




Speech by

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MEMBER FOR INALA

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MOTION: APOLOGY FOR FORCED ADOPTIONS

 **Ms PALASZCZUK** (Inala—ALP) (Leader of the Opposition) (12.38 pm): The year is 1966. A very confused, very frightened and very pregnant 19-year-old is brought into a hospital through the back door, instructed not to speak to anyone, treated as if she were guilty of some unspeakable, unforgivable offence. Over the following five days she is sedated by staff. She is denied compassion, denied decency and left alone to go through her labour and the birth of her child with minimum support. And then she is intimidated into signing consent forms allowing authorities to take her baby and give him up for adoption. That frightened young girl was Margaret Oakhill-Hamilton and today she is here as we give this long overdue apology to her and thousands of other women like her who were subject to one of the most shameful episodes in our history. These are the women who were betrayed by the hospitals and maternity homes and the government authorities who were supposed to care for them. These are the women who are the victims of a deliberate program of deceit which saw thousands of children literally ripped from their birth mother's arms.

I have met twice with Margaret over the past week and her story could not fail to move the hardest of hearts. It is probably best told in her own words—

I was alone when I saw my son through the nursery window only being 'allowed' to see him after the consent form was signed, never touching, never holding or nursing him.

I was alone when I was discharged from the hospital, broken-hearted and without my son.

I was alone and ever searching for my son for the following years.

24 years later, I met my son and I touched him for the first time and my heart sang.

Like Margaret, Trish's baby boy was also taken from her in 1968. She had not signed consent for this forced adoption but over the past 40 years she has battled for her rights as a mother. That battle has encouraged other women, many now grandmothers themselves, to break the silence of forced adoptions and to hold each government in this country to account for the terrible wrongs of the past. I have spoken personally with Trish and Margaret and Glenda to hear their stories and hear how vital this apology is to them. These three strong women are members of Adoption Loss Adult Support Australia, known to many as ALAS. They have been pivotal through the years in lobbying, along with hundreds of other women, to make the federal government's inquiry into forced adoptions a reality.

The stories that flowed from that inquiry make for confronting reading. I would encourage everyone to read the stories of a generation of forced adoption mothers, their children and also of the repentant health and social care workers who were complicit in this sad chapter in our history. While their stories are harrowing, they are also important in revealing a determination and resilience to fight for what is right. These are stories that recall pregnancies ruined by a system in failure and place rightful blame at the feet of religious communities, health professionals and maternity homes and hospitals. These are the stories that provide a shocking picture of young mothers and fathers misled and intimidated. It reveals a history of forgery in many cases and in many others the basic denial of fundamental human rights.

As I have heard these women's stories, the horrible reality has become apparent. This was not the Australia of a century ago, not stories that happened in our distant past; these stories are part of our recent

history and these deeply regrettable practices of medical institutions and governments were allowed to continue through the 1960s, into the 1970s and even into the 1980s. These women had committed no crime, yet they were punished, abused and ostracised in their local communities, even in many cases by their families. They were lied to. They were tricked into giving up their children. They were treated in the most unthinkable way—lied to and browbeaten and bullied into believing that they had absolutely no choice other than to give their children away. It was illegal. It was wrong.

But today, for as much as we can, we can help to right that wrong. That is why the apology we offer these women, their children, their families and all of those affected by forced adoption is so critical. It goes some way towards giving them back some of the dignity that was so cruelly ripped away. We are here today on this historic day to say sorry—to say sorry to these mothers, to their now adult children and to their children's fathers, siblings, grandparents and other family members. Today, to women like Margaret and Trish and Glenda, the Labor members of this place offer our apology for the wrongs done. To unwed young women and their children of the past, we offer our hope that there will be a healing process for the pain, the grief and the guilt experienced.

This is a trauma that has harmed families for generations. By acknowledging that terrible trauma and by remembering the past and acknowledging its wrongs, we hope that you can together continue on your journey of healing.