

Transcript – Adoption Apology, September 7, 2010.

Kim Hames: I'm here today to announce that on the 19th of October this year, we as a Parliament are going to do an apology to mothers whose children were adopted and for the practices that were done by hospitals in those times.

Now obviously I can't apologise on behalf of hospitals that were nothing to do with Government but it's quite clear that looking back on the practices of those days that the way in which those children were taken from their mothers was inappropriate. Many of you will know I'm sure that we talked about this on a previous television station that in those days children had babies taken from them. Sorry – I'll say that again.

In those days, young people who were pregnant quite often had babies taken from them as part of an adoption process that when we look back seems extremely harsh for those parents.

Often the mothers weren't even allowed to see their children who had been born. They were taken away and neither the mother nor the parents of the person who was pregnant were ever allowed to see that child. There was no opportunity for bonding, no opportunity for even seeing the child. And when we look back on those practices, nobody could consider that they were acceptable. At the time it was thought it was in the best interests of the mother, to not allow her to bond, but I think looking back you can see what a very harsh practice that was.

Now obviously now the Government wasn't just responsible, it was the practice of the day in both public and private hospitals but I can say I feel extremely sorry for those practices that they caused a huge amount of trauma to the mothers who gave up their children and a lot of them have said to me when they look back on those times that they felt they had no control, often they were underage, so their parents or guardians were required to sign for them giving up their child. And when they think about those times, they felt as though the children would think that they wanted to give them up, that they were abandoning their children when that was very seldom the case.

And so we just want to recognise those mothers and their pregnancies and the harm and trauma that this has caused very many of them throughout their lives so that's what we're doing on the 19th of October.

Daniel Emerson: Kim, this has been an issue that has been around for a while and I'm sure you're not the first health minister who has been asked to address the issue. Why personally have you taken this issue up?

Kim Hames: Well, it's hard to say. You know, obviously as a doctor I had some experience with mothers who had given up their children and the trauma that that was causing but I have to say it was the television program that was about two years ago now [correction, 18 months] that really initiated my thought processes when some of those mothers were telling their stories, particularly some wrote to me telling me how they felt and some came to see me to say the emotions they felt. Because I have to say at the start, I was thinking probably like a lot of people would, "what good is an apology, it wasn't me, it wasn't our Government, it was the practice of the day", but I am more than happy in talking to those – sorry, I'll say that again.

What became clear to me in talking to those mothers was that it had a profound effect on their life and is still having a profound effect on their life. And I thought it was if we could do something as a Government, and we're joined by the Opposition – David Templeman has spoken on this in Parliament as well – there is strong support on both sides of Parliament for us to do this because it's seen to be able to help the mothers get through those years of pain they are still suffering.

Alisha O'Flaherty: Are you the first Government in the world to do this?

Kim Hames: I don't know that and frankly I'm not doing it to be the first but it started through an apology in Queensland which I think came from the hospital that was involved. And that initiated the television program which showed "what about us, why aren't we don't this" so I give great credit to those people who came to me and initiated an awareness by Government that this was a serious issue and an apology should ensure.

Can I just say that there have been – there are some who think we shouldn't apologise, that those were the practices of the day and why it was done, it was done in the best interest of the mother but can I tell you I took part in the apology that was done in this Government by Richard Court and Geoff Gallop together to the stolen –generation for aboriginal people and it was quite clear at that time that it was the right thing to do. Again it wasn't the current government, again it was practices of the day, but it caused a lot of pain and suffering and harm for those people involved so I think this is a very similar story.

Geof Parry: So this was never a government policy, it was more of a local thing for various services and hospitals?

Kim Hames: Yes, I never found a specific government policy that says "this is what should happen", it was the practice of the day thought to be in the best interest of the mother and the child and private hospitals did exactly the same thing. Everybody had this practice, thinking it was in the best interests of the mother to sign and say to parents of those days, there was a different attitude to people getting pregnant out of wedlock. I've got a granddaughter born out of wedlock. Today nobody cares and I don't either, but in those days it was a big deal. And the parents often were saying "yes you should give up your child", but you know I had a cousin who got pregnant, thought about giving up their child for adoption, but what happened in her case is they were allowed to bond, they were given time to consider, and ended up keeping that child. And now she's my neice.

Geof Parry: The parents were often aided and abetted by churches, should they apologise?

Kim Hames: I think you need to talk to Archbishop Hickey at least. I've had a conversation with him myself and I think they've got quite a positive attitude to what we're doing.

Daniel Emerson: How far back are you talking about? What are the most recent cases?

Kim Hames: I'm aware of cases from the 1940s on. Generally in the 60s and 70s, those practices faded out, but I have still had people approach me from that era saying that those same sorts of practices happened to them. So we're not putting a specific time on it. If mothers gave up their children for adoption through a process that caused them pain and suffering, then I'm happy to include them in the motion we are putting into this government.

Daniel Emerson: Did you have to fight to get this through Cabinet?

Kim Hames: No, I took this to the Premier and the Premier is supportive and my colleagues are supportive of this process going through. I don't know about the other side, I know David Templeman is extremely supportive and I presume he's been talking to the rest of his team.

Alisha O'Flaherty: How many children did this involved?

Kim Hames: I don't have any idea on the number.

Alisha O'Flaherty: Is there any compensation that will result from this?

Kim Hames: No, there won't be. As we have done in other areas, this is an apology for practices of the day which caused pain and suffering to the women who were pregnant at the time. It's not up to me what the courts may feel about those issues, I'm happy however for Government to say 'yes, we do apologise for those practices of the day.'

Daniel Emerson: Will the apology also be to children?

Kim Hames: Well, it's not designed to be for children as we've not had children approach us. This apology is just to those mothers who gave up their children.