



Motions

National Apology to Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse

Mr MORRISON (Cook—Prime Minister) (11:00): I move:

That the House apologise to the victims and survivors of institutional child sexual abuse.

Let me first welcome all of those who have come here today. Whether you sit here alongside us here in this chamber, in the Great Hall, outside elsewhere in the nation's capital, in your living room, or in your bed, unable to rise today or speak to another soul, your journey to where you are today has been a long and painful one, and we acknowledge that and we welcome you today wherever you are.

Silenced voices; muffled cries in the darkness; unacknowledged tears; the tyranny of invisible suffering; the never heard pleas of tortured souls bewildered by an indifference to the unthinkable theft of their innocence—today Australia confronts a trauma, an abomination, hiding in plain sight for far too long. Today we confront a question too horrible to ask, let alone answer: why weren't the children of our nation loved, nurtured and protected? Why was their trust betrayed? Why did those who know cover it up? Why were the cries of children and parents ignored? Why was our system of justice blind to injustice? Why has it taken so long to act? Why were others things more important than this, the care of innocent children? Why didn't we believe?

Today we dare to ask these questions, and finally acknowledge and confront the lost screams of our children. While we can't be so vain to pretend to answers, we must be so humble to fall before those who were forsaken and beg to them our apology—a sorry that dare not ask for forgiveness; a sorry that dare not try and make sense of the incomprehensible or think it could; a sorry that does not insult with an incredible promise; a sorry that speaks only of profound grief and loss; a sorry from a nation that seeks to reach out in compassion into the darkness where you have lived for so long.

Nothing we can do now will right the wrongs inflicted on our nation's children. Even after a comprehensive royal commission, which finally enabled the voices to be heard and the silence to be broken, we will all continue to struggle.

So today we gather in this chamber in humility, not just as representatives of the people of this country but as fathers, as mothers, as siblings, friends, workmates and, in some cases, indeed, as victims and survivors. In Ngunawal, 'Canberra' means 'meeting place'. And on this day of apology, we meet together. We honour every survivor in this country. We love you, we hear you and we honour you. No matter if you are here at this meeting place or elsewhere, this apology is to you and for you. Your presence and participation makes tangible our work today and it gives strength to others who are yet to share what has happened in their world.

Elsewhere in this building and around Australia there are others who are silently watching and listening to these proceedings, men and women who have never told a soul what has happened to them. To these men and women, I say this apology is for you too. Later, when the speeches are over, we will stand in silence and we remember the victims who are not with us anymore—many, sadly, by their own hand. As a nation we failed them, we forsook them and that will always be our shame. This apology is for them and for their families too. As one survivor recently said to me, 'It wasn't a foreign enemy who did this to us. This was done by Australians to Australians.' Enemies in our midst, the enemies of innocence. Look at the galleries, look at the Great Hall, look outside this place and you will see men and women from every walk of life, from every generation and from every part of our land crushed, abused, discarded and forgotten.

The crimes of ritual sexual abuse happened in schools, churches, youth groups, Scout troupes, orphanages, foster homes, sporting clubs, group homes, charities and family homes as well. It happened anywhere a predator thought

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they could get away with it, and the systems within these organisations allowed it to happen and turned a blind eye. It happened day after day, week after week, month after month, decade after decade—unrelenting torment. When a child spoke up they weren't believed, and the crimes continued with impunity. One survivor told me that when he told a teacher of his abuse that teacher then became his next abuser. Trust broken, innocence betrayed, power and position exploited for evil, dark crimes.

A survivor named Faye told the royal commission:

... nothing takes the memories away. It happened 53 years ago and it's still affecting me.

A survivor named Ann said:

My mother believed them rather than me.

I also met with a mother whose two daughters were abused by a priest the family trusted. Suicide would claim one of her two beautiful girls, and the other lives under the crushing weight of what was done to her. As a father of two daughters, I can't comprehend the magnitude of what she has faced. Not just as a father but as a Prime Minister, I am angry too at the calculating destruction of lives and the abuse of trust, including those who have abused the shield of faith and religion to hide their crimes—a shield that is supposed to protect the innocent, not the guilty—and they stand condemned.

