



## TRANSCRIPT

# National Apology for Forced Adoptions: 10th Anniversary Event

[Speaker – The Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, Minister for Social Services]

Well, thank you and it is such an honour to be here with you tonight, marking the 10th Anniversary of the National Apology for Forced Adoptions. I wanted to particularly welcome the mothers, adopted people, fathers, family members, advocates and support workers, for being here tonight.

I know that you have been through what no family or community member should ever have to go through, and I cannot imagine the pain you live with each day. I do understand that this occasion may be difficult, but I do really thank you for the courage of being here tonight.

I know that some of you have travelled a long distance to be here and I do appreciate it's been a long day. But I do think it is important that we recognise this 10 year anniversary.

I acknowledge that we gather here on the lands of the Ngunnawal people and pay my respect to elders past and present, and extend my respect to First Nations people that are with us today.

Each of you here tonight have made a contribution to our understanding of forced adoption in all its insidious forms by bringing the truth to what was a shameful chapter in our history. And I would like to take this moment to pay tribute to all of those who are unable to be with us tonight, those that have passed. And for those who have been so affected by the trauma of forced adoption, that they took their own lives. This event remembers them. We remember them.

Also, I'd like to pay tribute to former Prime Minister Julia Gillard, as one of the driving forces behind the national apology. Unfortunately, she had every intention of being here tonight, but she's caught COVID in the UK and unable to travel. She has asked the Honourable Nicola Roxon, former Attorney-General, to read out the remarks that she drafted on her behalf.

I would also like to take a moment to acknowledge a number of people that have joined us in the room. Attorney-General, the Honourable Mark Dreyfus KC, the Honourable Nicola Roxon, former Attorney-General, the Honourable Jenny Macklin, former Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Professor Nahum Mushin AM, chair of the Apology for Forced Adoptions Reference Group and the members of the Reference Group, as well as the Implementation Group. Former Senator, Rachel Siewert, the chair of the Senate Committee. And we have with us, the

Honourable Rachel Stephen Smith ACT Minister for Health, Families and Communities and Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders. And of course the Secretary of my department, Ray Griggs.

And I did want to also recognise all the support workers from our Forced Adoption Support Services, as well as those who advocated tirelessly, to bring the truth and healing about forced adoption to our community.

On this day, 10 years ago, Prime Minister Julie Gillard, delivered the National Apology for Forced Adoptions on behalf of the Australian Parliament. It was an historic moment. We took responsibility and unreservedly and humbly, apologised to the mothers who were denied, even that first precious moment with their child they brought into the world. For shaming them, berating and coercing them and breaking the mother-baby bond.

We apologise to the children, now adults, who were denied their identities and robbed of a sense of connection to family, culture and place. Instead, they've spent their entire lifetimes suffering trauma and searching for their identities. And in some cases, these children were denied the most fundamental right, the right to a happy and safe childhood, the right to be loved and nurtured and protected, and the right to grow up free from abuse.

We apologise to the fathers who sought but were excluded from the births and their children's lives, often causing a legacy of shame grief and disempowerment. And the wider families, the siblings, the grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, because this is intergenerational trauma that runs deep and wide.

The National Apology was an historic moment. It was groundbreaking. It not only said, sorry, but importantly it denounced forced adoption practices, as reprehensible, inexcusable, immoral and above all, illegal.

It took aim at the imagined sense of moral superiority, that inflicted its judgement and its cruelty on vulnerable people.

Now, 10 years ago today, 800 people came together in the Great Hall of Parliament House to represent the grief of thousands across the nation. A decade later, we come together tonight, to hold space for the ongoing pain and in recognition that the trauma of forced adoption was not wiped away with an apology.

Tonight, we commemorate the National Apology, to refresh and reinforce its sentiments. An apology that was realised due to the ongoing advocacy and tremendous courage of people, including many in this room, who relived painful experiences over and over again, to make sure the impacts were fully understood by the nation.

