

BILL'S SPEECHES

NATIONAL APOLOGY TO VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS OF INSTITUTIONAL CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE - HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES - MONDAY, 22 OCTOBER 2018

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

I'd like to thank the Prime Minister for his sincere words.

And I wish to begin with 26 words from the Royal Commission.

I quote:

“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 come from one among 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, across this 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 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 a 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, 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 have bravely fought the long battle for justice, for recognition, for truth to be believed.

It is you who brought this day into being.

It is you who kept coming forward, again and again.

You dug 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 have given so much of yourselves through your stories but never for yourselves, never for your own sake.

Our fellow Australians should understand that you spoke up in the Royal Commission, you re-lived 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 did not happen to other children.

Today belongs to you.

Today belongs to your families, today belongs to your loved ones who have been there for you in the darkest times.

And today also belongs to your brothers and sisters who are not here.

People who perhaps have never told a soul 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 moved overseas to try and escape the memory, today belongs to people who are too ill to be here.

Today belongs to the people who are in the grip of addiction or poverty.

Today belongs to the people in the prison system, whose lives were shunted onto a track by the abuse they suffered as children.

Today belongs to those children who may not have suffered direct sexual abuse but endured other terrible forms of abuse: violence, cruelty and neglect.

This is a hard day for our fellow Australians, some of them. 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 to hear

this apology.

Many of our honoured guests are wearing these badges. On them, they've written the names of brothers and sisters and dear friends who are not here today.

Brothers and sisters who fought for decades but sadly, through illness or old age, 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.

Mr Speaker

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, to this very day, in this country.

We are sorry that we still cannot protect all our children.

And we are sorry – all of us in the parliament - that we have 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, would he be attending today.

He said no, he said:

"These apologies are only so politicians can look good in front of the public".

And 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, to feel that words are cheap.

To you here who have gathered, I say that you have fought for and earned more than words. You deserve real change: in your lives, in the law and for kids in the future.

It means improving the lives of children now, recognising that vulnerable children don't resolve every issue miraculously the day they turn 18, your support shouldn't fall-off a bureaucratic cliff based on the date you were born.

It also means delivering in full 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 has given so much to this process.

I do want to thank all the Royal Commissioners and their dedicated staff for the intellectual and emotional commitment that 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 and its 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 redress right, or reforming the law - it's now up to us in this parliament, not the survivors and victims.

We have the power, we have the authority and 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, with no discounting nor delay.

It is no time for government or institutions to haggle over the dollars, or hide behind lawyers.

No time to pretend that a token payment, handed over in secret 40 years ago, can be changed by retrospective formula into an adequate sum.

This is not the time to ask for more time, as if this process has been 'rushed'.

People have already died waiting for the justice they are due, people are dying.

There's Tony, a 54 year old man in palliative care in Toowoomba, watching this today perhaps, abused in two different institutions, two different states, both Government and Salvation Army. It is an unforgivable final indignity that legal hurdles mean he may not live long enough to receive modest redress.

Mr Speaker

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 about 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 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 just simply told to trust by virtue of their office.

Some of these people were supposed to be the 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. It was that flattery of attention, the praising their particular child's potential, to secure more private time.

If you were in an orphanage or foster care, or an Aboriginal child on the 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 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 big booming voice and all I could think to myself was: 'What have I done?'"

Aboriginal children silenced by isolation and discrimination, cut-off from country and culture.

Children who couldn't speak up for themselves: kids with profound and severe impairment, abused every day when they were being dressed or 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 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 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 the vile and unforgivable things the perpetrators did, perhaps the most devious and manipulative was to put the blame onto 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.

That shame lives with you every day.”

And even though you know what 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 the 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 would get away with it.

I said before, 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 reputations, their revenues ahead of the safety of children in their care.

They bullied and intimidated the victims, adding 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 exhaustion, 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 practised in private every day.

And instead, the young people and the children, you were the ones treated like criminals.

Stigmatised, ostracised, your word disputed, your characters assassinated, the trauma rippling down through the rest of your lives.

We read so many accounts of 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 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.

And even people who think that everything has gone away, that they're okay, that they're alright, but being triggered by a phone call out of the blue from a long-lost relative who never contacted you in 50 previous years, but today has lead a sudden spark of interest.

It can be triggered by something as wonderful as the birth of their own child, or the moment that your precious child reaches the age that you were abused at.

Or perhaps, it's even hearing today's Apology.

And so many who say their darkest nightmare is growing old, worried they will find themselves back in another institution, a nursing home, where helpless and powerless, they could be abused again.

Everyone has been affected differently by what they 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. We can't measure this on an insurance actuarial table and we can't do this on the cheap.

Mr Speaker

The measure of this day will not be known today.

It will be if in months and years to come – as a parliament, as a nation – we can look back to this as a moment that people could feel some hope, 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 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 when Australia finally faced up to our responsibilities, that we lived-up to our obligation to do the right thing by the people we had failed for so long.

On these questions, time will tell, history will judge our words today.

But I say to all of you: to people 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 people who couldn't be here because of illness, or trauma.

To people in prison or trapped in poverty and addiction.

To family members who have a member who has 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.

And in years to come, people will learn of your lives.

They will be appalled by the suffering, they will be shocked by the cruelty, they will ask themselves how such evil could be spread so far and wide.

But please, believe me, every single Australian will 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, 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.

Source:

http://www.billshorten.com.au/national_apology_to_victims_and_survivors_of_institutional_child_sexual_abuse_house_of_representatives_monday_22_october_2018