One survivor says it was like becoming a stranger to your parents. Mental health illnesses, self-harm and addictions followed. The pain didn't stop with adulthood. Relationships with partners and children became strained as survivors struggled with the conflicting currents within them. Parents and siblings felt guilt and sadness for what they had missed, for what and whom they chose to believe and for what they did not see, while survivors contemplated what could have been. A survivor named Rodney asked the question so common to so many survivors. He wonders about:

... the person I may have become, or the person I could have become if I didn't have all this in my life ...

Death can take many forms. In this case, the loss of a life never lived and a life denied. Another survivor, Aidan, spoke of not getting justice because his abuser had died. He said:

I was bereft because I was robbed. I was robbed of my day in court. I wanted to tell the world what he did. That was stolen. That was him again, taking control.

Today, as a nation, we confront our failure to listen, to believe and to provide justice. And again today we say sorry—to the children we failed, sorry; to the parents whose trust was betrayed and who have struggled to pick up the pieces, sorry; to the whistle-blowers who we did not listen to, sorry; to the spouses, partners, wives, husbands and children who have dealt with the consequences of the abuse, cover-ups and obstruction, sorry; to generations past and present, sorry.

As part of our work leading us to this day I recently met with, as did the Leader of the Opposition, the National Apology to Victims and Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse Reference Group, who are with us here today. I want to thank this wonderful group of brave people. Many are survivors. They have all worked so hard to make today a reality. They said to me that an apology without action is just a piece of paper—and it is. Today they also wanted to hear about our actions. It's a fair call.

In outlining our actions, I want to acknowledge the work of my predecessors: former Prime Minister Gillard, who is with us here today, and I thank her for her attendance; former Prime Minister Rudd; the member for Warringah, who continues to serve us here in this place; and former Prime Minister Turnbull. I want to thank them for their compassion and leadership as they also confronted these terrible failings.

The foundations of our actions are the findings and recommendations of the royal commission initiated by Prime Minister Gillard. The steady, compassionate hand of the commissioners and staff resulted in 17,000 survivors coming forward and nearly 8,000 of them recounting their abuse in private sessions of the commission. We are grateful to

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the survivors who gave evidence to the commission. It is because of your strength and your courage that we are gathered here today. Many of the commissioners and staff are also with us today, and I thank them also.

Acting on the recommendations of the royal commission with concrete action gives practical meaning to today's apology. The Commonwealth, as our national government, must lead and coordinate our response. The National Redress Scheme has commenced. I thank the state and territory governments for their backing of the scheme. The scheme is about recognising and alleviating the impact of past abuse and providing justice for survivors. The scheme will provide survivors with access to counselling and psychological services, monetary payments and, for those who want one—I stress 'for those who want one'—a direct personal response from the institution where the abuse occurred. It will mean that, after many years, often decades, of denials and cover-ups, the institutions responsible for ruining lives will admit their wrongdoing and the terrible damage they caused.

The National Office for Child Safety is another big step forward to ensuring the prevention and detection of child abuse wherever it occurs. It was announced as part of our government's response to the royal commission and it was established from 1 July of this year within the Department of Social Services. As Prime Minister, I'll be changing these arrangements to ensure that the National Office for Child Safety will report to me. It will reside within the portfolio of Prime Minister and Cabinet, as it should, and the Minister for Social Services will assist me in this role, including reporting to me on the progress of royal commission recommendations and the activities of the Office for Child Safety.

The office has already begun its work to raise awareness of child safety and to drive cultural change in institutions in the community to ensure the systemic failures and abuses of power that brought us here today are not repeated. Importantly, children themselves are being empowered to participate in these initiatives, because our children must be heard. When it comes to the work of safety, it must be approachable and child-friendly. They must know who they can tell, they must be believed and they must know where they can go.

