

FORCED ADOPTION APOLOGY - SPEECH

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(Please check against delivery)

Delivered on Thursday, 18th of October 2012.

It with great honour that I stand here today, side by side with my fellow parliamentarians, and with the Tasmanian community, to offer this most sincere apology.

To the mothers, fathers, sons and daughters: we *cannot* take back what you have lost, we *cannot* change how you feel and who you have become as a result of your experiences, we *cannot* simply unpick the patchwork of your lives to erase the memories of the hurt and trauma inflicted upon you.

We *can* offer you this apology, in the hope that it might provide a pathway to healing some of the deep and terrible wounds that you have endured as a result of these past policies and practices.

We *can* offer you support to aid in your healing and to help you move forwards.

We *can* educate the community to help foster understanding and empathy, to make it known that you have been wronged, and that the shame and guilt is not yours to bear.

We *can*, and must, learn from our mistakes, so that atrocities of this nature may never be repeated.

As a former teacher, I now wonder how many children I taught or knew were forcibly removed from their parents at birth.

How many mothers, dropping their children off at the school gates each day, were masking behind their smiles, memories of the precious bundle they lost?

The precious bundle they carried through pregnancy, that they loved and nurtured in the womb, and that they gave birth to, only to have that precious bundle whisked away out of their loving embrace, shortly after birth.

How many people I see as I wander down the street spend their lives searching, scanning the faces of babies, children, teenagers and now, adults- looking for signs, desperate for a glimpse of their lost child.

The birthday of their baby is an annual reminder of the heartache and pain, that only parents who have lost a child can know.

Bonding between mother and child was a policy no-no.

No teddy bears allowed.

Since being elected as a Member of Parliament, I have spoken to and met with many people directly impacted by past forced adoption policies and practices.

I have been struck by the stark reality these people have faced.

The trauma, the heartache, the pain, the loss, the confusion, the guilt, the shame.

I have also been moved by the stories of courage, growth and happiness that have emerged like desert flowers from otherwise difficult circumstances.

Stories of reconnection between mothers and fathers, between sons and daughters.

Stories of those whom have carried with them the burden of secrecy, finally feeling that they can share their stories and realise that they were not alone in their experiences.

Stories of people who have carried around the burden of shame and guilt for so long, suddenly coming to the realisation that they have done no wrong.

Stories about mothers working up the courage to tell the world of their experiences and in doing so, helping those who have shared similar life stories.

Stories of people banding together to fight for justice, for past wrongs to be acknowledged and to be prevented in the future.

Stories of people who have been worn down by their experiences over the many years since a forced adoption, finally seeing some hope offered by this formal recognition today and as a result, the slow restoration of their self-confidence and respect.

These stories are amongst the most poignant human stories I have ever heard.

A story I heard just this morning for example is from a woman who never knew her mother, a woman who was separated at birth.

This is a woman who went into what can only be termed a loose foster care arrangement. An arrangement to which she was subjected to unimaginable trauma and abuse.

She then gave birth to her own baby, a baby forcibly removed. A baby, now an adult, she never saw nor has ever met. The father of that removed baby was either her step-father or her step-mother's son, she doesn't know.

To the average Tasmanian who has not been directly affected by forced adoption, it is very hard to comprehend the full scale of the impacts of these policies and practices.

Society at the time was in the grips of a moral code which was ignorant of the realities of the human condition and devoid of any empathy for the mother-child relationship.

It is difficult to understand this, given the relative maturity of today's society

Until very recently, past forced adoption policies and practices have been enshrouded with secrecy.

The very underpinnings of forced adoption policy and practice were about creating secrecy, and about hiding the truth.

This secrecy has been, and continues to be the cause of much of the heartache and suffering that has resulted from these practices.

Secrecy in the locking away of young unmarried pregnant mothers, in institutions away from the public eye.

Secrecy, in the prevention of any contact between mother and father, once a pregnancy is discovered.

Secrecy, in the denial of information about rights of parents to keep, love, suckle, nurture, and raise their child.

Secrecy, in the administering of medications to sedate and control parents who are distraught at the loss of their child, and violently protesting the separation.

Secrecy, in the telling to mothers that their child has died, when in fact their child is alive and well and being handed to prospective adoptive parents just down the other end of the ward.

Secrecy, in denying the sons and daughters the right to know their true origins, in trying to blot out and re-write their life stories, and in effect, concealing aspects of their identity.

Secrecy, in denying these practices occurred.

Secrecy, in denying that these practices were wrong.

Let today be a final lifting of that veil of secrecy.

Allow us to recognise your pain instead of denying it.

Allow us to admit responsibility, so that your burden of guilt and shame may begin to lift.

Allow us to walk with you in your journey of healing and shoulder some of the burden of your troubles.

May we talk about and share in your stories so that your history, our history, is understood and respected.

No longer will we shut away the truth to pretend it didn't happen. We know that this does not work.

There are no winners in trying to suppress or hide from our past.

We have to ensure that institutionalised fear and guilt is eliminated.

To conclude, Mr Speaker, I wish to also quickly acknowledge the work undertaken by the Premier, and the Minister for Children in getting this necessary and long over-due apology underway. Also their advisors and departmental staff.

I also wish to thank my Executive Assistant Caroline Wootton for her ongoing commitment and work on this important issue on behalf of the Greens and constituents.

But of course, the main acknowledgement and tribute that must be paid is to the many mothers, fathers and these adopted as children who have been unwavering in their rightful demand for justice.

As elected representatives of the Tasmanian community, we have a huge responsibility to ensure that we protect the vulnerable in society at every turn, because the consequences of trauma experienced by one generation will resurface in subsequent generations.

This trauma does not simply disappear.

No government should ever come between a mother giving her baby a teddy bear.