And I recognise that, time will not heal your wounds and that you are living with the ongoing pain and impact of forced adoption, every day. It's rippled through generations and it still does. And as I said at the time when I rose to speak in Parliament 10 years ago, we can never make up for the trauma, pain, loss, disconnection and separation, that has been caused by the forced adoption process, policies and procedures.

Because I spoke to many who had been affected by this. I spoke to a mother in my electorate, who said, "I've suffered such low self-esteem and low self-worth, that I can say, it's impacted on every decision I've made in life since".

I spoke to an adopted person in my electorate, who was forcibly removed from her unmarried mother six weeks after birth and given to a family who put her to work, labouring on a farm.

The pain and suffering associated with forced adoption practices, is lifelong. And for some people, the pain is ahead of them. There are adults today, who only now, in midlife, are finding out that they were adopted. Which is why it's critical that we continue to support everyone who suffers or will suffer the trauma of forced adoption, to this day.

And it's critical that we continue to remember the truth. A truth that has been carefully documented, thanks to the tireless work that resulted in the 2012 Senate inquiry in the Commonwealth's contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices.

The Senate inquiry was driven by Senators Claire Moore, Sue Boyce and National Party Senator, the Honourable Bridget McKenzie and chaired by Rachel Siewert, who's with us tonight. All who exposed the truth that had been hidden, in many cases for decades.

The inquiry heard from hundreds of people affected by forced adoption, which included many experiences untold, even to those closest to mothers and adopted people. There were over 400 submissions in all, as well as volumes of archival material.

Senate committee members, some of whom are with us today and committee staff, some of, also who are with us today, worked through boxes of hospital records and other materials, to expose these practices.

Following the release of the inquiry report on the 29th of February 2012, the then, Attorney-General, Roxon, moved quickly to establish the first meeting of the National Apology Reference Group. The Reference Group brought together mothers, adopted people and fathers, with members of Parliament, including Ms. Siewert and some members of the Senate inquiry, along with Mr. Graham Perrett MP, who's with us tonight, to inform the government's response.

The Reference Committee chaired by Professor Nahum Mushin, an esteemed Family Court Judge with 20 years' experience, compassionately guided the group's work, leading up to the apology, which in and of itself, was a significant part of the government's response. The Reference Group created the foundation of the apology, as a document of national significance that would both, raise awareness and support the healing of those affected.

The National Apology, was both, national in reach and deeply personal. And I'm honoured that so many from the Reference Group and the subsequent working group, as well as people who shared their experiences in Ms. Gillard's speech, are here tonight. This includes mothers like Dr Christine Cole, Kathryn Rendell, Elizabeth Brew and Caroline Ayers. And I acknowledge all other mothers who contributed to the apology, who could not make it tonight, including Ms. Angela Barra and Evelyn Robinson AOM.

I'm also grateful to the adopted people who made contributions to this process, including Mr. Leigh Hubbard and Mr. Paul Howes, as well fathers, like Gary Coles, and I'm so pleased they could be with us tonight.

And I acknowledge the officials, who made significant contribution in this work, including those from my department and the Attorney-General's department, as well as the staff at the National Archives of

Australia, who continued the national conversation and brought 700 personal experiences to people across the country to a national toured exhibit.

And I must also acknowledge, the beautifully rendered National Apology, in its physical form, which hangs in Parliament House, created by Gemma Black, who's also here tonight.

There are so many of you here tonight, that have contributed to this work, and while I cannot list you all, I did want to sincerely thank you for your work, your dedication and your bravery. I've often said in politics, it's easy to talk about others, but very hard to talk about your own personal experiences. But your experiences, your honesty, your bravery, means that we were able to move the dial and get some recognition on this issue.

The reason the national apology was so powerful and community attitudes began to change, are in large part, thanks to the people who were once told to be silent, speaking up to governments and letting us know what needed to be done, so we can make it better for children and their parents. And while we cannot heal these wounds, the passage of time has seen changes to society.

