Dr NELSON (Bradfield—Leader of the Opposition) (9.30 am)—Mr Speaker, Members of this the 42nd Parliament of Australia, visitors and all Australians, in rising to speak strongly in support of this motion I recognise the Ngunnawal, first peoples of this Canberra land.

Today our nation crosses a threshold. We formally offer an apology. We say sorry to those Aboriginal people forcibly removed from their families through the first seven decades of the 20th century. In doing so, we reach from within ourselves to our past, those whose lives connect us to it, and in deep understanding of its importance to our future. We will be at our best today and every day if we pause to place ourselves in the shoes of others, imbued with the imaginative capacity to see this issue through their eyes with decency and respect.

This chapter in our nation's history is emblematic of much of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians from the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. It is one of two cultures: one ancient, proud and celebrating its deep bond with this land for some 60,000 years; the other, no less proud, arrived here with little more than visionary hope, deeply rooted in gritty determination to build an Australian nation for not only its early settlers and Indigenous peoples but also those who would increasingly come from all parts of the world.

Whether Australian by birth or immigration, each one of us as Australians has a duty to understand and respect what has been done in our name. In most cases we do so with great pride, but in others it is with shame. In brutally harsh conditions, from the small number of early British settlers, our non-Indigenous ancestors have given us a nation the envy of any in the world. But Aboriginal Australians made involuntary sacrifices, different but no less important, to make possible the economic and social development of our country today. None of this was easy. We cannot, from the comfort of the 21st century, begin to imagine what they overcame—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—to give us what we have and make us who we are. We do know, though, that language, disease, ignorance, good intentions, basic human prejudices and a cultural and technological chasm combined to deliver a harshness exceeded only by the land over which each sought to prevail.

And as our young nation celebrated its Federation, formality emerged in arrangements and laws that would govern the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The new nation's Constitution, though, would not allow for the counting of 'natives' or for the Commonwealth to pass laws in relation to Aborigines. Protection boards and reserves were established. Aborigines in some jurisdictions were excluded from public schools, episodic violence in race relations continued, assimilation underwrote emerging policies and churches heeded their Christian doctrine to reach out to people whom they saw in desperate need. Though disputed in motive and detail and with varying recollections of events by others, the removal of Aboriginal children began. In some cases, government policies evolved from the belief that the Aboriginal race would not survive and should be assimilated; in others, the conviction was that 'half-caste' children in particular should, for their own protection, be removed to government and church run institutions where conditions reflected the standards of the day. Others were placed with white families whose kindness motivated them to the belief that rescued children deserved a better life.

Our responsibility, every one of us, is to understand what happened here, why it happened and the impact it had on not only those who were removed but also those who did the removing and supported it. Our generation does not own these actions, nor should it feel guilt for what was done in many, but certainly not all, cases with the best of intentions. But in saying we are sorry, and deeply so, we remind ourselves that each generation lives in ignorance of the long-term consequences of its decisions and actions. Even when motivated by inherent humanity and decency to reach out to the dispossessed in extreme adversity, our actions can have unintended outcomes. As such, many decent Australians are hurt by accusations of theft in relation to their good intentions.

The stories are well documented, and I thank the Prime Minister for reminding us of Nanna Nungala Fejo's experience. I will repeat two stories. The first is from a submission given to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission inquiry, and I quote:

> I was at the post office with my Mum and Auntie [and cousin]. They put us in the police ute and said they were taking us to Broome. They put the mums in there as well. But when we'd gone [about ten miles] they stopped, and threw the mothers out of the car. We jumped on our mothers' backs, crying, trying not to be left behind. But the policemen pulled us off and threw us back in the car. They pushed the mothers away and drove off, while our mothers were chasing the car, running and crying after us. We were screaming in the back of that car. When we got to Broome they put me and my cousin in the Broome lockup. We were only ten years old. We were in the lockup for two days waiting for the boat to Perth.

In his black oral history, *The Wailing*, which I commend to every Australian, Stuart Rintoul recalls the thin pain of an Aboriginal woman from Walgett:

> Something else that never left my mind, my memory, was of a family of children being taken away and this little girl, she must have been about the same age as myself, I suppose she might have been about six. But I can still see that little person on the back of the mission truck with a little rag hat on, and she went away and we never seen her any more. She was crying. Everyone was crying. Things like that never leave your memory.

