

many people throughout Australia. He chose Redfern rather than an Aboriginal settlement in the Northern Territory or North Queensland, I guess, because it is symbolic of the urban reality for so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and because of the socioeconomic challenges that are often exhibited in this community. He also chose Redfern because it was a speech about hope. I will return to his speech and quote further. He said, and remember that this is on 10 December 1992:

There is one thing today we cannot imagine. We cannot imagine that the descendants of people whose genius and resilience maintained a culture here through 50 000 years or more, through cataclysmic changes to the climate and environment, and who then survived two centuries of dispossession and abuse, will be denied their place in the modern Australian nation.

We cannot imagine that.

We cannot imagine that we will fail.

And with the spirit that is here today I am confident that we won't.

I am confident that we will succeed in this decade.

Then, on 2 March 1996, that advancement towards reconciliation and a greater hope for Australia came to a screaming halt, when John Howard and the Howard government ensured that nothing else happened. We did not go forward as a nation in the late nineties. Instead, things stopped.

I certainly commend all the representatives in the House of Representatives last Wednesday who took part in that apology and were heartfelt in their apology. But, unfortunately, obviously not everyone from the other side of the chamber was prepared to participate in that apology. From my recollection, there were at least seven or eight people who either walked out or were missing and were not prepared to stay committed to what I assume was a collective coalition decision to participate in the apology. Maybe people were absent for other reasons. Maybe they had meetings planned—I am not sure. But I think it is shameful that people did not stay united and speak from the chamber as one in saying sorry to the stolen generations and to the representatives who were there in the chamber.

It is interesting. There was the sorry last Wednesday, a great day in this nation's history, and then we move forward to *Four Corners* on Monday night, where the new coalition members were trying to rewrite history. Apparently it was John Howard who called the shots on everything. No-one was able to speak up with such a voice to actually move him in any way. Any bad decision that was made was all John Howard's. No voice at that cabinet table was able to pass comment on Work Choices and obviously no voice at that table was able to speak on behalf of the stolen generations or the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people generally. It is almost as though the current opposition are trying to rewrite history. It is not really a 'black armband' view of history, which was John Howard's favourite phrase for condemning the Labor Party for trying to present the facts; I guess you could call it a 'slack armband' version of history: 'It wasn't me—no, it was all John Howard. John Howard did everything bad.'

I was fortunate enough to grow up in a country town where about one-quarter of the population, or a bit more than that probably, were Murris, were Aborigines. I do not go out to St George all that often. I am going out at Easter for a school reunion, but it is amazing the number of Murri friends who have phoned me up to comment on the apology and what it meant to them. These are not children of the stolen generation at all; these are people who did not have that experience. But it is amazing the number of them who have phoned up to say how great that was, how much it meant to them. It has really changed their view of government and what it can do.

By refusing to say sorry, by refusing to take the *Bringing them home* report recommendations and do something with them, the Howard government betrayed the real roots of Australia. It was almost like it was trying to erase the Mabo decision and say: 'No, no—terra nullius really did exist. There were no people here before Captain Cook and the first fleet came to Australia.' That is what the Howard government was saying.

So many of my friends in St George and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have made comment about how wonderful that gesture was from the Prime Minister and Jenny Macklin. That is why I am very proud, after my first speech, to be affirming the apology.

Ms BIRD (Cunningham) (6.33 pm)—Can I say, with the indulgence of the chamber, that I have very little voice left, but I am quite determined to use what I have left to put on the record of this place my support for the extension of the apology to the stolen generation that occurred last Wednesday on behalf of the parliament.

I cannot help but feel that last Wednesday was a moment in my parliamentary career that will never again be surpassed. It was certainly a wonderful feeling to win government and to be able to implement the programs that I know so many of my colleagues and the general public had been hoping would become the story of this nation. But, despite the level of pleasure I felt in that, it still did not come close to the feeling that was in the chamber on Wednesday when finally, more than 10 years after the tabling of the *Bringing them home* report, the parliament of this nation extended an apology to the stolen generation. I think what was so profound about it was the fact that

there are very few things more powerful in life than to say sorry. Sometimes we do it glibly and sometimes we devalue the word 'sorry', but saying sorry is one of the most powerful things we can do as one individual to another or as a government to a people.

