

TASMANIAN STATE FORMAL APOLOGY TO THOSE AFFECTED BY PAST FORCED ADOPTION PRACTICES

Speech delivered by Greens Leader Nick McKim MP

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(Please check against delivery)

Mr Speaker,

I rise on behalf of the Tasmanian Greens to join with all members of this House in acknowledging the hurt and suffering caused by the horrific past practice of forced adoption. We also join with all members of this House to issue our most unreserved and sincere apology.

None of us in this House can truly understand what it was like for all those people affected, but we owe it to each and every one of those people to at least try to imagine how we would feel if it was us who went through this trauma.

I know all members will have read in the Senate inquiry report or heard by direct communication, including speaking to people who were impacted, about some of the terrible stories that occurred. There were many stories and many tragedies that occurred in the past. I want to mention a couple here today.

Firstly, from the Senate inquiry and testimony in recent consultations undertaken by the Tasmanian Government, we have heard from mothers who said:

'We were treated like dirt'. Another said, 'We were made to feel like we were bad girls', and that has stayed with them their whole life. Many at the time were given variations on the words, 'If you love it' - speaking about their child - 'you will give it away'. As well as the coercion that this involves, they were so greatly upset the baby was referred to as 'it', not 'him' or 'her' or 'your baby'.

They referred to practices such as having their faces covered with pillows as they gave birth so they could not see their baby and that baby being taken away without being able to see them.

I also had the honour of speaking this morning with Margaret Giblin, a mother who went through the terrible trauma of being forced to give up her baby. While she was in labour, as a 17-year-old, the doctor said to her, *'You've had your fun; now you're paying the price'*. Margaret was allowed no visitors and

no support while she was in the institution. Margaret told me this morning that she has learned to live with what happened but has had a hole in her heart her whole life.

Margaret also told me a terrible part of her experience, and I offer this as evidence of the level of trauma so many mothers and other people went through. Another mother in the same institution was told that her child had died. Margaret does not know whether that child died or not, but she told me this morning she could not help thinking how lucky that mother was that her child had died because at least she knew what had happened to her baby. Margaret did not know what was going to happen to her baby. This does not reflect on Margaret in the slightest; it reflects on the horrendous practices that have occurred in the past.

These are nightmares, but they are real nightmares. There are so many more examples that there is not time to relate here.

Tragically, there are many more that have never been told and some that never will be told because for some this acknowledgement and this apology comes too late because their lives have already ended.

These terrible, terrible stories of mothers who never got to hold or say goodbye to their child, fathers who never got to see their child, parents denied the right to hold and know their child are real stories.

They are not delusions or fanciful excuses made up by those trying to find someone else to blame for what they were told were their own mistakes.

Some people have understandably carried the knowledge of what happened as a terrible secret through part or all of their lives. No apology or acknowledgement can truly make adequate reparation. These overwhelmingly young women were criticised for getting pregnant out of wedlock, then criticised for wanting to keep their child and, in some cases, after they went back to their homes they were subjected to criticism for giving up their child.

All this during the twentieth century, in a society which considered itself to be civilised and free.

There is no way to sugar-coat this; it is one of the greatest moral and legal failings in Tasmania's history.

The Senate inquiry report summarised the 'clean break' theory which it says underpinned much of the past practices. The report says that, *“a clean break would supposedly allow both parties to forget about the past and forge a life free from stigma.”*

But in reality the so-called 'clean break' condemned many to be haunted by the past and suffer a life unfairly shrouded by a sense of shame and guilt.

We acknowledge here today the depth and degree of immediate and long-term trauma, grief and loss.

We acknowledge these past wrongs, that women were coerced and intimidated and bullied into giving up their babies.

We acknowledge that they were not believed and we acknowledge that this was an abuse of power.

We acknowledge that in many instances the mothers and fathers did not and were not able to give informed consent for the removal of their baby.

We acknowledge impacts such as loss of identity for those adopted as children but who are now grown-up adults often searching for answers.

Of course there will be tears shed today but none of those tears - which I acknowledge are shed as a genuine response and acknowledgement of a shared humanity - can come close to the decades of tears shed by those who lived it and continue to live it.

As cited in the Senate committee inquiry report: *“a mother whose child has been stolen does not only remember in her mind, she remembers with every fibre of her body.”*

This is a significant day.

Not only is it a day in which a long-overdue and long-awaited acknowledgement and apology is finally being provided but, significantly, this apology recognises that these horrendous past practices were illegal.

They are morally reprehensible and unfathomable to us today but it is also fundamentally important to clearly acknowledge that they were wrong and legally wrong.

These practices should not be dismissed as 'just a society evolving', as some have tried to excuse them; these were unlawful and immoral acts.

We should all today be proud to be in the first Australian parliament that has had the guts to call it as it is and state on the public record that these practices were illegal.

So many affected parents and other people have stated clearly that an acknowledgement and an apology is vital for their ongoing journey moving towards a place of healing and internal peace. The past must be acknowledged to free people to try to move forward. None of us here today will try to suggest that an apology will undo the hurt, the pain, the social dislocation or loss of identity. It will not suddenly make lost and missing records appear, but we hope that this apology and acknowledgement provides a bridge to a better future.

