



Sharon Grierson MP
Federal Member for Newcastle

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APOLOGY TO AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Ms GRIERSON (Newcastle) (8.09 p.m.) - In rising to speak on the motion offering an apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples, I would like to show my respect to and acknowledge the Ngunnawal people - the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which this parliament meets. I would also like to pay my respects to the Awabakal and Worimi peoples, the traditional owners and custodians of the lands in my electorate of Newcastle.

I join the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, in honouring the Indigenous peoples of this wonderful land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history, and I too apologise for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country. For the pain, suffering and hurt of the stolen generations, their descendants and their families left behind, I am truly sorry.

Like the Prime Minister, I hope this apology will be received in the spirit in which it is offered, as part of the healing of this nation. This apology is delivered to our fellow Australians in a spirit of human compassion and given in the same generous spirit as the welcome to country which was extended to us on the day preceding the apology motion, the first formal sitting day of this new parliament. For those who were not here, I have to say what a great privilege it was to be part of the first ever welcome to country in the Parliament of Australia. It was a most joyous ceremony which set the tone for last week. It was also very revealing for all of us - and we were enjoying it too - to see the diversity of culture of our different Indigenous peoples from all around Australia. It was an absolute treat and I congratulate everyone involved in the welcome to country ceremony. It was something that lifted us all to a much higher level, enabling us to better respond to each other's needs. Certainly, the parliament demonstrated that the next day. For those who could not be so generous, I apologise for them and I am sorry for them.

Last Wednesday this parliament made history when our Prime Minister apologised to Australia's Indigenous peoples. Our parliament resolved that the injustices of the past must never happen again. We committed ourselves to a future in which all Australians, whatever their origin, are truly equal partners with equal opportunities and an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this nation. It seems to all of us who are now sitting on the government benches that this will be a chapter of great decency, of great passion and of genuine discourse where we can talk to each other, look each other in the eye and try to understand, and set those ideals together and be part of the

journey of achieving those ideals. We do so as friends and as fellow countrymen and women. It has been too long coming.

For all those people who watched the apology on television around the country, the atmosphere in the chamber that day was something that none of us could imagine and all of us will never forget. It was amazing to walk in and see the past prime ministers from both sides of the House, with one very notable exception - or not very notable exception - and in particular Sir William Deane, a former Governor-General, who will always be remembered as a very special moral guide for this nation during his time as Governor-General. He was always a man of the people. He was always a friend to people in this country, particularly the Indigenous Australians.

The atmosphere in the gallery and the joy of the people who were specifically invited to represent the stolen generations, and the tears that flowed so freely, were things which all of us were moved by, and we were proud to be Australians on that day. It seemed that we were holding our very own 'national tear fest', and it does seem to have started some wonderful healing. I suppose that, sitting in the chamber, we did not know that, all around Australia, those feelings were being echoed and those experiences were being shared, particularly by Indigenous communities.

I am proud to say that, in Newcastle, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people gathered at the city hall. I am told it was a very moving experience. Richard McGuinness, the chair of the Guraki Committee, rang me afterwards and 'fessed up to being very moved. I think that was something we all happily 'fessed up to on that day. I thank the Guraki Committee and the Newcastle City Council for allowing the people of Newcastle to share in this important occasion via a big screen in the Newcastle City Hall. I also want to acknowledge and thank the Indigenous people from Newcastle who travelled to Canberra to witness this historic occasion. I know that Laurel Williams and Mrs Kelly - Ray Kelly's mother - were here in the chamber as guests of the Prime Minister. I know that, out on the lawn, Yarnteen, a very successful Indigenous enterprise, was represented by its CEO, Leah Armstrong, as well as board members and participants. I also know that Donna Meehan was there that day celebrating the wonderful occasion. Donna Meehan is someone I will be eternally grateful to. When I was a principal in public schools in Newcastle, Donna was an Indigenous liaison officer. To me personally and to all my staff during those many years, and to the many Indigenous students and families, Donna was an absolute pleasure to work with and always a friend.

Donna has made her own very special contribution as an Indigenous person of the stolen generations. In 2000 she published her book, *It Is No Secret: the Story of a Stolen Child*. I quote from the publisher's notes:

At the age of five, Donna Meehan was taken away from her large and loving Aboriginal family at Coonamble, NSW, and sent to be the only child of a white family in distant Newcastle. Tiny and vulnerable, she had to try and make sense of her strange new world and the loss of everything she had known and loved. Despite the true and enduring love of her adoptive parents, and of her husband, her loss of her sense of belonging brought Donna close to suicide. Only when she traced her birth parents could the healing begin.

Donna recalls the day she was taken from her family, describing the patterns on her mother's dress, which she can remember so vividly. The brothers who were to be separated from her for such a long time were there too. She describes her mother, saying:

Mum in her good blue dress, tears rolling down her cheeks too fast to wipe away.

For people like Donna it was a very special day. For that I am very grateful, because it is nice to be able to pay back those people who have so generously assisted the Indigenous people and the education communities in Newcastle.

I also want to acknowledge and thank the Indigenous people who joined me in my room during that day. I was very honoured to meet with Stephanie Gilbert, Bev Shipp, Megan Kirby and Laurel Williams here in Parliament House. When I asked these Aboriginal women what they thought would be important to include in this speech, they said:

Make sure people understand that we have survived despite everything and that we have a proud culture.

