



SPEECH TO THE SENATE TAKING NOTE OF THE MOTION ON THE NATIONAL APOLOGY

By Senator Mathias Cormann on 13 February 2008

Mr President, as a relatively new Australian the debate on the apology is a difficult debate for me to be involved in.

As I said in my first speech in the Senate, I chose to become an Australian.

I am grateful for the opportunity.

I love my adopted country.

I admire the Australian spirit.

I admire what has been achieved by successive generations of Australians, initially in very difficult conditions, in a relatively short period of time.

I am grateful for the opportunities that the efforts and sacrifices of past generations have created for Australians today.

I became involved in the political process because I wanted to play a part in helping to make Australia a better place for future generations.

In taking note of the motion on the apology though, I rise to express my reservations and give a voice to the reservations of many Australians on how our Government has handled this issue which has divided our Nation for the whole period I have been an Australian citizen.

With great empathy and sincere regret for the personal hurt and suffering of those who were unjustifiably removed from their families, I remain concerned about the way we have passed this apology today.

I am concerned about the use of the term 'stolen generations'.

I'm concerned about us, representing this generation of Australians, sitting in judgement over the actions and motivations of past generations of Australians.

More than anything, I'm concerned about the process, the divisive way our Government has handled this sensitive and emotive issue.

I'm concerned that the Government was not prepared to take all of the Australian people into its confidence before last night.

I'm concerned about the secrecy and lack of transparency.

I'm concerned that the wording of the apology when finally released with less than 16 hours to go goes well beyond an apology to those who were unjustifiably removed from their families.

I'm concerned that the Government has refused to release the legal advice it says it has that this apology will not lead to a requirement for compensation.

And finally, I'm concerned that two weeks ago we were told by the Chair of the Northern Territory Intervention Taskforce that our new Government had still not given any direction to them on how to proceed with the intervention aimed at the protection of aboriginal children from abuse and neglect today.

In short, in my view, the Government's handling of this difficult issue has been arrogant, it has been divisive and it has been insincere.

Where Dr Nelson demonstrated true leadership by directly engaging in the difficult debate with those in our Party Room who quite legitimately held different views, the Prime Minister in contrast arrogantly railroaded this Parliament and through this Parliament the Australian people.

He railroaded this Parliament with a partisan political approach.

Without Dr Nelson's leadership, today would not have happened.

All Australians should be concerned if the approach to this issue sets the tone for this Government's approach to other difficult issues for our nation.

To be meaningful an apology has to be sincere.

To be sincere this apology should have the support of the Australian people.

The apology was given by the Parliament as representatives of the Australian people.

The Government is aware that the Australian people have been divided on this issue.

The Government is aware that Australians remain divided on this issue today.

The Government must have been concerned about the views of the Australian people.

Why else did the Government make a deliberate decision to keep the wording of the apology secret until the last possible moment?

Why did they – on this first opportunity to be open and transparent, to listen and to be upfront with the Australian people – exclude them from their consideration of what was their first important priority in Parliament?

Why did they not engage with the Australian people in a genuine attempt to bring the Australian people together?

We will not get healing and reconciliation if we exclude the Australian people from this process. I hope that moving forward the Government will be engaging in a genuine fashion with all Australians on this and other issues.

The Parliament today has apologised.

It was an apology that had bi-partisan support.

Now that it has happened we should and need to move on.

We all need to focus on helping to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal people

The Little Children are Sacred report confronted us with our responsibility to focus on the safety and protection of aboriginal children subject to abuse and neglect today.

It continues to confront us and should confront our Government every waking hour of every single day

And in the spirit of both the motion for reconciliation passed by the Parliament in August 1999 and the motion passed by the Parliament today, we all need to commit as a nation to the cause of reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

To work together to strengthen the bonds that unite us.

To respect and appreciate our differences and to build a fair and prosperous future we can all share.