As such, it is important to acknowledge that this apology is a first step, an important but preliminary step, and there must - and as the Premier has confirmed today - be ongoing support and assistance provided.

It was not only the government of the day that was involved. There were other non-government organisations that were also involved and complicit in these appalling practices. Some of those are yet to face up to their responsibilities and issue formal apologies, and I urge them to do so.

There are still many in our community who are oblivious to these unacceptable events, or at least unaware of the specific circumstances or the trauma experienced by those affected. There will be many who are unaware that this affected or continues to affect their neighbours, their family members, and their workmates. Our office had contact from an adopted person whose efforts to contact their mother led them to contact their uncle. This person was completely unaware that his sister had ever had this child until over 30 years later when the now adult nephew made contact.

Many reports and inquiries have recommended that community support and educational material should also be developed and made available to help

foster greater understanding and awareness across all levels of our society, which is very laudable in their intent.

But if we are going to stand here today and promise to learn from the past, as we all are, then we need to not just pay lip service to the past. We have to make sure that ongoing and meaningful measures to address past wrongs and to provide ongoing support still occur.

There has been such suffering and such damage.

On behalf of all members I would like to acknowledge and thank the Premier for the commitments she has announced today detailing areas of dedicated support that will be provided by the state, and I also welcome the commitment to the development of an appropriate permanent memorial to mark this sad and shocking period in our history. It cannot and must not be allowed to be forgotten, and we all undertake here today to ensure that it is never again swept back beneath the carpet.

I also want to be clear that it is our firm understanding that the prime reason that so many affected people have taken such a brave and courageous step of speaking out is absolutely not about seeking financial compensation, as some have attempted to paint it. Fortunately it is only a few who have tried to put this slant on these calls for acknowledgement. I want to take the opportunity to personally thank the many brave and resolute people who, knowing that their motivation could be misconstrued, still stood up and spoke out.

That determination to stand up for natural justice and strength of character to pursue the cause, no matter how hard it was, is a true testament to incredible strength of character and clarity of purpose and it puts to shame all those who continued to try to deny their efforts.

It puts to shame those who participated in or condoned or allowed these practices, finally acknowledged here today as illegal.

It puts to shame those who have tried to deny that anything wrong or untoward occurred.

It puts to shame those who have since tried to brush this sad part of our history beneath the carpet and imply that these women, men, and adoptees should just 'get over it'.

There will be those for whom this long-overdue recognition has come too late.

We have to face up to the sad fact there are mothers who have since died without ever finding their babies, now adults, and there are adopted children who have died before their mothers or members of their family of origin could find them. That is the tragic and unavoidable human toll that must also be acknowledged.

On behalf of the Greens I want to place on the record our thanks and appreciation to the Premier for heeding the calls for Tasmania to issue this overdue apology to those affected by these horrific past practices. I also wish to thank all those who assisted in making this apology and this acknowledgement happen within the Premier's office and the departmental staff involved. These are obviously very difficult issues to work with.

I also want to pay tribute to my colleague, Paul O'Halloran, and his staff and other staff supporting the Greens who have driven the call for a formal apology on behalf of the Greens and who have worked closely with affected people to secure the necessary and appropriate recognition.

Today, however, is for the mothers, the Tasmanians who were adopted under these shocking circumstances, the siblings they were denied the chance to grow up with, the fathers, and the grandparents they never knew. The parliament owes them, many of whom who are here today, an incredible debt of thanks.

We do not take lightly the massive effort and toll it has taken on many of you to share your experiences and participate in the events that have led up to today, or the ongoing effort it will still require to move forward. We thank you for your fortitude, your resolve and your sheer determination not to give up in your fight to reconnect with your families.

Today is about connections.

It is about recognising the connection between mother and child, which so many of us take for granted as our given right to celebrate. It is also about recognising that for some, that fundamental connection was severed cruelly and unforgivably through no fault of either the mother or child.

It is about recognising the connection between actions and consequences. These horrific policies had seismic consequences for so many Tasmanians, so many women and children and other family members, which are still felt today.

Today is also about reconnecting.

It is our hope that this may smooth the path towards family members being able to reconnect. It can also herald a new stage in the journey where mothers and adoptees can access necessary documents and files, where people who may never meet their families of origin in person can still move a little towards reconnecting with their sense of identity via records which can at least provide them with their initial birth name and the name of their birth parents.

Today is also about reconnecting decision makers with the consequences of past policy decisions made. It is a sad truth that we have to draw these dots before the picture will be acknowledged, but by connecting those dots between actions and consequences we now have a responsibility to squarely face the picture that emerges and to learn from it.

The struggle by many mothers to reconnect with their child, which has spilled out from the shadows of shame and emerged from beneath the carpets under which it was once swept, has forced us all to confront this awful truth. We owe you all a debt of thanks for ensuring that this veil of secrecy and disbelief has been drawn aside here today.

What happened was wrong, it should never have happened, and it cannot and must not be allowed to happen again.

We pledge to you here today that we will do everything in our power to ensure that this does not happen again. We unreservedly apologise to those here today, to those who are unable to attend, and we also apologise to those for whom this formal apology has arrived too late.

We are so very, very sorry.
