



# Apology for past forced adoption

## Background

The Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee released its report *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices* on 29 February 2012. The Senate Committee made 20 recommendations including that government and non-government institutions that administered adoptions issue formal statements of apology.

On 5 August 2012, the Premier Lara Giddings MP, gave a commitment to make a formal Parliamentary apology for past forced adoption practices in the Spring Sitting of Parliament.

## What is forced adoption?

Forced adoptions are generally defined as adoptions where a child's natural parent, or parents, were compelled to relinquish a child for adoption. In general, the mothers were young, unmarried women at the time of the child's birth.

Submissions to the Senate Committee generally described the following experiences:

- information – lack of or misleading information about alternatives to adoption including the availability of financial support;
- consent – severe emotional and physical pressure to consent to adoption, consent under duress or while under the effects of drugs, disregarding revocation of consent, and in some cases where consent was not given at all (including in cases where women were told that their baby had died); and

- social stigma – isolation and systematic disempowerment by families, employers, society, religious communities, health professionals and maternity homes.

Pregnancy outside of marriage and illegitimacy were profound social stigmas in Australian society primarily through the 1950s and 1960s. At that time an unmarried mother faced considerable hurdles if she wanted to bring up her baby on her own and without the support of her family.

The period of past forced adoption practices in Tasmania is difficult to identify and can conceivably extend from 1950s to the 1980s.

## How many people have been affected by past forced adoptions in Tasmania?

It is very difficult to determine the number of adoptions that can be classified as having been subject to forced adoption practices. Adoptions were often shrouded in secrecy and guilt.

Based on the records available, the total number of adoptions between 1920 and 1988 in Tasmania was over 11 000. However, this figure is not indicative of the number of forced adoptions as it includes adoptions by family members and inter-country adoptions. Record keeping in the past was also often poor and each individual's experience was different.

## What is the purpose of the apology?

The apology is motivated by a desire to acknowledge the past practices of forced adoptions and accept responsibility for past injustices.

The apology has the support of the three political parties. The House of Assembly is united as representatives of the Tasmanian community to offer a sincere and unreserved apology to people hurt by past forced adoption practices.

It is hoped that the apology will support individuals harbouring feelings of hurt, pain and loss from their past experience to seek help and information to assist them to deal with their feelings.

It is also important to note that each individual's experience is different and unique to them. Not everyone affected by adoption considers it a damaging experience and there have been very positive and loving circumstances of adoption. Further, not everyone that has been separated from a family member through adoption feels that the apology is necessary.

## Will the Tasmanian Government provide financial compensation to those affected by past forced adoptions?

It is not the Tasmanian Government's intention to provide financial compensation for past forced adoption practices.

However, the Government does support the recommendation of the Senate Committee which states that the Commonwealth should lead discussions with states and territories to consider the issues surrounding the establishment and funding of financial reparation schemes and will participate in those discussions.

The Government is also establishing new services to assist those affected by past forced adoptions to access specialised targeted counselling and receive assistance to access information relating to the adoption in a streamlined way. These new services will be provided free of charge.