Forced adoption was driven by the supposed societal ideal that children must, at all costs, be raised by married parents, a mother and a father. To meet these standards, unmarried mothers were shamed, berated and coerced into being separated from their children. Babies were taken by the most trusted institutions, by forgery and fraud, and again, illegally. Afterwards, stigma, shame and intimidation, drove many to hide their suffering and live in silence.

Today, we know families can come in all shapes and sizes. It's safety, security, permanency and love that help children thrive.

We are also learning from the past, and while I acknowledge there is more to be done, as a society, we're moving towards better outcomes for children, where children have the right to know their parents. And as far as possible, be cared for them, by them.

We're moving to a time where governments are obliged to protect the fundamental rights of the child, just as the National Apology states. A time that is starting understand the importance of identity and belonging, connection to family, to community, to country. And a time that is advancing women's rights and gender equality, so that we can create a fairer society based on respect.

Ten years ago, all sides of politics came together in agreement with the apology. Since then, the Commonwealth has funded the forced adoption support services, which offer a national helpline, casework and support, search services to locate family and access to counselling to people across the country. We need to continue to fund this vital service.

In addition, I'm pleased that we are able to announce we're strengthening these current supports, with dedicated funding for training. We need better training in aged care, allied health, forced adoption support service providers, as well as other services, to deliver targeted and trauma-informed care. This will mean that people affected by forced adoption can access appropriate care, tailored to their needs, whatever stage of life.

Now, tomorrow a statement will be read out in the House of Representatives, commemorating the National Apology. And after that, I hope you'll join me for an informal morning tea, so we can meet all of you properly.

I've invited parliamentarians from all sides of politics, to raise further awareness of this issue. Many of the current parliamentarians were not there 10 years ago, but still understand the importance of this issue. And we need to make sure this continues.

It's an opportunity for those who wish to share their thoughts and experiences with the people that represent you. And it's a poignant moment to share with other people in the room, who may understand what you've been through.

Now, it will take all states and territories, along with the Commonwealth, for us to do better for mothers, adopted people and impacted family members, who have historically been let down by institutions and governments.

Some states have taken commendable action over the last year, with Victoria, for instance, establishing a hardship fund, to provide discretionary payments to mothers affected by forced adoption.

The West Australian Parliament has committed to inquiry into historic forced adoption practices. And I know that many of you in this room have fought and advocated for these actions to be taken.

I can give a commitment to you that I will be reaching out to my fellow Community Service Ministers across all states and territories, to renew cooperation and keep this issue in the public consciousness.

Just in closing, we must never let these experiences and this chapter of Australia's history, be forgotten. By being here tonight, you're making sure that it is not. Anniversaries are a time to reflect and remember the truth of what happened. And by passing the knowledge between generations, we keep the memory alive.

For being here tonight, I thank you. The apology delivered 10 years ago, is as true today as it was then. And by continuing to remember, we make sure it isn't forgotten, but importantly, we don't make the mistakes of the past.

Thank you, and I hope you enjoy the night.

[Speaker – Professor Nahum Mushin AM]

Thank you very much, and may I start by paying our respects to the elders of the Ngunnawal nation and particularly to their elders, past, present and emerging and to any indigenous people who are here tonight.

Ministers Rishworth, and Dreyfus. Former ministers, Macklin and Nicola Roxon. Mothers, fathers, adoptees, all of you who have experienced forced adoption, other distinguished guests, ladies, and gentlemen.

Thank you for the honour or the opportunity to make some remarks on this important occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Commonwealth's apology to people affected by forced adoption.

It's a time for us to stop and look back at how it all came to fruition, and to consider where we are at now and what lies ahead.

The process leading to the apology started with the committee of the Senate, which considered the issues for about 18 months. The work of the chair, former Senator Rachel Siewert, together with Deputy Chair Claire Moore, Sue Boyce, and the Honourable Bridget McKenzie, together with other members of the committee was quite exceptional.

