



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Main Committee**

**APOLOGY TO AUSTRALIA'S  
INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 20 February 2008**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

---

## SPEECH

**Date** Wednesday, 20 February 2008  
**Page** 1061  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Cobb, John, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr JOHN COBB** (Calare) (6.06 pm)—As the member for a large electorate, the largest electorate in New South Wales, which also has a very large Aboriginal population, I am obviously aware of the issues surrounding the apology last week and also very aware of the issues surrounding my electorate of Calare and the issues surrounding the Aboriginal people who live in it. Let me tell you that they are a very, very welcome and very, very wanted part of that part of Australia. They play a very important role, as do all people in the electorate of Calare and in fact in western New South Wales.

Nobody wants to help Aboriginal Australians move forward—or, more correctly, help them move themselves forward—more than I do, but an apology that does not have the resolve to act, to let the past go, means nothing at all. That really means that everybody on both sides, if there are sides in this debate, has to be able to move forward from the past, from the blame game—as is a popular thing to say these days—and get on with life. There are two sides to every equation or two sides to the game, and both sides have to be able to let go and move forward.

I think almost all people in the past—I say ‘almost all’; not everyone, obviously—be they government or whoever, have acted or have thought they acted with the right intentions. But unfortunately there were some who acted under racist misconceptions. We are talking about children who were removed from their families. Obviously, the child’s welfare is much more important than the feelings of the parents involved. It does not matter what the background of the parents is—if a child is in danger then it has to be removed, whether it is 100 years ago or today. But where a child has been removed because of the culture of the parents then obviously there is no question that it was wrong and should not have happened, and let us hope it never happens again.

The one thing that I am very disappointed about in the current debate and the talk that has certainly—and I am very pleased that it has—come to the surface since the events of last week is in the events surrounding what has been happening in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia. People are forgetting—I am not, and western New South Wales and New South Wales as a whole are not—that the issues that exist there also exist in New South Wales. In my electorate and in western New South Wales, these issues are also there.

I very much urge the new government to work with the New South Wales government to get it to look at its own report, which I will mention in a moment. I take this opportunity to stray away from the straight issue of the apology to look at the issues which are so current around Australia, be they in the Northern Territory, be they in western New South Wales or wherever they might be. I think that in what the Prime Minister calls the new spirit of cooperation or getting rid of the blame game it is incumbent upon the current government to deal with New South Wales and to take action, or to get the New South Wales government, because we are not talking about the Northern Territory here, to take action to make life better for my constituents, particularly my Aboriginal constituents, in the electorate of Calare and western New South Wales—and what affects one really affects the lot, so we are talking about the whole population.

I have been very vocal about Indigenous issues in western New South Wales. What really pains me is that the New South Wales government has all but ignored a report first commissioned by the current federal Minister for Home Affairs when he was a minister in the New South Wales government. The report, which is called *Breaking the silence: creating the future*, addressed child sexual assault in Aboriginal communities in New South Wales, painting a horrific picture of abuse within Indigenous communities in our state, yet it has basically been ignored. In fact, take the report which provided the basis on which the previous government moved to intervene in the Northern Territory, *Little children are sacred*. Well, the New South Wales report *Breaking the silence*, which was commissioned a long time before that federal one, having been handed down almost two years before *Little children are sacred* was, pretty much says exactly what the report on Northern Territory matters, *Little children are sacred*, said—yet it is being ignored. For those of us who live in New South Wales that is a terrible thing. That is an indictment of the New South Wales government. Most importantly, that is a terrible thing for those little Aboriginal children in New South Wales who are still suffering what is addressed in that report.

As a minister, I was very fortunate to have on my staff Peter 'Chika' Gibbs. Many of those from the last parliament who are still here, being those on both sides of the chamber who are members of the Parliamentary Christian Fellowship Group, will remember Peter's very powerful speeches, in the committee room and in the Great Hall last year, which left quite a few of you in tears. Peter is a product of the back country of New South Wales. He grew up Weilmoringle, a very small village which is actually in my electorate of Calare. It is north of Brewarrina. He is very proud to be an Aboriginal and of his Indigenous heritage, and it is fair to say that his life has not always been an easy one. He had a simple mantra that he wanted people, particularly Aboriginal people or those of that descent, to know: 'No matter how difficult one's life, there is only one person responsible for your own actions, and that is you. Without making changes in your own life then nothing will get better.'

I read with interest an article in the *Australian* newspaper by its editor-at-large, Paul Kelly, earlier in the week. I believe that it is worth quoting in this forum as it speaks eloquently of the dilemma facing all of us in this place. It does not matter what our political persuasion is as it faces all of us. As the member for Wentworth said earlier, we all represent all Australians. This is what Kelly says:

The apology is demanded by our humanity and respect for fellow human beings in a shared community. But Rudd rejects the 1997 demand for compensation, rejects the report's accusation of genocide and repudiates the false trail of intergenerational guilt.

He then goes on to say:

This amounts to a devastating critique of the current and past generation of Liberal and Labor governments. At this point Rudd confronts a new denialism. Just as John Howard was wrong to deny the confessional value of the apology, many Laborites are wrong to deny the abject failures of past generation policies.

When it comes to Indigenous affairs, many Australians have firm, entrenched views on the subject. The verbal apology which was expressed in parliament last week and was endorsed by all parties is going to please many Aboriginals and many non-Aboriginals. While this might be a symbolic but sincere gesture, I hope it is not used by some people to fuel ongoing divisiveness.

It is now incumbent upon all of us to move forward with programs of support and inclusion for our Indigenous communities and to not allow the clock to wind back and raise further resentment and conflict. I think the whole point is that this is a wasted exercise if people cannot move forward from it. Actions always speak louder than words. It is imperative that the actions of this government support an ongoing collaboration between federal government and the Aboriginal communities and people of Australia and that the government shows no fear in taking action where action must be taken—as we did in the Northern Territory last year, backed up at that time by the current Territory government. I am not a Territorian but I have been up there a bit and I know a lot of people, such as Nigel Scullion, with vast experience up there. I think it will be a great pity if the current government brings back the permit system. We really must look upon this as helping the Northern Territory, because the one thing I do know is that, when Aboriginal women of the Northern Territory feel safe to talk about these things, they are themselves very supportive of the actions taken by the Commonwealth government up there last year.

I strongly believe that action needs to be taken in western New South Wales too. I think that, while our issues are not as widespread, people in western New South Wales are probably more exposed to the general media. Already people in the Calare electorate are talking about a 'lost generation'. We cannot move forward from this without leadership from the Aboriginal community. It is important that it continues to grow, as it has with people such as Noel Pearson and Warren Mundine—he comes from Dubbo and is someone I know quite well. And there is the person I mentioned a while ago, Peter Gibbs. They are all demanding reform by Aboriginal groups themselves. They are demanding reforms not just by us, the parliament and the people of Australia, but by the Aboriginal community itself. They know that their attitudes have to change to help themselves; we cannot do it if they are not part of it, quite obviously.

While no-one can be proud of some aspects of our history, it is very telling that most of the events of the last 100 years were done in good faith; although not all, obviously. I am well aware that many in our community will not agree with the apology. However, given our understanding that this is not and cannot be about recompense, financial or otherwise, we all have to move on from here. Let us take this opportunity to do that. The acceptance of the Australian community that it is time to actively move forward and support all sectors of the community will go a long way to assisting our reconciliation process. All of us need to be a part of assisting the Aboriginal community to help themselves, just as with any other disadvantaged section of our community.