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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Main Committee**

**APOLOGY TO AUSTRALIA'S  
INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 18 February 2008**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Hayes, Chris, MP

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**Question No.**

**Mr HAYES** (Werriwa) (5.10 pm)—Today I join with the Prime Minister, the government and members of the Australian parliament in apologising to the Aboriginal people of this country for the pain and suffering caused by previous administrations, past practices and laws of successive governments in removing Aboriginal children from their families. Apart from the unjust feeling on reflection of what occurred, I would like to approach this from the perspective of being a parent. If my children were removed for reasons I did not understand, I think it would be pretty easy to put in perspective the torment, anger and hurt that I would carry with me until the end of my days. Simply: that is what occurred. People did not understand. As a matter of fact, there were not any great reasons. Nevertheless, their children, their kin, were forcibly removed at a stage when they could do nothing about it. It was the law. The word ‘stolen’ does not indicate a criminal or illegal act; this was a highly legal and sanctioned position. That is why it is appropriate that we do apologise to the stolen generations.

The apology to the stolen generations is the first necessary step to move forward to a new stage of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. It is very much the next genuine step in terms of reconciliation. The apology is made on behalf of the government and the Australian parliament—it is made on behalf of all Australians, as a consequence. The apology signifies the beginning of this new relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It will act, in my opinion, as a bridge to build respect and will be a powerful healing symbol. It is an opportunity to formally recognise past injustices and an opportunity to commit to changes for the future. Quite frankly, it is a chance to move forward.

I know that the apology to the stolen generations will bring special meaning to the people involved and their families. To use a modern colloquialism: I hope it allows a measure of closure for the people and their families. The intention to have a new relationship with Indigenous Australia was exemplified through the national welcome to country this week when we opened the parliament. The national welcome to country from the Ngunawal people was the first that has occurred in this place. I trust that it was not missed by many. This was not only a genuine invitation from Ngunawal people to be at this place but also, from our perspective, the first national ceremony for this parliament.

For members of the parliament, the Prime Minister’s speech last Wednesday was very much an emotional occasion, as it was a reasonably emotional occasion for all Australians who abhor injustice and believe in a fair go. However, the emotional impact of the Prime Minister’s speech was unmistakable when you looked into the faces of the many Indigenous Australians who were in attendance that day. I assure you that it was not just members of parliament with tears in their eyes and serious lumps in their throats. We took the opportunity to meet with many people after the Prime Minister’s speech. To simply see their faces and to hear what they had to say I think was very significant.

The overwhelming comment that was made to me by people I met was ‘Thank you’. They were actually thanking us simply for making that apology. They were thanking us not for the past injustices but for acknowledging that those injustices had taken place, and we were mature enough as a nation to admit to the wrongdoings that had occurred and to apologise. The impact on the stolen generations themselves, especially those who attended here in this chamber, as well as their families and their communities, was nothing other than enormous. It was genuinely a historic occasion, one which was well overdue and, speaking for myself—and I am sure it is a view echoed by most—an occasion that will stay with me forever.

It must be said that Labor made it very clear that not only would we apologise to the stolen generations, should we win government, but we would make it the first order of business. To that extent, we have honoured that commitment—the commitment that we made in public but also the commitment we made to the Indigenous people of this nation. This commitment was not about furthering any political agenda but, rather, it was about doing what has long been considered to be the right and decent thing to do. The opposition, on the other hand, opted to support the decision to say sorry last week—and I respect the words that were spoken by the Leader of the Opposition—but it would seem to me from some of the speeches that have been made, particularly in this chamber, that a number of members of the opposition are still hedging their bets. While, as I say, the words of

the Leader of the Opposition in supporting the Prime Minister were appreciated, I note that members such as the member for Tangney not only hedged their bets but went on to oppose the general concept of any apology to the stolen generations. To those of us who might have been a little aggrieved by his speech, let me remind them that this was the same Liberal member of parliament who asserted that the actions of mankind had little, if anything, to do with climate change. So at least those who feel aggrieved can be consoled by the fact that he is obviously a little removed from mainstream thinking on a range of subjects.