All Australian governments are now working together to establish a national database to ensure higher standards for working with children and that data about people's ability to work with children is shared nationally. Our work does not stop our borders. We are ensuring children across the world are protected by stopping child sex offenders from travelling overseas without permission, which will disrupt, prevent and investigate the abuse of children globally.

We recognise that, as survivors age, those who were abused in or by an institution have real fears about entering into aged-care facilities. It's an understandable fear, given what happened during childhood. We will work with survivor groups about what we can do to alleviate those fears, and, indeed, the work of the royal commission into aged care will be able to address this as well.

To assist with lasting change, we recognise that there are many survivors who were abused in other settings, such as in their own homes and in their communities, who will not be covered by this redress scheme. These survivors also need to be heard, believed and responded to with services to address their needs. So, today, I commit to fund the establishment of a national centre of excellence, and I call on the states and territories to work as partners in this venture. This centre will be the place to raise awareness and understanding of the impacts of child sexual abuse, to deal with the stigma, support help seeking and guide best practice for training and other services.

All of this is just the start. The Australian government has not rejected a single recommendation of the royal commission. We are now actively working on 104 of the 122 recommendations that were addressed to the Commonwealth, and the 18 remaining are being closely examined, in consultation with states and territories. Today we commit, from December this year, to report back to the Australian people through the parliament to be held accountable each year—each year—on the progress we are making on the recommendations over the next five years and then beyond. We will shine a spotlight on all parts of government to ensure we are held accountable.

The institutions which perpetrated this abuse, covered it up and refused to be held accountable must be kept on the hook. Already, many of those organisations have made their own apologies and have signed up to be part of the

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National Redress Scheme, as they should, but there are others yet to join. Today I simply say: justice, decency and the beliefs and values we share as Australians insist that they sign on.

Today I also commit to establishing a national museum, a place of truth and commemoration, to raise awareness and understanding of the impacts of child sexual abuse. We will work with survivor groups to ensure your stories are recorded, that your truth is told, that our nation does not turn from our shame and that our nation will never forget the untold horrors you experienced. Through this, we will endeavour to bring some healing to our nation and to learn from our past horrors. We can never promise a world where there are no abusers. But we can promise a country where we commit to hear and believe our children, to work together to keep children safe, to trust them and, most of all, to respect their innocence.

Mr Speaker, I present the formal apology to be tabled in this parliament today, which will be handed to those in the Great Hall shortly. It reflects all of the sentiments that I have expressed on behalf of the Australian people, this parliament and our government. I table that. As I do, I simply say: I believe you. We believe you. Your country believes you.

Honourable members: Hear, hear!

Mr SHORTEN (Maribyrnong—Leader of the Opposition) (11:18): I'd like to thank the Prime Minister for his sincere words. I wish to begin with 26 words from the royal commission:

... we were treated as slaves, beaten and abused, used for their perverted desires ... No love or kindness, no safety or warmth. Always hungry and always frightened.

These words are not a tale from a foreign country or the distant past; these words came from one amongst us, describing his life as a child: a cold life of fear, hunger, loneliness, abuse. Australia failed this child. Australia failed tens of thousands of children across generations and across the country. Our nation let you down.

Today we offer you our nation's apology, with humility, with honesty, with hope for healing now, and with a fire in our belly to ensure that our children will grow up safe in the future. We do this because it is right, because it is overdue, because Australians must know and face up to the truth about our past. But, above all, we do this because of you. I say to you here in the galleries, here in the Great Hall, on the lawns and beyond, and I say to you in the big cities and country towns: today is because of you. Today is because of your advocates, your networks, your organisations and your leadership. It is you who bravely fought the long battle for justice, for recognition, for truth to be believed. It is you who have brought this day into being. It is you who kept coming forward, again and again. You went beneath scar tissue. You told strangers and people in power of the most terrifying moments in your memory.

Our fellow Australians should understand that you've given so much of yourselves through your stories, but it was never for yourself, never for your own sake. Our fellow Australians should understand that you spoke up in the royal commission and you relived your pain in the royal commission for the next generation of Australian children. Australians should understand that you spoke and relived your pain because you want to make sure that what happened to you does not happen to other children.