The report, which was tabled on the 29th of February 2012, was world-class and has been relied on by parliaments of other countries, and others interested in forced adoption.

Without detracting from the work of the committee, the real work was done by those who summoned the strength and resilience to give evidence before the committee, many of whom who are here tonight, both for themselves and for everybody affected by forced adoption. It's unnecessary for me to detail the experiences related to the committee.

It is sufficient to record that mothers were, amongst other atrocities, degraded, treated violently, denied legal representation and denied a guardian. Consents were either denied or forged, or otherwise fraudulently dealt with. And as I say, every time I speak about forced adoption, above all, the whole process was illegal.

I often wonder how this could have happened. How could apparent professionals practising in a civilised society behave like that? How could hospitals, religious and other institutions, lose sight of the fundamentals of decent and proper behaviour?

Some of those involved to whom I've spoken say things like, "I thought I was doing the right thing by the babies." Others are remorseful in varying degrees. And I have to say that I'm no closer to understanding.

Of course, the damage does not stop with the mothers. The profound effects on adoptees who've experienced lifelong trauma and a perpetual search for identity are also a consequence of these terrible experiences.

There has been a massive flow on effect to fathers, grandparents, siblings, and wider families. As we also know, it is intergenerational. The Senate committee recommended the establishment of the apology process.

The Forced Adoptions Apology Reference Group was established within the Attorney-General's Department by then Attorney-General Nicola Roxon, and I was most honoured to be chairing it. The essential work of that committee was performed by its members who had been directly affected by forced adoption; mothers, adopted people and fathers.

We had further invaluable input from former Senators Siewert, Moore, and Boyce, as well as Senator the Honourable Bridget McKenzie and also from Mr Graham Perrett MP.

But the contributions of people affected by forced adoption were not restricted to committee members. We consulted around Australia, and as a result, developed the understanding and confidence that the

apology which we ultimately delivered to the government reflected the wishes of those to whom it was offered.

The 21st of March 2013, 10 years ago today, was a day which will remain in our memories for the rest of our lives. The reference group wrote the apology, and it was offered in one of the outstanding speeches that I've ever heard by then Prime Minister Julia Gillard. And that was one of those moments which we never forget.

It brought the words on the page to life with great empathy, compassion, and emotion. Of enormous importance was the announcement of meaningful concrete measures, which are fundamental to an apology.

The establishment of the Forced Adoption Support Service known as FASS, financial assistance for peer groups, and within the health system for mental health support, educating mental health professionals in issues of forced adoption. And the funding of an outstanding exhibition by the National Archives called 'Without Consent', were all of great importance. But there is more to be done.

I'll return to that shortly. The motion constituting the apology was moved in both houses of the parliament later the same day and eventually passed in the traditional manner. Regrettably, I cannot ignore the fact that certain political events that afternoon. I think we all feel the same. Took much of the attention from the apology.

While I do not propose going into detail, it is necessary to record how ill-considered they were to what should have been the raising of the public's awareness and empathy for such an important moment.

The progress of the issue of forced adoption in the decade since the apology has, in my observation, been mixed.

On the positive side, the way in which the apology was accepted, achieved my and others' most optimistic expectations. I haven't spoken to anyone to whom it was offered, who did not accept it. On the negative side, the standing of forced adoption in the community has not been as prominent as is warranted by the scope and importance of the issue.

The unfortunate events to which I've referred were a significant contributor to that. Perhaps the more important factor is the status of the many and varied peer groups, which are active throughout the country. For my experience, they provide services to their members, which are of the highest standard and are vital in the sector.

I would like to see a national umbrella organisation, constituted by all the peer groups from throughout the country, which could make an important contribution to raising awareness and representing this sector in many different ways. Such an organisation would in my view, also alleviate some of the unfortunate differences of opinion, which can be a negative in the forced adoption sector.

