.

At this morning's service, where I had Senator Pratt on one side, I was also able to chat with one of the women who gave us evidence at the Tasmanian inquiry. I will go to that later in my contribution. We sat one and all together and watched a bit of footage roll onto the big screen. It was state premier after state premier—Labor state premiers, Liberal state premiers—as a nation, as state governments making an apology. As part of the states' house, I was very proud—as we all should be as senators—that each of our states has apologised to our respective citizenry who were affected by these practices. Today we have come together as a nation to apologise.

Last year, as I have mentioned, I was proud and privileged to be involved in the Senate Community Affairs References Committee inquiry into the Commonwealth's contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices. It was a report that took 18 months to complete. I came in on the tail end of that 18 months and had a bit of catching up to do. When we talk about the children of those adoptive practices, they are my generation, so I found it quite challenging to come into that process and hear very traumatic stories about an issue on which I had only heard aunts and mothers in country towns talk briefly of girls being whisked away to the city for nine months. I found it quite humbling. It was a comprehensive, bipartisan report into this traumatic time into our past, and I too want to pay tribute to the very brave women, men and children who came before us; to the social workers who came before us; to the nurses; even to the organisations that had to own up to their past forced adoption practices—to everyone who was very brave in telling the truth, because what has shrouded this conversation as a nation over decades is the silence. Being able to use the Senate committee process to give a place for those stories to come forth into the public arena and then ultimately, only 12 months later, to see some real action on the recommendations that were made in that report as a result of those brave stories is fantastic.

The issues were complex and involved an enormous amount of evidence, and I also acknowledge Dr Ian Holland in the chamber today and say congratulations to the secretariat on helping us to bring together that problematic amount of information into a comprehensive report that we are very proud of one and all from all sides of politics.

We heard harrowing tales of regret, abuse, neglect and loss. They dated from the 1950s to as recently as 1987. They were very detailed and showed us very clearly that babies were taken for adoption against their mothers' will. For many mothers the experiences that they recounted were traumatic, and we thank them for their bravery. I cannot even begin to think what it might feel like to have lived in a time when support at what should be a time in your life of incredible celebration just was not available from family, from your church or from

society more generally. We were told that mothers were pressured, deceived or threatened in order for them to sign adoption forms, the notions of choice and consent trashed. Nobody has the right to take a child from its mother and to make judgements about who is a good mother and who is a bad mother. What happened was wrong and today, as a nation, we apologise.

I want to mention how fantastic this is in terms of Senate process. A lot of times we hear, particularly with regard to reference inquiries: 'Why should I bother? Nothing's going to happen.' But it has been so great. As a newer senator I am quite chuffed that we have seen so much action so quickly. Let's hope action on this issue continues from today now that we have had our states apologise, that we have had agreement to work together at the state level—which is going to be the first step in getting the paperwork trail happening. It is fantastic.

Today, as I had Senator Pratt on one side, on the other side was a woman who, as I said, gave evidence at our Tasmanian hearings. She was very clear in telling me that the counselling services still were not on the ground. She wants today to be 'a start', she said. She wants those from the service to walk away tall. She wanted me to know and to share with you that words are cheap and that for the apology to have meaning there needs to be action.

We all welcome the support from the government of those recommendations from the inquiry, particularly around counselling services. If we are serious about healing the trauma, that is going to be a good way to start and information is power. So ensuring that the paper trail between states and across states occurs will be great and it fulfils some of our recommendations.

The Senate inquiry found that 225,000 children were removed from often very young, unmarried women. The Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne estimates that 45 per cent of unmarried mothers were subject to forced adoptions between 1945 and 1975. It was the heyday for adoption. People who gave evidence astounded me and I applaud their tenacity. I want to particularly acknowledge and put on the record the effect these practices had in small rural communities and for regional Australians.

If you were the new baby being adopted by a couple in a small country town, everybody knew that you were adopted and that had consequences in the playground. There were often stories of young women who would be whisked away to Melbourne or Sydney for a specified time and then returned home. To quote one particular example:

I became pregnant in a country town and the father was not prepared to help me. I knew my parents, especially my mother, would never cope with the shame of having an illegitimate grandchild so I decided to go to Sydney and have the child there.

Her mother's last words to her as she was leaving were:

If you don't have that child adopted, you can never come home again.

Sitting here today I cannot imagine ever saying something like that to my own daughter at a time of intense need and, troubles with my own mother aside, I cannot imagine she would ever say something like that to me.

Historian Janet McCalman recorded the experience of a nurse who moved from a busy city labour ward to a hospital in a quiet country town. She wrote:

It was quiet and there was time to talk and I found that women over seventy, who might have been coming in for gynaecological problems, would say, 'You're a midwife?' 'Yes.' 'Well, I lost my baby years ago' and it was the first time that they'd plucked up the courage to talk about it, because you had the time to sit there.

Those women were probably of an age where they just did not care anymore about societal stigmas at that time. She further wrote:

And those women have suffered all their lives—they've never forgotten it. It's a real myth to say that it's all over and done with.

It is never over and done with. It ruins their lives; it ruins their family lives and their ability to rear families. We heard story after story of the guilt. In other evidence to the inquiry, we heard this from my home state of Victoria:

I believe that every adoption begins with loss and those who are adopted experience this loss and those whose lose children to adoption experience this loss.

