

## *The Australian Adoption Apology*

Australia is the only country in which the government has issued a formal apology for the past adoption policies and practices that had led to so many family separations. This apology, which took place in 2013, was a result of the efforts of many people who had experienced adoption separation, who worked tirelessly over several decades, individually and in groups, to educate the Australian community in general and politicians in particular about their issues. Historically, in Australia, adoption had been seen as a positive outcome for all concerned. Since the early 1980s, however, a movement to acknowledge the grief and loss associated with separating children from their families has grown. This movement culminated in the apologies of the twenty-first century.

The journey to the Federal Apology for past adoption policies and practices began with a recognition of the long term issues for Aboriginal people who had suffered because of past colonialist policies which led to the removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities. In 1981 the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in New South Wales produced a paper, written by Historian Peter Read, entitled: *The Stolen Generations – The removal of Aboriginal children in New South Wales 1883 to 1969*. This paper described the policies and practices which led to the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families by federal, state and territory government agencies as well as church missions. These children were either adopted into non-Aboriginal families or placed in institutions.

Paul Keating, who became Prime Minister in 1991, delivered a speech the following year at Redfern Park, in which he acknowledged that the actions of the European settlers had caused long term issues of loss and grief for Aboriginal Australians. Following this speech, a campaign gradually gained momentum across Australia, which resulted in pressure being applied to the federal government to investigate this issue further and expose the truth about the long term outcomes for those families which were affected by these past policies and practices. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of May, 1995, an inquiry was established by the Federal Attorney-General, Michael Lavarch.

The inquiry was completed over the next two years and the report was tabled in the Australian Federal Parliament on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May, 1997. It was entitled: *Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, and became known as the *Bringing Them Home* report. Its principal aim was ‘to trace the past laws, practices and policies which resulted in the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families by compulsion, duress or undue influence, and the effects of those laws, practices and policies’. One year later, the first annual National Sorry Day was held.

In his parliamentary response to the *Bringing Them Home* report, the Opposition Leader, Kim Beazley, called for John Howard, who had become Prime Minister in 1996, to make a formal apology on behalf of the Australian people to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who had suffered the long term consequences of those past policies and practices. Mr Howard refused to issue an apology. However federal funding was allocated at that time, to help fund counselling, parenting support, family reunion services and an oral history project.

A letter, written by me, in response to Mr Beazley’s comments, was published in the South Australian *Sunday Mail*, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of June, 1997. The letter read as follows:

*Like Kim Beazley, I, too, weep for the Aboriginal children who were taken from their families. And I also weep for the parents of those children who will grieve their loss for the rest of their lives. But I also grieve for myself and the thousands of other mothers and fathers like me, whose children were taken from us to be adopted, because it was “for their own good”. We also expect to grieve the loss of our children for the rest of our lives. In the case of Aboriginal families, their “sin” in the eyes of society was simply to be Aboriginal. Growing up in an Aboriginal family was considered to be such a disadvantage the children had to be removed for their own protection. In our case, our “sin” was simply to be single and pregnant. Growing up in a single parent family was seen as such a disadvantage our children had to be taken from us to be adopted by married couples. Does anyone weep for our children? Can we expect an apology?*

Between 1997 and 2001, all Australian states and territories apologised to the Stolen Generations. The publicity which surrounded the *Bringing Them Home* report and the possibility of a federal apology had a major impact on members of the non-Aboriginal community around Australia, who had experienced adoption separation. Many of those people were aware that their issues were similar in some respects to the outcomes for the Stolen Generations and so efforts were increased to bring those issues to the attention of both politicians and the Australian community.

Kevin Rudd, who became Prime Minister in 2007, finally apologised, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February, 2008, on behalf of the Parliament of Australia, to the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal people for the policies and practices of the past. The apology included a resolve 'that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again'.

Then, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November, 2009, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised to the Forgotten Australians (ie those who had been raised in care) and the Former British Child Migrants, who had been brought to Australia as children. The apology was for what they had suffered, not only, for many of them, in terms of abuse, but, also for the loss of family, the loss of identity and, in the case of child migrants, the loss of their country. The apology included a commitment to fund appropriate services and supports to those affected. Many of the states and territories also apologised.

One of the reasons given by former Prime Minister John Howard for his refusal to apologise to the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal people was his view that one generation cannot accept responsibility for the actions of an earlier generation. By the end of 2009, however, the Australian people had generally come to accept that there is value in acknowledging the errors of the past and their long term outcomes in the lives of those who have been adversely affected and in putting in place supports and services to assist those affected. From this time forward, those whose lives had been affected by adoption separation stepped up their efforts to bring their issues to the attention of governments.

The first significant step in the journey towards a Federal Apology for past adoption policies and practices took place when the state of Western Australia, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October, 2010, became the first state, not only in Australia, but in the world, to apologise to family members separated by adoption for the policies and practices of the past which had led to those separations.

After this apology, the Senate Community Affairs Committee commenced an inquiry into the practice of forcible adoption in Australia between the 1940s and 1980s. The report on this inquiry, entitled *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices* was completed in February 2012. It was clear from this Senate Inquiry Report that many of those who were adopted were, like the Stolen Generations, removed from their families 'by compulsion, duress or undue influence'. In response to the report, all of the other states and territories in Australia, with the exception of the Northern Territory, issued apologies in 2012 for past adoption separations. The first was South Australia, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July, followed by the Australian Capital Territory on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August, then New South Wales on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September, Tasmania on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October, Victoria on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October and Queensland on the 27<sup>th</sup> of November.

One of the recommendations of the Senate Inquiry Report was that the Federal Government offer an apology for past adoption policies and practices. Julia Gillard became Australia's first female Prime Minister in 2010. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of March, 2013, Prime Minister Gillard issued a formal apology to all those in Australia who had suffered because of the separations which had occurred through adoption and acknowledged the healing power of an apology, both for those affected and for the nation. The apology included this statement: 'We resolve, as a nation, to do all in our power to make sure these practices are never repeated'. Funds were allocated to provide appropriate services for those affected.

This apology came at the end of a long period in which the understanding and recognition of the long term impact of the separation of children from their families, under a range of circumstances, was gradually brought to the attention of the Australian people. All of these apologies occurred as a result of efforts by many who had suffered the grief and loss associated with separation from family and who had refused to remain silent about their experiences. As a result of their efforts, the people of Australia have been educated, supports and services have been put in place and important lessons have been learned. Australia has set an example to the world.

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