Today belongs to you. Today belongs to your families. Today belongs to your loved ones who've been there for you in the darkest of times. Today also belongs to your brothers and sisters who are not here—people who perhaps never told a single soul about what happened to them. Today belongs to people who have locked away the pain so deeply in order to survive, to get by. They simply cannot revisit the ordeal. Today belongs to people who've moved overseas to try and escape the memory. Today belongs to the people who are too ill to be here. Today belongs to people who are in the grip of addiction or poverty. Today belongs to the people in the prison system whose life was shunted on the wrong track by the abuse they suffered as children. Today belongs to the children who might not have suffered direct sexual abuse but endured other terrible forms of abuse: violence, cruelty, neglect. This is a hard day for some of our fellow Australians. This is a hard day for those who were abused outside of an institution. I hope they can take something from the fact that the royal commission's recommendations reach beyond institutions to the protection of all children. And, my fellow Australians, today belongs to the people who did not live long enough

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to hear this apology. Many of our honoured guests are wearing badges. On them they've written the names of their brothers and sisters and dear friends who are not here today—brothers and sisters who fought for decades. Sadly, through illness or old age, they have not lived to see this day or, indeed, justice done. And, of course, there are those who took their own lives, stolen from our world by the trauma, the hurt and the hardship that they have endured. We will remember them today and Australia must promise to remember them always.

To everyone to whom this day belongs I say on behalf of the Labor opposition and the Commonwealth parliament and the people of Australia we are sorry. We are sorry for every childhood stolen, every life lost. We are sorry for every betrayal of trust, every abuse of power. We are sorry for trauma measured in decades for scars that can never heal. We are sorry for every cry for help that fell on deaf ears and hard hearts. We are sorry for every crime that was not investigated every criminal who went unpunished. And we are sorry for every time that you were not heard and not believed. We hear you now. We believe you. Australia believes you. And we are sorry it has taken so long to say these words. We are sorry for wrongs that can never be made right. We are sorry that you and your brothers and sisters have been left to fight for justice, respect and dignity on your own. You should not be alone any longer. Australia is with you. And we are sorry that the abuse and the assault and the rape of children is still going on and being covered up this very day in this very country. We are sorry that we still cannot protect all our children. We are sorry—all of us in this parliament—that we've not yet done enough to guarantee that this cannot happen again. Too many Australian children are still living unsafe lives at risk. It's the true test—isn't it?—of our words. It's whether from this day forward we see some meaningful change for the better in this country. It is why the words of this apology must come with action.

Last week I was told of a survivor who was asked whether he would be attending today. He said no. He said these apologies are only so politicians can look good in front of the public. Do you know what? After decades of betrayal—by governments, by the police, by the courts and the law, by foster parents and orphanages, by teachers and schools and sporting clubs, by churches and charities and more—he has every right to be sceptical that words are cheap. To you who have gathered here I say that you have fought for and earned more than words. You deserve real change in your lives and the law, and for the kids in the future. It means improving the lives of children now, recognising that vulnerable children don't miraculously resolve every issue the day they turn 18. Support shouldn't fall off a bureaucratic cliff based on the date you were born. It also means delivering on the promise of the royal commission and its recommendations.

I acknowledge the work of previous prime ministers—Prime Minister Rudd and his advocacy. Prime Minister Gillard, who had the courage and the leadership to initiate this royal commission, you are so very welcome today. I acknowledge Prime Minister Abbott for continuing the royal commission. Prime Minister Turnbull put this apology on the parliamentary agenda. We recognise him. I acknowledge and support the initiatives announced today by the Prime Minister. I also acknowledge Jenny Macklin, who's given so much to this process. I thank all of the royal commissioners and their dedicated staff for the intellectual and emotional commitment they made over many years. Already other countries are looking at what Australia has done as possibly best practice around the world for empowering survivors and victims, for putting the people who matter at the centre.

