



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**MOTIONS**

**National Apology for Forced Adoptions**

**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 21 March 2013**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Thursday, 21 March 2013  
**Page** 2950  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Irons, Steve, MP

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**Mr IRONS** (Swan) (12:58): On behalf of the Leader of the Opposition and the coalition, I rise to respond to the Attorney-General's motion. I heartily endorse his words and sentiments, and acknowledge the commitment by this government of the \$11.5 million to assist people in their journeys from this time forward.

Today we saw the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition deliver formal statements of apology, on behalf of the nation, to the parents and children who suffered harm when those children were forcibly removed and separated from their parents. Since my election in 2007, this is the third apology delivered on behalf of this nation to people who have suffered under a system that we could all say would not be acceptable in today's society.

I want to start by paying tribute to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition for the warm-hearted sentiments they expressed in the Great Hall this morning. For me, personally, it is a privilege to be able to respond on behalf of the coalition—and, after this morning's experience in the Great Hall, I feel greatly humbled to be responding on behalf of the coalition. To those who have been affected by these policies, you deserve nothing other than an unequivocal and formal apology in this place, and I hope many of you will be happy and relieved this day has finally come. This day is about you.

This apology, along with the apologies to the stolen generation in 2008 and the forgotten Australians in 2009, provides a substantial window into the humanity of this parliament. All members in this place know that we work in an adversarial environment, and these three apologies, which have dealt with some of the most misguided, shameful and regrettable actions of our 20th century social directions policies and programs, enable us to open our hearts and minds to the suffering and experiences of many people in our Australian population.

For those people who have lived the experience of forced removal and the secrecy that surrounded the process and outcomes, you now have had the opportunity of coming out into the open with your experience and this gives legitimacy to what happened to the mothers, fathers and their children. No longer do you have to feel as though you have a secret that will not be believed. This parliament is recognising that,

and that is our message to you today. I can only begin to imagine what the parents of the children removed may have felt. The evidence given in the Senate report in 2012 on the forced adoption policies and practices gives us an intimate insight into those experiences.

I would like to relay to the House my own personal experiences that may assist other members understand in some small way the issues and understand the feelings that the parents and children of forced adoption felt and feel. I know that this House has people from many varying backgrounds, and these life experiences contribute to our ability to understand the emotions and trauma of people who have been through the forced adoption process. I am aware that at least one person in this chamber is an adoptee and, as I have stated before, I was a ward of the state. The feeling of disconnection from my family left a void in my life that was hard to explain and I can only guess that any child who had been removed and was aware they had been removed must have had similar feelings.

As a six-month-old baby, I along with two of my siblings was removed from my family due to financial circumstances. We went to stay in institutions. At that point, I was separated from my other two siblings. Growing up in the Irons household, I often thought about my family—"Where were they? What did they look like? Was I the same as them? How many of them were there?" I used to walk into shopping centres or football games and wonder if my brothers or sisters might also be in the same place I was and how close they might be. But I knew I would not know them even if I bumped into them.

Speaking to my mother about these issues years later, she spoke to me of the pain and the sorrow and feelings of hopelessness she experienced after having four children taken away from her. I mentioned earlier that three children were removed, but the next child after me, Richard, was actually adopted out and spent his whole life in a family growing up with two adoptive siblings who were significantly older and thinking he was just a late addition to that family.

When his adoptive mother passed away in 2011, Richard by then knew he had been adopted and, at the tender age of 51, sought out his original birth certificate and then discovered he had nine siblings. So in early 2012 I met my brother for the first time. He was 51

and I, along with our older brother Robert, were the first contact he had had with his family since he had been adopted. Richard—or Rick, as he prefers to be known—felt an enormous range of emotions prior to meeting us, and then his world changed on the day he met with us. Rick had the characteristics I have seen in many of my fellow forgotten Australians, ranging from insecurity to socially inhibited interactions that can only come from the type of experiences they have been dealt. It was a surreal feeling to be sitting there with two brothers who looked similar when none of us had the same surnames. We all had the same smart alec sense of humour and we shared not only physical similarities but similar idiosyncrasies. I wonder what it would have been like to grow up together. Should I see this as lost years or should I approach it from the angle that we still have many good years to share in the future? I also wonder what it would have been like to grow up in a family of 10 children and what could have been.