One mother who was forced to give her baby away told reporters on the day of the Victorian state apology that she felt like she had been serving a life sentence. I cannot even begin to imagine what it might feel like. The enduring pain and trauma cannot be erased and what happened was wrong and, in some instances, illegal.

I quote from the Victorian government's apology, where the Victorian Premier said:

We acknowledge that many thousands of Victorian babies were taken from their mothers, without informed consent, and that this loss caused immense grief.

We undertake to never forget what happened and to never repeat these practices.

So, as a nation, we go on from an apology to healing, with practical measures that will assist on the ground. Also, as a nation and as states and governments, one and all, we commit to being much more cognisant than ever before. Today has been a historic day. Today our nation acknowledged that that practice of forced adoption was wrong and that as a nation we are sorry. I join with the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in apologising. Today's apology recognises the mistakes of previous generations. What happened was wrong and we first acknowledge that so that we can learn. Today is our new beginning and I look forward to a very healing future.

[Senator PRATT](#) (Western Australia) (13:27): I am humbled to say a few words as part of this national apology today to people who have been affected by past forced adoption practices and to acknowledge many things: to acknowledge the extreme trauma inflicted on mothers and children from Australia's past adoption practices; to acknowledge that these practices were profoundly wrong; to acknowledge that children were taken from their mothers without consent; to acknowledge, worse still, that these children were taken with force and coercion; to acknowledge that women were intentionally degraded, lectured to, hectorred, ignored, humiliated, lied to or drugged in order to tear them from their infants; to acknowledge that

these practices were also used to manipulate the so-called consent from women—and I note that in Western Australia women were rarely, if ever, told that they had legal rights, including the legal right to withdraw consent (it was a 30-day right); to acknowledge that this so-called consent was often thrown back in the faces of women to reinforce the idea that these children were unwanted; to acknowledge the denial not only of that natural right but of that legal parent-child relationship; and to acknowledge that these practices have had deep, lifelong impacts on mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, and on whole families. These practices were immoral, unethical, often unlawful and the cause of deep and profound suffering. Today, with this apology, we recognise all of these wrongs. Today we say sorry. Today we apologise.

I know that saying sorry cannot take away all of this suffering, but I hope that it can help many in our nation who have been affected by these practices to heal. I also hope that it can help people to reach out, to help correct the record and to correct those long-held misbeliefs—the misbelief that these children were unwanted and unloved. I would like to share with you a quote from Sue MacDonald, who has bravely shared her story and was a brave campaigner for the apology in Western Australia. She has spoken to me about her history. She said:

We were treated like animals with no feelings for the babies we conceived, carried, gave birth to and love. We were viewed as little more than breeders, unpaid surrogates, fallen women who needed to be punished and rehabilitated, by having our babies taken. We have lived with the injustice of knowing that the perpetrators of this abuse have by in large, been viewed by society as squeaky clean professional people performing wonderful work in the community, finding perfect homes for the children "**we supposedly did not want and abandoned**". We have had thirty, forty or fifty years of living with the injustice of this general and sanitized view. This view continues to colour our children's perception—most believe they were abandoned, unwanted, unloved and then rescued by their adoptive parents.

I think this quote really unravels some of those perceptions today. It shows the difficulty that many people had in reaching out to reconnect family bonds, because that was such a widespread and prevailing view. So I would like to thank everyone who has helped lift the lid on this, including those who were part of those practices who helped unveil what had been happening in our institutions, but most of all the mothers and families who have bravely lifted their voices to help tell this story.

As a child I grew up in the seventies and eighties, and I grew up amongst a generation of young people taken from their mothers. As Senator McKenzie said, in every classroom you were in, you would be with other young people who were adopted. I know I have watched many of these friends, and people I have known, work hard to reach out to reforge family relationships. I really want to commend all of those who have struggled to put back together what the state, and others, broke apart by reaching out to find children, mothers, fathers and family. I note, with some sadness, that for many affected by past adoption practices contact vetoes still exist. Some people will pass from this earth without ever having met the kin that they were separated from.

As a chair of a committee that inquired into adoption practices in Western Australia, I have had to look this issue squarely in the face to consider whether our adoption practices today meet the ethical standards that they should, and I have had to reflect on the past adoption practices and the failure of whole systems, including of legislators, to protect the fundamental human rights of children, mothers and families. While I cannot stand in the shoes of people

who, because of family secrecy or shame inflicted by past practices, still feel that they need these contact vetoes, I can question whether it should be legitimate today to legally prevent someone from making contact with someone who is their parent or child.

I have great hope today that this apology helps dispel the myth that adopted children were unwanted or unloved and that mothers were unworthy or unfit. With today's apology, we can continue to learn from this terrible past to ensure that these practices are never repeated. Most importantly of all, with today's apology, we can help lift the veil of secrecy, and sometimes shame, so that people affected by past adoption practices can continue to reach out to each other and to affirm their family bonds. I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.

[Senator FEENEY](#) (Victoria—Parliamentary Secretary for Defence) (13:35): I move:

That the Senate stand adjourned until 2 pm.

Question agreed to.