



## VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

# National Apology for Forced Adoptions: 10th Anniversary

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

Today I rise to acknowledge the 10th anniversary of the National Apology for Forced Adoptions. On 21 March 2013, in front of an audience of over 800 people in the Great Hall of Parliament House, the then Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, offered an unconditional apology on behalf of the Australian people for the lasting harm to mothers, adopted people, some fathers and wider families caused by forced adoptions. The Australian parliament took responsibility and unreservedly and humbly apologised to the mothers who were denied even the first precious moment with the child they'd brought into the world. We apologised to the children, now adults, who were denied their identities and robbed of a sense of connection to family, culture and place. We apologised to fathers, the ones who sought but were excluded from the births and their children's lives, and to the wider families—the siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins— because this is an intergenerational trauma that runs deep and wide. It was a historic moment where a mass of voices, once silent, were brought to the national stage. Ten years ago all sides of politics came together in agreement with the apology.

Last night over a hundred mothers, adopted people, fathers, family members, advocates and support workers travelled to Canberra from all over the country to mark the occasion. It was a night of reunion, reflection, mourning and connection. I acknowledge that some of you are here today in the public gallery, and I welcome you. I know that this may have been very confronting and traumatic for many of you, but I thank you for your courage in being here in the House to commemorate this occasion. We know that the passing of time has not healed your wounds, but we thank you. By being here, you are ensuring that the nation does not forget.

I would also like to acknowledge the former members of the Senate Ms Sue Boyce and Ms Rachel Siewert, who championed this cause through the Senate inquiry into the Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices, as well as former ministers Ms Roxon and Ms Macklin. I also acknowledge the chair of the reference committee for the forced adoption apology, Professor Nahum Mushin, who, with his committee members, including the member for Moreton, worked with mothers, adopted people and fathers to ensure the apology reflected their deep pain and hurt as well as their bravery.

As the Prime Minister said yesterday when he spoke in parliament: ... this is not ancient history, not some distant tale from the vanished past. The Australians affected are with us still ...

Forced adoptions are a startling recent chapter in Australia's history. They were commonplace across the country, growing in frequency through the 1940s to reach a peak from the 1950s to 1975. Though difficult to confirm with unreliable records, it is estimated the total number of forced adoptions could be as high as 250,000. That's a quarter of a million newborn babies that were taken from their mothers and families by means of shame, coercion, institutional abuse, drugging, physical restraint, forgery and fraud. These practices were driven by the social judgement that children must at all costs be raised by married parents, always a mother and a father.

As the Prime Minister said yesterday: ... we reflect on a culture that enabled and facilitated the practice of denying mothers even a single moment with the baby that they had brought into the world.

It is unimaginable. The aftershocks are still reverberating through communities as the consequences of forced adoption are still coming to light. Many people are full of questions, which every year become harder to answer due to the march of time. Some who have experienced trauma are not able to recount their experiences. But others rightly want and demand to be heard.

One mother gave me permission to share her experience. She was held down and blindfolded at the birth and told that eye contact must be prevented so the baby would bond to their adoptive parents as if in utero, which was in the best interests of the child. 'It was another woman who held me down,' she said. 'I can't believe another woman would do this to me,' she said. It took 50 years before she was reunited with her son. He had tried a few times to find her, so she knew he was looking for her, but he always stopped short of actually contacting her. It wasn't until he married and had a child that, with the encouragement of his wife, he found the courage to connect. He found not just a loving mother but a wider family. He now has a sister, with a child. Their children play in the park together but don't know that they are cousins. He hasn't told his friends or adoptive family that he's made contact. He meets his new family in secret. Like many others, he grapples with the feelings of divided loyalties between two sets of loving parents.

Last night, some people were recounting their experiences of connecting and reuniting, but not all children were given to loving families. Some adopted people were not put in places of safety as their mothers were promised they would be. Sadly, some experienced abuse of all forms, neglect and even institutionalisation. Other adopted people only found out about their true identities much later in life, when it was too late to reconnect with their mothers. Many more people in midlife, in their 50s and 60s, who knew they were adopted, are only now finding out that their mothers were forced to relinquish them.