Are these the thoughts or similar of people who have been through the forced adoption process? From the evidence given to the Senate inquiry, the shroud of secrecy that surrounded the process young mothers went through and the lifetime of bitterness and feeling of disconnection would have been a continual mental blight on their lives.

Anyone who has ever felt they have let their children down by not being able to attend a school play or a game of sport will know that in itself that one experience can play with your emotions for days. Can we even begin to imagine what it must feel like to carry that with you your whole life? I know my wife, Cheryle, who lost her daughter Lauren at the age of 10, carries with her the nagging doubts about whether she did enough to save her child. For those mothers who had their children forcibly removed, I am sure the thoughts 'Did I fight hard enough?' or 'Could I have changed things and kept my child?' must continually be with them daily in their lives. Well, the answer is you had no choice, and for that this parliament has apologised to you today.

In the Senate report, evidence was given about forced removal, and I would like to quote from one of the many pieces of evidence as an example. The evidence was from an unnamed witness who was in the Royal Women's Hospital in 1959:

On the sixth day a nurse came to my bed and told me that someone wanted to talk to me in a nearby room. I went to this room and I now realise the person in it was a social worker. She started talking to me about my baby son. I can't remember what she said to me except these words; 'I should not have been breast feeding him and I had no rights to him.'

I was extremely shocked, I believed that he was mine. She then placed in front of me some papers and told me to sign them: they were adoption papers.

Numbly I signed them.

As I was in complete shock I returned to my bed immediately, my baby was taken away and a nurse bound my breasts tightly and painfully to dry up my baby's milk.

I never saw my baby again.

Can we as a parliament or as individuals even begin to imagine what that must feel like? Many young women were traumatised by the harsh treatment they received under these policies. I am sure all in this place will agree the delivery of a national apology for forced adoption was well overdue.

The Senate report says that forced adoption affected not only mothers who were compelled to have their children adopted but also fathers, husbands, subsequent children, the adopted people themselves and their adoptive families. Some adopted people indicated in their submissions that their adoptive parents cared for them very well, and I quote from a witness:

I wish to state right here and now that I categorically feel no hatred or bitterness towards my birth or first adoptive families!!!!

Most adopted people who made submissions did not have positive experiences with their adoptive parents, or at school, and that is why this apology needs to deal with not only the parents who lost their children but also those who were actually removed and all the other people who were affected by these removals. Again I quote personal experience that my older brother Robert relayed to me when I met him later in life. He said he came home from school and his three siblings were gone. He did not know where they had gone and if he would ever see them again, and this had an enormous effect on him.

Approximately 150,000 to 250,000 babies of unwed and mostly teenage mothers were adopted by childless married couples from the 1950s until the mid-seventies in Australia. It is important that today we as a parliament have acknowledged the pain and suffering separated parents and their children experienced. We as a parliament have apologised, and I recognise that we can never, ever make up for the trauma, the pain of loss and the disconnection and separation caused by the forced adoption process you went through. Our apology is to recognise that pain, and hopefully for many you can now move into a phase of your lives that sees you and your families start to heal. We have heard

the Prime Minister commit to funding mental health services, and that is a good thing. I hope those funds find their way to those services that will assist you.

In a nation like ours, where our expectation is that we nurture, care for and love our children and provide them with the security of a safe, happy life in their formative years, we have seen many examples of that not happening. We have seen the abuse and torture visited upon institutionalised children that we now have a royal commission into. Today in the Great Hall we heard the recognition of and apology for the forced adoption policies of the 1950s through to the 1970s. In this place, along with state governments, we are charged with the responsibility of implementing policies that meet the expectations of child care throughout this country. We must remain vigilant and be prepared to action the wrongs and abuse we become aware of immediately and not decades later. If we do not, we have failed those who are here today who have been through that process and we will fail our children in the future—if we are not vigilant.

I support this motion. In closing, I would like to say to all the people who have been harmed by the forced adoption process and to those that have made the journey today: we have heard you, we believe you and we feel for you. I hope today's formal apology, even if only in a small way, can contribute to lighten the burdens of your past.

Honourable members: Hear, hear!

Debate adjourned.