The final report—it's 17 volumes—occupy three full shelves of the Parliamentary Library. But we cannot leave it tucked away in a quiet corner of this building, slowly gathering dust. We are never going to get a better set of opinions than this royal commission. We are never going to be presented with a more comprehensive set of solutions than this royal commission. And, whether it is making it right through redress or reforming the law, it is now up to us in this parliament, not the survivors and victims. We have the power, we have the authority, we have the responsibility to turn these recommendations into actions, without caveats, without compromise.

Labor will, wherever we sit in this parliament in coming years, unequivocally support the implementation of the royal commission recommendations, with no discounting or delay. It is not the time for government or institutions to haggle over the dollars, to hide behind the lawyers. It is not the time to pretend that a token payment handed over in secret 40 years ago can be changed by a retrospective formula into an adequate sum. This is not the time to ask for more time, as if this process has been rushed.

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People have already died waiting for the justice they are due. People are dying. There is Tony, a 54-year-old man in palliative care in Toowoomba, watching this day perhaps—abused in two different institutions in two different states, both government and Salvation Army. It's an unforgivable final indignity that the legal hurdles mean that he may not live to receive this modest redress.

As the royal commission has gone about its work, I know many Australians have been watching the news and reading the articles and saying to each other in horror and disbelief, 'Why are we only hearing this now? Why didn't we know? Why weren't we told?' There are a thousand different reasons—every individual life unique. But at the heart of so many reasons is this deeply uncomfortable truth: too many were told; they just didn't listen. Too many did know; they just didn't act. It makes you angry to think that we were raised to respect these institutions all of the time, not understanding the danger that some of our fellow children were in—institutions we were taught to respect, people in authority that we were simply told to trust by virtue of their office. Some of these people were supposed to be pillars of our community. They had the power, the status, the authority, but they wielded these as weapons.

I think of new migrants who trusted their children to the tight-knit community of faith, who put the clergy on a pedestal and simply could not comprehend when their own children said otherwise. Coaches, scoutmasters, priests and pastors: predators and manipulators. They all knew the buttons to push with parents—there was that flattery of attention, the praising of their particular child's potential—to secure more private time.

If you were in an orphanage or foster care, or an Aboriginal child on a mission, the machinery of state was geared against you. If you ran away to escape assault, the police brought you back. One child who tried to tell them what was going on got a smack across the mouth and was told not to tell lies about these nice Christian men. Another boy actually went to file a police report. He was sitting there in the interview room: 'The sergeant started interrogating me in his booming voice, and all I could think about myself was, "What have I done?"' Aboriginal children silenced by isolation and discrimination, cut off from country and culture. Children, who could not speak up for themselves, kids with profound or severe impairment, were abused every day when they were being dressed and bathed. Silence was coerced by beatings, by forced labour, by threats of starvation, by the punishment of perpetual fear. One child recalled waiting every day for the crackle of the PA system, the moment when someone's name would be called to summon them to the office to be disciplined. He said, 'We were scared from the minute we woke up until the minute we fell asleep.' And then, of course, there was the fear of God—the nuns who told children they abused to keep their mouths shut because little girls who lie go to hell, or the good Catholic boy who, every time he was sexually abused by his priest, had to confess the sin of his impurity to his abuser.

Sometimes children kept silent to protect others, to shield a younger brother or sister from abuse. Sometimes children were kept quiet through a terrible false hope that, if they did what they were told, then their mum and dad would come back and take them home. Sometimes children kept quiet because compliance was the only realistic survival strategy they had. As one said, 'I needed to do what I could to survive.'

In all of these heartbreaking cases, children often kept their abuse a secret for years and years to spare themselves the shame, because, amongst all of the vile and unforgivable things that these perpetrators did, perhaps the most devious and manipulative was to put the blame on the child itself, as if somehow the child had something to be ashamed of. One of you said to me last week: 'You can't underestimate the damage that does. The shame lives with you every day. And, even though you know what has happened to you was not your fault, even though your head tells you that, your heart still feels the powerlessness and the shame.'