In terms of where we are in the reconciliation process, particularly for the Indigenous Australians in my electorate, it is clear that the time for denial has come to an end and it is time to advance a proper relationship with Indigenous Australia. During the course of the last couple of weeks, in the lead-up to the opening of parliament and particularly the well-publicised event in which the Prime Minister made an apology to the stolen generations, I took the opportunity—as, no doubt, most members of parliament did—to sit down with various members of my local Indigenous community regarding what the apology meant to them. For instance, I spoke to Jack Johnson, Nancy Davis and Rae Stewart from the Gandangara Local Aboriginal Land Council, which is based in Liverpool, in the heart of my electorate; Glenda Chalker and Cliff Foley, of the Dharawal people; and Auntie Norma Shelley, who always stays in contact with me. The apology meant a range of things to these people, but one of the things that they consistently said was thank you—thank you for realising the indifference there was towards Indigenous Australia in the past, and thank you for realising and acknowledging the injustices that occurred and the hurt and suffering that have been borne by their families. It was not a thankyou based on the fact that it was about time, although clearly that was the case. They put to me that it was a genuine thankyou for us acknowledging those wrongs of the past, and for the maturity of an Australian nation, with a view to putting forward a new compact for Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations.

I also took the opportunity to speak with a number of agencies and individuals who work tirelessly with the Indigenous community in my electorate. One of those was Sister Kerry McDermott. She is a Catholic nun from the Wollongong diocese who not only works with but lives amongst the Aboriginal community in and about Minto. I know from listening to her comments and those of the people she has introduced me to that the government now saying sorry, however long it has taken, is something that is genuinely appreciated throughout the community. They are hoping for something better to come in the future.

One woman I spoke with—and I have been asked to suppress her surname, so I will use only her first name, Jenny—is an elder in Minto. She was with Sister Kerry and actually broke down when asked what the apology meant to her. She took some time to speak, sighed deeply with tears falling gently down her face and said, ‘I think it is absolutely great that the government is going to apologise, for every Aboriginal family has been affected and it is so emotional for us all.’ Jenny was only four years old when she and her sister Rita, who was two years old, were both taken away from their family. They were both innocently playing with their cousins near their home in Bourke when they were removed and driven away. Their cousins were warned not to say anything because otherwise the welfare men would come back and take them too. This was 45 years ago. They were taken from their mother, their family and their community. Their mother thought they had been murdered. I understand from my discussion with her that their mother searched for their bodies on a daily basis. She was clearly in pain and cried every day, as would any parent if, without knowing why, their kids suddenly disappeared. The cousins watched all of this, by the way. They saw the pain in the eyes of the old lady and the rest of the family. They saw what the family was going through but said nothing. They were just too afraid. After all, they were kids too.

Late last year, after a family tragedy, for the first time the cousins spoke out about what they had experienced. They begged Jenny and her sister Rita for forgiveness. Jenny was honest enough to say, ‘There is so much pain still in our hearts and anger too that we were taken from our family.’ Jenny welcomes the apology and told me how important it was for her and her mother. She said her mother had been waiting for this day. Jenny said: ‘My poor old mother has carried so much pain and anguish and sorrow. It is still with her and the hurt will never heal, but the apology and sorrow expressed by the government is a start.’ Despite what happened to Jenny, she still has hope. The most striking thing I observed while Jenny graphically told her story was that she did not even have to use words. Her expression, her sad eyes, told the story of a lifetime of sorrow. She said that there is hope.

Another prominent Aboriginal woman in my area is Auntie Christina Craig. She is from Macquarie Fields. Unfortunately, she is in Liverpool Hospital at the moment, and I send my regards to her. She is in a very serious condition with kidney failure. Christina said to us, ‘I am so very happy and just wanted to live long enough for an apology to be made.’

Like many here, we have all heard heartfelt stories from Indigenous Australians and no doubt there will be many more to come. Comments like these from Indigenous members of our communities show how important the

apology is and how important it is to move to do something so that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians work and live better together. It is time that we make the commitment to move forward and to look at those issues that we need to address, particularly life expectancy, mortality rates and education, so that Indigenous children have the appropriate opportunity to participate along with every other child in this country at the same level.