By saying sorry, you do not ask yourself the question: how does this affect me? You ask yourself the question: how does doing this affect you? By saying sorry, you do not ask yourself: what does this cost me? You ask yourself: what will not doing this cost you? I think the story of our Indigenous people has made it very, very clear to us that the power of extending that sorry to them cost us very little and meant a terribly great deal to them. The faces in the chamber and those that we saw on the evening news in tears or with smiles of joy demonstrated visibly how powerfully important the extension of that apology was.

I speak mainly as a mother in this chamber. As the member for Cunningham, I am going to use my time to put forward the words of my own constituents on the extension of the apology. But I would just like to briefly talk about my feelings as a mother. I do this because I cannot understand people who extend a justification for the removal of Aboriginal children with an argument that says: but look what they achieved in their life, look at the improvements they made, look at the education or training they got.

There is no doubt that many Aboriginal people who were removed from their families and placed into other forms of care may indeed have experienced an education or an opportunity that gave them new avenues in their life. But to say that the price of losing your family is worth that, I find incomprehensible—absolutely incomprehensible. I have a 23-year-old son who is in London and I am missing him terribly and I had the great privilege of 22 years of his life, having him there every day. I cannot begin to imagine how I would have felt if a truck had rolled into my town when he was four, five, six or seven to take him away and I was never to see him again. I cannot imagine the incomprehensible damage that would have done to my life and the grief and suffering that would have been inflicted on our family—and yet this is what happened to 10 to 30 per cent of Aboriginal young people and children, up to 50,000 of them. It is wrong to say that that was purely an intervention to provide protection. There is no way that number of children needed to be removed purely on those grounds.

These were hard times; some of it was during the Depression. There were many working families who were out of work, who were having trouble maintaining their families and providing for their children. Indeed, in some cases they did have their children removed. But let us be clear: there was nowhere near the extent of removals that occurred in Aboriginal communities and there was no attempt to put the blame purely on their race. Clearly, these policies were about extinguishing the Aboriginal people. Because they were targeted at mixed blood children, that made the policies' intentions very clear.

My former husband discovered that he was a direct descendant of Bill Ferguson, one of the original Aboriginal activists in New South Wales. I did not know that until he was in his thirties. The other thing that was stolen from generations of people by these policies was their heritage, because what they did was force many people of mixed race, of both Aboriginal and white heritage, to hide their Aboriginal heritage, to deny it for generations for fear that because of that simple mixed blood they would lose their children. So there is so much that was stolen because of these policies and it is so important we reach out. We do it through the apology and we do it through an ongoing commitment to make sure that Aboriginal people's opportunities in our country are improved.

As I said, in the run-up to the extension of the apology in the parliament in the week since, I had at last count 122 emails from local constituents, one of which opposed the extension of the apology. The other 121 supported it. As their representative in this House, I want to place on the record some of the comments that I received from my local constituents. This is from James at North Wollongong:

Hi. I'm a Cunningham constituent and I'm writing to congratulate you on your re-election and to discuss the apology to the Stolen Generations that is in the news right now.

I'm glad to see the new Rudd government getting to work so quickly, particularly on this divisive issue that has been festering for so long.

However, I'm concerned that this apology will be purely symbolic. I agree that it is important to take the symbolic action of apologising to the Stolen Generations and reestablishing respectful relations. But I believe an authentic apology must be accompanied by good faith efforts at reparations.

In short Ms Bird, I'm asking you to push your party to adopt all of the recommendations of the Bringing Them Home report, not just the symbolic ones.

Thanks for your time.

Carolyn at Figtree wrote:

Just like to say thanks for yours and the Labor party's support of the apology to the Stolen Generation of Indigenous Australians but as you are aware this is only the first step and we want full implementation of the Bringing Them Home Report.