It is worth repeating now on behalf of our nation: it was never your fault, not at all, not then, not now. You have nothing to be ashamed of. There was nothing wrong with you, and you did nothing wrong. The abusers did it because they could. And they did it because they were confident they could get away with it.

I said before that people have been saying, 'Why didn't we know about this?' Well, make no mistake: institutions knew. They knew and they did worse than nothing. Too often they put their land, their buildings, their reputation and their revenues ahead of the safety of children in their care. They bullied and intimidated the victims, adding

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vicious insult to injury. They used their wealth and their resources and their lawyers and their insurance companies to suppress the truth, to engage in a strategy of litigation to exhaust and to bankrupt survivors. And they protected the perpetrators, sometimes for decades.

Instead of being sent to jail, the people who committed these crimes were quietly shipped to another town, another unsuspecting parish and another pulpit, to hypocritically and sanctimoniously sermonise on a Sunday about values which were the exact opposite of what they were practising in private every day. And, instead, the young people and the children—you—were the ones treated like criminals, stigmatised, ostracised; your words disputed; your characters assassinated; the trauma rippling down through the rest of your life.

We read so many accounts of the people who've never been able to fully trust another human being again, for whom intimacy, touch and affection are foreign and frightening concepts; people who can't bring themselves to do something as simple as to use a public toilet because of the memories it re-stirs; people who left this country and swore they would never return; people for whom abuse began with a chain of events which has led them into prison; even people who think that everything has gone away, that they're okay, that they're all right, but it can be triggered by a phone call out of the blue from a long-lost relative who never contacted you in the 50 previous years, but today has led a sudden spark of interest. It can be triggered by something as wonderful of the birth of your own child, or the moment that your precious child reaches the age that you were abused at. Perhaps it's even hearing today's apology and so many who say that their darkest nightmare is growing old, worried that they will find themselves back in another institution, a nursing home, where, helpless and powerless, they could be abused again. Everyone's been affected differently by what they have endured, which is why everyone must have the right to access the counselling and the care they need for their own recovery in their own time. This cannot be measured on an insurance actuarial table, and we can't do this on the cheap.

The measure of this day will not be known today. It will be in the months and years to come that as a parliament—as a nation—we can look back and say, 'It was this day that people could feel some hope and some healing.' But it should be this day that people say, 'There was a redoubled commitment to action.' If we can say that this day was the day that child sexual abuse could be driven from its final hiding places, not just in institutions but across our homes and families, and brought into the light; if we can say this day was the day that Australia finally faced up to our responsibilities, that we lived up to our obligation to do the right thing by the people we failed for so long—on these questions, time will tell. History will judge our words today.

I say to all of you—to you here who treat this parliament with respect by gathering here, to those in the Great Hall, to those on the lawns and across the nation, to the people who couldn't be here because of illness or trauma, to people in prison or trapped in poverty and addiction, and to the family members who have a member who's passed away and who we remember—you matter to all of us. We've come too late to this day. There are wrongs that cannot be made right, but know that today Australia says sorry. Australia says: we believe you.

In years to come, people will learn of your lives. They will be appalled by the suffering, they will be shocked by the cruelty and they will ask themselves how such evil could be spread so far and wide. But please believe me: every single Australian will also pause and wonder at your courage. Believe me: every person takes hope and inspiration from you. Every Australian will count themselves privileged to share this country with people as strong, as brave and as full of character and heart as you. So, in the name of the Australian people, in the spirit of humility and healing and with hope for the future, I commend this motion to the House.

The SPEAKER: To signify their support, I invite all present to rise in their places.

Honourable members having stood in their places—

The SPEAKER: I thank the House.

Debate adjourned.

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to Victims and Survivors
of Institutional
Child Sexual Abuse



Reference to Federation Chamber

Mr PYNE (Sturt—Minister for Defence and Leader of the House) (11:43): by leave—I move:

That the resumption of debate on the Prime Minister's motion relating to the National Apology to Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse be referred to the Federation Chamber.

Question agreed to.