A deep veil of silence is drawn across this shameful period in history. The apology was only realised due to the ongoing advocacy and tremendous courage of people—including many who are here today—who relived painful experiences over and over again to make sure that the impacts were fully understood by the nation.

Although we must acknowledge the apology did not get the coverage it deserved due to other political events taking place, the apology did make a difference. The apology was years in the making. On 15 November 2010 the Senate committee commenced its Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices inquiry. Hundreds of people affected by forced adoption courageously gave evidence to the committee, with over 400 submissions, including large volumes of archival material. The committee released the report of its findings in 2012, illuminating the extent of the forced adoptions and the many, often illegal, forms that forced adoption took and the significant ongoing trauma inflicted on the families who were separated. The Senate committee members worked through boxes of hospital records and other documents as well as hundreds of testimonies and submissions to bring forward a comprehensive report that the lay bare the experiences that, until then, were untold, even to those closest to these people. Together with considered advice from the Forced Adoption Support Services program, the findings of the inquiry provided the foundations for a fundamental turn in the nation's perception of this dark chapter in our history.

The motion to support the apology speech was passed through the House of Representatives and the Senate with bipartisan support. The Australian parliament unanimously acknowledged the lifelong pain and suffering associated with forced adoption practices and committed to supporting all of those affected to get the help they need. Importantly, the Australian parliament denounced the forced adoption practices as reprehensible, inexcusable, immoral and, above all, illegal. However, the apology was also an acknowledgement that we had to do better—do better in our recognition and support for people affected, do better by the people who were let down by the institutions that they should have been able to trust to protect and care for them.

Today, I acknowledge there is more to be done. Over the years since the apology the government has delivered key inquiry recommendations and established ongoing funding for Forced Adoption Support Services. The Australian government continues to provide around \$1.8 million annually for Forced Adoption Support Services, which comprises of seven organisations across Australia who provide coordinated specialist support services for people affected by forced adoption. These services include a national helpline, referrals, individual case work and support, assistance with families searching and record-tracing, group activities, peer support, and access to counselling. The Forced Adoption Support Services program also offers small grants to build sector capacity and to engage with group healing activities for mothers, adopted people and family members that are directly impacted by forced adoptions.

But we know that support needs to continue to change and evolve over the course of someone's life. Mothers and some fathers will need to have access to specialised services and care as they age. Adopted people, now grown adults, will need continued support to access their records and to process and heal from the trauma and loss of identity. A number of people have only recently become aware of their experience with forced adoption, such as mothers who were informed their babies died, or the parent or sibling that sought them out through family ancestry or DNA searches. These people will need support to navigate these new discoveries, from the emotional fallout to the logistical process of accessing their own records. We need coordinated efforts to improve the supports available to meet ongoing needs. To begin with, the government is committing an additional \$700,000 to ensure that aged-care providers and Forced Adoption Support Services providers can offer trauma-informed care

that is targeted to people who experienced forced adoption as mothers or children. This will see the delivery of training packages for allied health, aged-care services and support services to support them to deliver trauma-informed care, including as people age.

All governments need to come together for us to strengthen the supports available and to do better by mothers and adopted people and impacted family members who have historically been let down by institutions and governments. In this vein, I will be asking community services ministers from across Australia to consider how we can renew our cooperation and rebuild the national momentum. Some states and territories have taken commendable action over the last year. In 2022 the Premier of Victoria announced the establishment of a hardship fund to provide discretionary payments to mothers affected by forced adoption, including those who are terminally ill. In February this year the Western Australian government committed to a parliamentary inquiry into historic forced adoption practices, including a review of findings from previous inquiries. I congratulate Western Australia and Victoria on these moves and I look forward to working with my state and territory counterparts on what more we can do.

On this 10th anniversary we restate that we have not forgotten the mothers, adopted people, some fathers, families and communities torn apart by forced adoption. We recognise that the pain has not gone away and will never go away. We recognise that the search for identities continue and more support is needed. We need to look at what more we can do to better support the people impacted, to do better for everyone who was let down by society and the institutions that they should have been able to trust to protect and care for them, and to make sure Australia never forgets this shameful chapter and never makes the same mistakes again.