Chris at Thirroul wrote:

I am just writing you a short note to express my support for the apology to the stolen generation and the indigenous people of Australia that the government is proposing to make. Indeed, I think, speaking as someone who migrated from England 10 years ago (and is now an Australian citizen) that we should apologise for the wider devastation caused to indigenous peoples for the whole colonial adventure. Certainly I hope that the apology represents the start of a more sustained attempt by the government to address the inequalities and suffering experienced by indigenous peoples expressed for example in the report 'Bringing Them Home'.

Joy from Corrimal wrote:

I'm sure you support this bill as well as I do. I just believe you need to know how many of us are behind you. As an adopted non-aboriginal child I know the emotional issues of what it is like to grow up with more questions than answers. To have been removed forcibly and put into a different ethnic family, no matter how well-meaning an advantage, would not compensate for the wrench from one's own roots.

I urge you to urge other MPs to support this ground breaking apology. I also wonder if we are pressuring Britain to apologise for having treated Australian settlement and indigenous relations so differently from their treaties with the First Nation's aboriginal people of Canada.

Colin at Figtree wrote:

I applaud the government's decision to proceed with reconciliation with aboriginal people by agreeing to say 'sorry' for past atrocities and neglect. I look forward to seeing this process move on from 'sorry' and will be interested in your input and leadership at this time.

Justin at Austinmer wrote:

I heartily congratulate your party and leader for taking this important first step. I truly hope it's the beginning of some momentous leadership on this cause and that you'll be part of this. As we've all seen too recently, governments set the tone for leadership. Kevin Rudd is making a great start & I hope he rewards the faith shown in Labor's fresh approach to government so well reflected at the last election.

Lucas from North Wollongong wrote

I would just like to send a quick congratulations to your Government for ticking off my boxes so early in your term of Government. One of the biggest wishes I had for this country is for its people to recognise the position successive generations have put Indigenous Australians into so they can start to understand their plight.

Sorry is a big catalyst for this. I am proud that this Government has been strong enough to start the healing process. Well done.

This is from Robert of Woonona:

Well done for finally having the guts, and decency, to say sorry. As Elton John once sang, 'Sorry seems to be the hardest word'!

Catherine at Mangerton wrote:

Congratulations on being in government. I wanted to express my respect and thanks for the apology that the Labor government has made on behalf of the people of Australia for the treatment of Aboriginal people documented in the 'Bringing them Home' Report.

However, this is only the first step. To show sincerity, that your government is one of substance, not just rhetoric, you must have full implementation of the recommendations outlined in the 'Bringing them Home' Report.

Andrew at Otford wrote:

I strongly support the recommendations of the Bringing Them Home Report, as well as the Deaths in Custody reports ...

I supported Labour knowing that you have a more progressive and sympathetic policy to Aboriginal Australians and I am greatly encouraged by your enthusiasm for an apology.

Amanda of Figtree wrote:

I am so thrilled that the stolen generation of Aboriginal people are finally going to have a formal apology from our federal government. Well done! I hope and pray this is only the beginning of doing all that is possible to compensate these people and deal with the issues of health and justice and reconciliation for all Australian Aboriginal people. Thanks again.

Greer from Figtree wrote:

It is with great relief that I realize that our government is taking the first steps to acknowledge the injustices done to Aboriginal people in the past. The action of saying sorry is a wonderful and powerful first step. I urge you to ensure that it is just the first of many steps of a powerful and healing journey for all Australians! We will be a greater place for making this journey.

Sarah of Austinmer wrote:

It's really great the new government has finally taken on board the fundamental importance of an apology to members of the Stolen Generation.

I really want to congratulate you and your government for taking this important first step. I would hope, however, that this is just the beginning and that the government will seriously and comprehensively address the recommendations from the Bringing Them Home Report.

... ..
Very best wishes for the year of the rat. Let's make it a truly great one!

