



FAMILY FIRST



Steve Fielding **Family First** Senator for Victoria

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National Apology to the Stolen Generations

Speech

13 February 2008

Today Australia's Parliament will deliver a long overdue apology to Australia's Indigenous people. It will be an historic and emotional day for many who have waited a long time to hear these words.

Saying sorry shouldn't be so hard. In families, just like in any relationship, we all know that we should be quick to say sorry when we do something wrong and mend any hurt we have caused. It is not about blame. It is about being genuinely sorry that the other person has been hurt, even if the action was unintentional.

Every parent knows and understands the importance of teaching our children to say sorry when something goes wrong. There is no doubt something has gone wrong for the children and families of the 'Stolen Generations'.

But what exactly do we mean by this term, the 'stolen generations'? I think many Australians may not understand the wrong that was done to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

That it was Australian Government official policy from the mid 1800's right through to 1970 to remove children from their parents in order to assimilate the Indigenous population in to the wider community.

Family First does not believe that Australian governments, 50 years ago or even 100 years ago, intended harm to any child or family. These governments and authorities acted in a manner that they thought was right at the time and in the best interests of the children involved.

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But removing children from their parents just because they were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children – not on genuine welfare grounds – was wrong.

The parents were hurt and the children got hurt. A report found that many of the children taken from their families then fell victim to physical or sexual abuse.

They got hurt and everyone should be sorry, very sorry for the hurt caused to these children. We should show compassion and empathy. These children are now adults and many have passed on. But the unresolved hurt continues in them and in their families.

Unresolved and unacknowledged hurt in any family or relationship, just festers and never really goes away. We wouldn't wait to say sorry if this was our family. We would want to fix the rift and restore the relationship.

When we don't resolve past hurts, we find that resentment builds up and there really is little possibility of an ongoing healthy relationship.

However, sorry often seems to be the hardest word to say. Yet it is one of the most important words in any family, marriage or relationship. Saying sorry allows our kids (and us as parents) to move past our mistakes and failures.

Saying sorry is part of life, because we all do and say things at times that we shouldn't. Sometimes on purpose, sometimes out of ignorance or carelessness. But we need to fix it and we need forgiveness. There is responsibility on both parties here.

And it's no different in the relationship between the Australian Government and Indigenous people which was torn apart by the Government's policy to remove indigenous children from their parents, their families and their communities.

In our family we also teach that when someone says sorry, they must also ask for forgiveness. Sometimes, we can say sorry as a throw away line, just to get us off the hook, but my wife Sue and I have taught our kids that a proper apology comes with the words: "I'm sorry, please will you forgive me?"

The child who has been hurt, even in an unintended situation, then feels that their hurt has been acknowledged but more importantly, they are part of the healing by actively forgiving their brother or sister. We reckon that saying sorry and being forgiven go hand in hand. Relationships get restored, friendships are mended and fences re built.

As I said before, sorry can be the hardest word to say, but forgiving can be the hardest thing to do.

Forgiveness is not an easy thing. As a nation today we are sincerely sorry for the great hurt and pain caused, and we admit that Australian governments have treated Indigenous Australians badly.

In turn, I hope Indigenous Australians can be open to a process of forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn't mean condoning what happened. We can't change the past, but we can forgive it.

There are real, positive effects from letting go of the hurt by forgiving. It enables us to move forward.

Most importantly forgiving makes room for hope. Hope for the future. Hope for a better life for the kids. Hope for a united Australia.

As a nation we need to help that process of forgiveness by really committing to deal with the complex and longstanding problems facing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. We need to close the 17 year life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-indigenous children.

Who can hope for the future without knowing your kids will get good schooling and decent health care?

It is a scandal that Indigenous Australians are so far behind other Australians with the standard of education and health care provided to them and in the outcomes from those key services.

The big task for government is to make sure that schooling, health and other services are provided at a level equal to the broader Australian community and the challenge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is to make the most of those opportunities.

Family First agrees the Australian Parliament *should* say sorry for the past. I hope the children and families that have been hurt can then *accept* that apology and forgive us. The debt must finally be cancelled so we can all move on together to build a united family of Australians.