



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

**APOLOGY TO AUSTRALIA'S
INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

SPEECH

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BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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Speaker Abetz, Sen Eric

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Senator ABETZ (Tasmania) (12.01 pm)—Today I join with others in supporting the motion moved by the Leader of the Government in the Senate. The purpose of the motion is to say sorry to Indigenous Australians for past misdeeds, an apology. It is to advance reconciliation—laudable, worthy and noble objectives deserving the support of every senator in this chamber. Previously, this parliament has resolved a similar sentiment in its expression of regret in 1999. The dislocation white settlement had on our Indigenous brothers and sisters is hard to imagine. The differences were phenomenal, be it in traditions, beliefs, technology, resistance to certain diseases and tolerance to alcohol, to name a few. Another is the understanding—or, should I say, lack of understanding—of how our Indigenous population operated in the sense of a genuine extended family in the nurture of children, which was often misunderstood as child neglect.

I commend the statesmanlike speech that the alternative prime minister, Dr Nelson, delivered earlier today. It was sincere, genuine and visionary. In 1996, I had the honour and privilege to serve as the chair of this parliament's native title committee, and saw first hand the unacceptable disadvantage of our Indigenous communities, visiting them from Coober Pedy to Kununurra and from the Torres Strait to my home state of Tasmania. In discussing native title, in discussing apologies, a number of themes did emerge. One was the Indigenous community's understandable desire to enjoy mainstream health and wealth, something which native title promised to deliver. Another was the need for local leadership and responsibility. The difference between communities only half-an-hour drive apart was sometimes very stark, the differences being in the local leadership. The other theme was the scourge of white lawyers inflicting their ideology in the name of looking after the Indigenous communities.

Not surprisingly, Indigenous aspirations are largely the same as ours. They want a house, they want good health, they want a car, they want security and they want a future for their children. So, when former Labor senator Graham Richardson promised all Indigenous communities flowing water, it was welcomed. That practical help, if carried out, would have been a massive step forward, as is the intervention in the Northern Territory, restoring law and order and protecting women and children. But, in the 'group think' we currently have, it seems you are socially aware to be angry about not apologising for past deeds whilst condemning those who feel anger about the abuse and misdeeds that currently occur within these communities. I suspect children in danger of being raped would prefer protection to an apology. I trust we will have both. We can have both, and we must have both—the practical and the symbolic.

I do not mind admitting that I am more of a practical person, or a person in support of substance over the symbolic. But I accept symbolism is important, and it is a journey that I have travelled and accepted. Words of apology are important circuit breakers if accepted and acknowledged with a reciprocation of forgiveness. Apologies will not provide the healing unless the words are accepted and forgiveness is reciprocated. In my home state of Tasmania, there was an official apology a decade ago followed by compensation. Regrettably, I do not detect any change. Indeed, the same activists who called for the apology and compensation condoned the burning of the Australian flag just a few weeks ago. I hope today's apology does not travel the same path.

We need to recognise that many Australians are questioning of today's apology. Are they all mean-spirited? Absolutely not. Similarly, not all those advocating an apology are politically correct flunkies. Both views come from genuine, sincere Australians. But I must say the Prime Minister's approach is causing some division and cynicism. The refusal by the Prime Minister to share the wording with the Australian people until a few hours ago suggests other imperatives were at work, as is his absolute refusal to share the legal advice on the issue of compensation. Sure, the Prime Minister had the media, the audience, the screens—which, might I add, only showed Mr Rudd—and even the day and hour finely choreographed, but he had all that done before he even had the words in place. The parliament was denied the opportunity to fully discuss the issue, to keep the self-promotion timetable for the Prime Minister.

This is an issue which was developed over 10 years ago and is now brought into this place with indecent haste, lack of consultation and breach of accepted parliamentary practices. We had the vote before the debate finished.

That is fine if you are into the slick media timetable, but not so if you are truly genuine about bringing as many Australians as possible with you. The apology, I believe, has been demeaned as a result. Indeed, the rush and lack of consultation is highlighted by the reported bungle over which group were the traditional owners for the purposes of yesterday's delightful welcome to country and the different representatives for today's activities.

I can understand the cynicism of many in the community. I also understand the doubts by many over the term 'stolen generation'. As someone who has read the report cover to cover including its appendices, and discussed some misgivings I had with one of the authors, Sir Ronald Wilson, in my office, I empathise with those doubts. To assert that people who took vows of poverty and devoted their life's work to serving the Aboriginal community were complicit in genocide is unsustainable and offensive, and even more so after the findings in the Gunner and Cubillo cases.

I understand how people feel when a person gets compensation because of their race and for being 'stolen' by welfare authorities when their mother was doing time in jail for neglect of children. But we do not compensate capable, loving, young unmarried mothers who were defrauded by the same welfare authorities by being told their child had died at birth and given empty coffins to bury. It seems we are allowed to feel sorry for the first but not the second.

When you hear the Labor member for Bass pronounce the apology as a first step and then laugh hysterically when asked what the next step might be, it shows the shallowness of some. To all those people who have those doubts, see an inequity or express cynicism, I simply say: I understand those reservations, but nevertheless I plead with you to give this apology a go. Many people have asked for it for many years. Many say it will make a material difference for a group in our society that have been undeniably mistreated, so why not give it a go?

Some time ago, a group of Christian Aboriginal women that I spoke with apologised for their hatred of the white people. Racism in this country has been a two-way street but I think most of the traffic has been on the white side. If these Aboriginal women had found it within themselves to seek forgiveness from the white community why can we not find it within ourselves to also offer an apology for past misdeeds? That is what this apology is about and that is why I fully support it, and I trust that reconciliation will be enhanced as a result of this unanimous decision of this place. *(Time expired)*