Rosemary of Wollongong wrote:

Thank you that the Labor Party through Kevin Rudd's leadership has decided to formally apologise to the Stolen Generation. This is an important first step in the official reconciliation process. With full implementation of the 'Bringing Them Home' Report, the future of Indigenous Australians will be much brighter. There are so many inequities to be addressed between white and Indigenous Australians—health, education, mortality, etc. Let it be borne out in our history that the Labor Party was the government who turned things around for the better!

Regina of Thirroul wrote:

Thank you for representing myself and my family when you apologise to the Aboriginal people of Australia.

Peter of Wollongong wrote:

I believe you are a person of principle. Think how history will judge us in 100 years time, when all the current preoccupation about neo-conservative economics is just a peculiar footnote in a textbook. Think about how our simple acknowledgement of a simple moral tenet, to say we are sorry for the sins of an earlier generation, no matter how well intentioned that may have been, and that we acknowledge they were wrong. We will just be telling the truth, our nation's leaders were wrong, and we are big enough and honest enough to say so. Please thank Mr Rudd for actually being a leader, and not just being a poll driven polliie. This really makes me proud, especially after the last 11 years.

That is only a small sample of the 121 emails. I apologise to the rest of my constituents, who I was not able to put on the record, but I assure you the expressions were reflected in that sample. They all make the point, and I think it is profoundly important, that this is a bridge to a longer term commitment to closing the gap between Indigenous Australians and white Australians. There is no doubt that each of us in this place will be particularly keenly endorsing and supporting the current government's commitments to closing that gap so that the apology issued last Wednesday will actually be the beginning of a whole new period for Indigenous Australians and an opportunity for them to take some of the many privileges that are their rights as citizens of this nation.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS (Canberra) (6.48 pm)—Mr Deputy Speaker Thomson, congratulations on your appointment to this important position. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak briefly on the apology that was executed in the chamber last week. I have always been in awe of the fact that I have even had a parliamentary career, and I am very fortunate to have been for the past four terms in this parliament. But I have to say that in all of those years I never quite imagined that an occasion within the parliament—and we have been through a few—would bring quite the level of emotion to everybody involved that last week's apology did. I have to be honest and say that I, along with lot of my colleagues—on both sides of the House, to be fair—found it a bit overwhelming. I do not think any of us quite imagined the extent this groundswell of reaction within the community would reach.

I am very fortunate, as the member for Canberra, to have had a very local connection in many different respects to the proceedings of last week. I want to first of all thank the community of Canberra at large for their obvious support of the occurrences of last week. That support came from not just getting in touch with offices like mine and thoroughly encouraging us to be part of this apology—and I have to say I did not need encouragement to do that, but I welcomed their input—but also the turnout of members of the local community who came out to be in or around this building. It was also reflected in those who in their workplaces—and some I know had the encouragement of their employers; even the ACT government allowed their employees to do this—watched the proceedings on television as a community at work and participated in that way.

Many Canberrans opened their homes. There was a very widespread email connection and other connections made through this community to say people are coming from everywhere and some of them are going to need some accommodation. Many Canberrans opened their homes and billeted people from all sorts of places. Those stories of those experiences are now just beginning to emerge. Some of them are wonderful in terms of the relationships that were formed and the friendships that I believe will, as a result, exist for a long time.

The other connection of course is that this has all happened on the Ngunnawal land, which is the land upon which we stand here today, which is my local community as well. I put on the record my absolute admiration for Matilda House and her family and the role that they took, particularly in the welcome to country on the Tuesday morning, which I thought was on par with the occurrence of the next day and its impact and emotional connection. Matilda, in fact, is a very dear friend of mine and I was so pleased to see her, her son Paul and the little ones from their family take part in that very moving service that was done in the Members Hall on the Tuesday morning. I am very proud to see that particular role from our local community.

In saying that, I must congratulate and thank those participants, dancers and performers who came, I understand, from other parts of the country to be part of that ceremony as well. I am sure that all members of the House