I note my previous reference to there is more to be done, in the context of concrete measures. To the commendation of the Minister, department and the government, whose activities I have to say, in preparing this event, have been exemplary.

This commemoration is a vital step in the recognition of the profound effects of forced adoption. References have often been made to the proposition that an apology is only words if it is not accompanied by concrete measures.

The recommendations of the Senate report, and the Forced Adoptions Implementation Working Group, referred to several important concrete measures, which have not yet been enacted. In what I regard as being ascending order of importance, they are a memorial statue, an annual forced adoptions commemoration day, and a redress scheme.

Let me expand on two of those. The implementation working group proposed the 21st of March of each year would be the appropriate day to commemorate forced adoption. However, that is International Harmony Day. While it might not be appropriate to appoint that day, there are a number of 364 days in the year, one of which should be designated forced adoptions day.

A redress scheme, which in my opinion is the most important of these proposed measures, is not a matter within the primary jurisdiction of the Commonwealth. The Senate committee remembered that the Commonwealth, and I quote, "lead discussions with states and territories to consider the issues surrounding the establishment of and funding of reparations schemes". Now this is not a straightforward exercise. But we do have the Stolen Generations and Institutional Sexual Abuse Redress Schemes as excellent models.

I have also quite frequently advocated reform of Australia's adoption laws. This is not a university law class, and I don't propose going into that, it's a matter for another day.

Finally, one of the most important matters is to raise community awareness of forced adoption. Forced adoption affects hundreds of thousands of people in various ways, and it should not be an issue in the background of public awareness.

Thank you.

[\[Speaker – The Hon Nicola Roxon, former Minister\]](#)

Thank you very much for that and can I add my acknowledgment to all of the guests. And can I just before I read Julia's speech to you, I want to just channel my Health Minister days for a moment, because I know it's already been a lot of speaking. If I was at a health function, you know I would have to ask you to stand up and do some star jumps.

I don't think we should do that, but I am wondering whether it is worth standing up and just taking a moment. I know it's very emotional for a lot of people, but I also know it's quite restless and I have got a lovely speech that I want to read from Julia, and I would like people to be able to hear it. So maybe just



stand up, give each other a hug, move your feet for a minute. Introduce yourself to someone next door if you haven't. Just take a moment. Okay, that's enough time now to get your blood circulating.

Okay, now I'm being asked to channel my school teacher skills rather than my health minister skills to ask everyone to sit back down again, please.

I know that it's already been a long occasion and I know that many of you really would've loved Julia to be here today. I did choose an orange dress in honour of the, you know, the redhead. I didn't quite have time to dye my hair in her honour, but she very, very much wanted to be here with everyone who celebrated that important event 10 years ago.

And normally when you get asked to fill in on an occasion like this, you might just sort of tweak the speech a little bit and put in some of your own voice, because it was a big occasion for many of us. Mark, Amanda, others who were there on the day, as it was for so many of you. But it really was, and I think Julia's words will make this clear, a very important day for her in a Prime Ministership when she did a lot of amazing things. So I want to read for you word for word what she's written, and I'm sorry as she is that she was not able to be here to deliver it.

First, I wanted to convey heartfelt apologies for not being with you tonight and for the anniversary events at Parliament House tomorrow. Unfortunately, a bout with COVID has delayed my return to Australia by several days and made it impossible for me to attend. I deeply regret not being with you and feeling once again the wisdom and strength that permeates this community, which fought so long for justice and recognition. My sincere thanks to Nicola, my former colleague and great friend, for reading this message on my behalf. It would've been lovely to see you, Jenny Macklin and Minister Amanda Rishworth, and I'm sorry to miss you all.

If I had been with you tonight, I know I would have been flooded with the memories of that day 10 years ago when I had the privilege on behalf of the nation to say sorry. Sorry to the mothers, to the fathers, to the children, to the long chain of family and friends impacted by the devastating practice of forced adoption. Sorry for the shameful policies that allowed precious babies, some mere seconds after being brought into the world, to be taken from the person who most ached to hold them. Sorry that instead of being shown love and care, women, some of them very young and very vulnerable, were instead hidden away, ostracised, lied to, bullied, tricked and then sent back out into the world with no help navigating the traumatic path that lay ahead.