They wanted me to remind people that the removal of Aboriginal children was not something from the distant past and that they were still dealing with the consequences. Many, they said, are still meeting previously unknown brothers and sisters. I am told by Charlotte Connell, a Novocastrian journalist, that that was happening right here in Canberra at the tent embassy on that day. She witnessed the reunion of two brothers who had not seen each other for 40 years. But they also asked me to remind people that every reunion is a renegotiation of familial relations; it is not easy. They said:

And just as mothers are important, please also acknowledge the pain and suffering of fathers.

I have been contacted since that day by many, many Novocastrians, including Rick Griffiths, a former ATSIC Commissioner. Thank you, Rick, for your contact and for expressing the way that day made you feel proud. Your contribution to Indigenous Australians in the Hunter and Newcastle has always been very much valued.

I am also told that this event was watched around the world via podcast. I received an email from a very good friend, Helen Williams, who is the daughter of Joy Cummings, the first female lord mayor in Australia. Joy was the first lord mayor to raise the Indigenous flag over a town or city hall - that was Newcastle's - and to hold a civic reception in honour of our Indigenous people. Helen's daughter is the actress Sarah Wynter. Sarah and her mother, Helen, watched the apology in New York. Helen commented that in the many times she has visited America and read the Fairfax press and the *New York Times*, including throughout the Iraq war, she has never seen mention of Australia. But on that day in the *New York Times* there were headlines, a beautiful photograph of four Aboriginal elders and a story that read:

Formal apology to Aborigines by Australia's new leader. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd pledged to Australian lawmakers on Wednesday "to remove a great stain from the nation's soul".

It meant a great deal to expat Australians to know that such an important occasion was held here and that they were part of it as well.

Greg Heys, a former Lord Mayor of Newcastle, was the first lord mayor in Australia to honour a partnership between a local government council and the region's Aboriginal community. He signed a very special document at that time, a commitment to reconciliation. The ceremony was held in 1998, at which Councillor Heys said that the document recognised the community's efforts to see the past clearly. He said:

I do not find it hard to say sorry for particular sins perpetrated by my culture, including the stolen generation issue. We have a clear responsibility as a nation to see the past clearly, such that we can see our way clearly ahead, and this is what this commitment is about.

I know that those two Labor lord mayors would be very proud of this Labor government having put the wrongs of the past right, finally.

I would also like to say that so many Novocastrians sent text messages and emails saying they were proud to be Australians. They were Indigenous and non-Indigenous, but they were proud to be Australians. They also said that, finally, we have a Prime Minister who can inspire us and who can appeal to our better angels and make this country truly great. Yes, we have, and I am very proud to be a member of that government.

I think that it is only right that also we acknowledge the work of the media. I know that, in Newcastle, ABC 1233 in particular provided the opportunity for so many Novocastrians to express their feelings on talkback radio on that day.

I also acknowledge the work of previous prime ministers in this place. I particularly mention the inquiry that Paul Keating commissioned into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. I acknowledge the *Bringing them home* report which resulted from this inquiry. I was not a member of this House at the time, but I can remember watching Kim Beazley in tears in the chamber, detailing some of that report. I knew why when I read it, because it certainly was the most moving report. For it to have sat on the parliament's table for 11 years with no action was a great shame.

But now, of course, our challenge is action. As the Prime Minister has said, we have made this heartfelt apology but we must face the challenge ahead and deliver, with Indigenous Australians, real outcomes that provide dignity, justice and equity. It is the actions, not just the symbols, that will be important. In mentioning the targets that Labor has set for Indigenous affairs, I would like to acknowledge the great work of Minister Macklin. The apology was a great achievement. The wording was beautiful.

The negotiations were respectful and were certainly detailed and long. I think they have created a much closer bond between Labor and Indigenous Australia.

In speaking about the targets we have set for Indigenous Australians, I would like to acknowledge my staff member Sharon Claydon. She spent many years at Fitzroy Crossing. She is an aunty to many people at Fitzroy Crossing. I have watched her pain as she has lost many friends through deaths and suicides in that area. I would like to acknowledge the wonderful work she has done on the ALP New South Wales Indigenous Policy Committee that I know developed similar targets and set a model for us to follow.

I applaud the Prime Minister's commitment to improving Indigenous housing as a first priority. I am pleased to see that will have bipartisan support. A landmark study published today reinforced how important that is. I remember being shocked, when I went to Yuendumu, at the very poor design of Indigenous housing. It is appalling. Housing is vital to closing the gap. You cannot improve Indigenous people's health or give Indigenous kids a good education or expect them to thrive and be part of the future of this country if they do not have at least decent shelter.

There is much to do, but I am very proud to be part of this parliament and to have supported the motion of apology. I hope it will be the hallmark of a compassionate government, a government that does actually achieve its outcomes and does so with great respect for, and consultation and collaboration with, the stakeholders involved. Thank you to my Labor government and to the parliament for allowing me to be part of this. To the people of Newcastle: I am very proud to have represented you on this great occasion and to have been part of the National Apology. *(Time expired)*