



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

MOTIONS

Forced Adoption

SPEECH

Wednesday, 15 May 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Chester, Darren, MP

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Mr CHESTER (Gippsland) (17:10): It is with a heavy heart that I rise to join the previous speakers to speak on this motion in relation to the national apology on forced adoptions and, on behalf of the people of Gippsland, get our voice to the people affected by the forced adoption policies of the past. In doing so, I do not intend to quote the entire apology, but I think it is worthwhile to quote a couple of the extracts. I quote:

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 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 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.

... ..

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.

As a personal message to the many people in my community who have contacted me in relation to this national apology I simply assure them: 'You did nothing wrong. You had the misfortune of living in a severely judgemental era of our nation's history and you did nothing wrong.'

The background to the national apology on forced adoptions is important. In February last year, the Senate Community Affairs References Committee released its report into those practices, and the report found that the policies and practices that resulted in forced adoptions and the removal of children were widespread throughout Australia, particularly during the mid-twentieth century. The Senate committee inquiry received submissions from hundreds of individuals who had suffered from the effects of forced adoptions and found that there were many different ways in which these forced adoptions occurred. The accounts provided in that report are shocking and graphic for anyone who has read them. They range from experiences of mothers being drugged and physically shackled to beds, to social workers failing to advise mothers of government payments that may have been available to support them to keep their child.

These forced adoption practices impacted a large number of Australians and caused significant ongoing effects for many people, particularly the mothers and also the fathers and the adoptees themselves. The report concluded that it is impossible to know the exact number of people who have been affected by these forced adoption practices but that it does number in the tens of thousands of Australians.

While I accept that an apology, no matter how well framed, how well meant, how well intentioned and how well supported by members of this place, cannot undo suffering that has been experienced by those who have been affected by forced adoptions, I hope that the apology will be accepted in the way that it has been offered by members in this place in the hope that it will provide a significant step in the healing process for the mothers, the fathers, the adoptees and their extended family members who were adversely affected by these practices.

It is a great example of this parliament at work when we have such bipartisan support for an issue of such importance, and I do commend the leaders of our two major parties, the member for Warringah and the member for Lalor, on their speeches in the Great Hall. It was a great occasion, befitting the Great Hall. I will quote the Leader of the Opposition, who said:

But hundreds of thousands of Australians have been adopted, often, because their mothers had no real choice or were denied any choice and that means that there are hundreds of thousands of mothers who hardly knew their children and hundreds of thousands of children who hardly knew their mothers.

He went on to say:

We were hard-hearted and we were judgmental and that's why we should apologise.

We did inflict pain on those we loved and on those we had a responsibility for.

For some, we turned what should been the wonderful experience of new life into something filled with shame.

Instead of love, there was reproach;

Instead of support, rejection;

Instead of celebration, silence;

And instead of justice, there was wrongdoing.

And from the Prime Minister:

Today's historic moment has only been made possible by the bravery of those who came forward to make submissions to the Senate Committee and also of those who couldn't come forward but who nurtured hope silently in their hearts.

Because of your courage, Australia now knows the truth.

I will talk about the courage of one brave woman in my electorate, a woman by the name of Brenda Coughlan, who has been a fearless supporter and campaigner for people who have been affected by the policy of forced adoptions. Brenda has helped to lead the fight for this apology. Her baby was taken from her without her consent when at just 17 she fell pregnant and delivered her baby. Even though she was in a loving relationship with the child's father she was coerced into giving up her child for adoption. In her evidence provided at the Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Organisations held by the Victorian parliament's Family and Community Development Committee, Brenda said:

My body was forcibly examined without consent, not by 1, not by 2 but by up to 12 male medical students at a time — different hands, without consent, brutally and cruelly thrust inside my body one after the other, over and over again; at the same time, strangers' hands cruelly pulling at my breasts, pushing at my stomach, with the excuse given that ... it was just part of medical students' training.

She went on to say:

I was eventually able to train my mind to visualise on an item in the cubicle so that the pain and the trespassing on my body by a group of males could be endured. I was barbarically and criminally tied down with shackles. I was torturously treated during labour. I was entrapped. I was defenceless. I was petrified and frightened.

I make no apology for the graphic nature of the evidence, because it needs to be told.

The hurt, anger and disillusionment with the medical profession resulting from that treatment obviously lingers with Brenda today. Brenda is not someone who has pursued this case for any material gains—she is not interested in compensation—but she wants to make sure that such atrocities never occur again. She said to me during a recent discussion in my office:

This is not about money, because my daughter was never for sale. Money can never compensate me for the pain and loss my daughter and I have endured.

It is a remarkable tribute to Brenda that in addition to working so hard campaigning for victims of forced adoptions she has found the energy within herself to open her heart to orphans in Asia and has actually organised ongoing practical support for those less-fortunate children.

I must say that Brenda has been through an emotional roller-coaster, and it is fair to say that she was disappointed with some aspects of the national apology. It was an intensely emotional time for all the people involved in this issue. She was disappointed because she was concerned it did not include a specific reference to the mistreatment that I have just highlighted in relation to the medical profession. I wrote to the Attorney-General, Mr Dreyfus, on her behalf to raise her concerns in relation to the failure of the apology to identify that specific reference to the medical profession. I thank the Attorney-General for his most recent reply, which I will put on the record:

Although the national apology did not specifically mention the treatment of mothers in Victorian hospitals, it did acknowledge the manipulation, mistreatment and malpractice that many mothers experienced as a result of forced adoption policies and practices. It also acknowledged that many mothers were denied their rights, given false assurances and forced to endure coercion and the brutality of practices that were often unethical, dishonest and in many cases illegal. Not including references to specific situations ensured that the apology included the widest possible range of people affected by forced adoption practices.

The Attorney-General went on to point out that there has been a formal statement of apology from the Victorian government and that Melbourne's Royal Women's Hospital and Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital issued apologies on 23 January and 20 March this year for their involvement in forced adoption policies. I think it is important that it is on the record, because, for people like Brenda, the abuse and the violence that she endured will live with her for the rest of her life.

The national apology for forced adoptions is obviously not the end of the story for the people who were hurt by these policies. We cannot, by any stretch, pretend in this place that we can take away the pain or the suffering that they endured and that was inflicted on our fellow countrymen and countrywomen, but we can resolve to ensure that such atrocities are never repeated and to support those broken-hearted souls during the remainder of their lives. I do hope that through this apology, through the extraordinary support across both sides of politics, we can give some comfort to people like Brenda as they continue their life's journey. I commend the apology to the House.