A decade on, I still remember the day of the National Apology very clearly. It was one of the most important and moving days of my Prime Ministership. And I remain incredibly honoured that I delivered the apology to a community of people who had worked so hard to have their voices heard and their pain and suffering acknowledged.

As I spoke on the stage, I could see just how much it meant to those who had spent so long enduring grief, stigmatization and guilt. I saw people sobbing, clutching at each other as they finally heard the words they so desperately needed and deserved.

On that day I heard many stories from people whose lives had been forever changed. They spoke of their anguish and unbearable loss the never diminished, no matter how many years and decades passed. Their strength and courage rang in my ears as I delivered the apology.

Ten years on I still meet people and hear from people wanting to share their very personal story, their very painful experience and express what the apology meant to them. Some might say that words don't mean an awful lot, but they do.

It matters to every human being to hear words that embrace you, that convey you are seen, believed, valued and loved. To those who have spent a lifetime thinking, "I can never tell anyone about this." Or having finally found the courage to speak, being told, "We don't believe you," or, "It was a long time ago, just forget it," or, "What else did you expect," hearing words that finally acknowledge the fullness of your grief and apologise for the hurt caused are potentially life-changing.

As one mother told the Senate inquiry, she'd spent years feeling buried alive. "I've been clawing the lid of the coffin trying to get out," she said, "and someone has just lifted the lid off of me and I'm gulping for fresh air."

An apology in Parliament House matters to affected individuals, but also to the nation more broadly. It's the one way we weave the national history we collectively own as a nation. It's one way we say to ourselves, this happened, it was wrong and cruel, and we must be courageous enough to face it and determined that we never let it happen again. And that's why, as a couple of other speakers have mentioned, the Without Consent exhibition, which opened here in Canberra in 2015, was so important. It built on the apology and connected people who knew little about Australia's past policies and practices of forced adoption with a hard, uncomfortable and emotional truth.

It put on display the stories and experiences of families who had been across their lifetime to bury their secret, to never acknowledge it and never speak about it to anyone.

I commend the National Archives for later taking the exhibition around the nation. It means tens of thousands of people attended from Sydney to Kalgoorlie, Adelaide to Hervey Bay. The stories were heard, understood and shared.

Beyond truth telling though, concrete actions are required too. In 2013, I announced that more than \$11 million in funding, \$5 million of which was dedicated to improving access to specialist support and record chasing. I'm pleased to know that since its commencement in 2015, the Forced Adoption Support Service has helped nearly 3,000 people. In tandem with state and territory organisations, it's provided vital assistance via a national helpline, face to face support, help with searching for family, peer support and access to counselling.

These are essential services doing incredibly important work in continuing to support those impacted by forced adoption. Although the need for these services will not cease, just as the pain and trauma is unending.

I do understand that some of the planned projects around increasing access to support services for allied health professionals did not get off the ground and I acknowledge that this is disappointing for the community.

I commend Minister Rishworth and the federal government for tonight committing new funding to training modules.

The trauma experienced by people impacted by forced adoption is complex and lifelong. And it's vital that those supporting them are in turn supported themselves to ensure that people receive the care, respect and understanding that they deserve.

We must always be alert to what more we need to do to support those who still have real and ongoing needs.

As you would recall, a number of things competed for my attention on the parliamentary day of the apology, but I was determined nothing would distract me from being fully with you in such an important moment.

Now, with the sense of perspective that comes from 10 years having passed, we can see that there was really only one thing that mattered that day: words of apology, a moment of healing. A recognition of the incredible efforts of those who had campaigned for so long. A shared sense that the moral arc of the universe was indeed bending towards justice. And I hope tonight, those emotions are with you still.

Thank you.