It is reasonably argued that removal from squalor led to better lives: children fed, housed and educated for an adult world which they could not have imagined. However, from my life as a family doctor and knowing the impact of my own father's removal from his unmarried, teenage mother, I know that not knowing who you are is the source of deep, scarring sorrows, the real meaning of which can be known only to those who have endured it.

No-one should bring a sense of moral superiority to this debate in seeking to diminish the view that good in many cases was sought to be done. This is a complex issue. Faye Lyman's life is one of the *Many Voices* oral history at the National Library of Australia. Faye left her father when she was eight. She said this:

> Personally, I don't want people to say, 'I'm sorry Faye', I just want them to understand.
>
> It was very hurtful to leave Dad. Oh, it broke my heart. Dad said to me, 'It's hard for Daddy and the authorities won't let you stay with me in a tent on the river bank. You're a little girl and you need someone to look after you.' I remember him telling us that, and I cried. I said 'No, but Dad, you look after us.' ... But they kept telling us it wasn't the right thing.

She went on:

> I don't want people to say sorry. I just want them to understand the hurt, what happened when we were initially separated, and just understand the society, what they have done ... You don't belong in either world. I can't explain it. It hurts so much.

There is no compensation fund for this—nor should there be. How can any sum of money replace a life deprived of knowing your family? Separation was then, and remains today, a painful but necessary part of public policy in the protection of children. Our restitution for this lies in our determination to address today's injustices, learning from what was done and doing everything we can to heal those who suffered. The period within which these events occurred was one that defined and shaped Australia. The governments that oversaw this and those who elected them emerged from federating the nation to a century characterised for Australia as triumph in the face of extraordinary adversities unknown to our generation.

In offering this apology, let us not in our language and actions create one injustice in our attempt to address another. Let no-one forget that they sent their sons to war, shaping our identity and place in the world. One hundred thousand Australians in two wars alone gave their lives in our name and our uniform, lying forever in distant lands, silent witnesses to the future that they have given us. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians lie alongside one another. These generations considered their responsibilities to their country and one another more important than their rights. They did not buy something until they had saved up for it, and values were far more important than value. Living in considerably more difficult times, they had dreams for our nation but little money. Theirs was a mesh of values enshrined in God, King and country and the belief in something greater than yourself. Neglectful indifference to all that they have achieved while seeing their actions in the separations only, through the values of our comfortable, modern Australia, will be to diminish ourselves.

Today our nation pauses to reflect on this chapter of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia. In doing so, however, given that there are so many Australians who, perhaps unusually today, are focused on Aboriginal issues, spare a thought for the real, immediate, seemingly intractable and disgraceful circumstances in which many Indigenous Australians find themselves today. As we meet and speak in this parliament, Aboriginal Australians continue to die long before the rest of us. Alcohol, welfare without responsibilities, isolation from the economic mainstream, corrupt management of resources, nepotism, political buck passing between governments with divided responsibilities, lack of home ownership, underpolicing, intolerance by authorities and neglect and abuse of children that violates all for which we stand all combine to see too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living lives of existential aimlessness.

Indigenous life expectancy is still stubbornly 17 years less than for non-Indigenous Australians. An Aboriginal baby born while we speak still has only a one in three chance of seeing the age of 65. Diabetes, kidney disease, hospitalisation of women from assault, imprisonment, overcrowding in housing, educational underperformance and unemployment remain appallingly high, despite gains in some areas over the past decade. Annual Indigenous-specific spending by the Commonwealth has reached $3½ billion a year, plus half a billion dollars this year on the Northern Territory intervention.

The sexual abuse of Aboriginal children was found in every one of the 45 Northern Territory communities surveyed for the *Little children are sacred* report. It was the straw that broke the camel's back, driving the Howard government's decision to intervene with a suite of dramatically radical welfare, health and policing initiatives. I cannot imagine the strength upon which she drew, but the Alice Springs Crown Prosecutor, Nanette Rogers, with great courage, revealed to the nation in 2006 the case of a four-year-old girl drowned while being raped by a teenager who had been sniffing petrol. She told us of the two children, one a baby, sexually assaulted by two men while their mothers were drinking alcohol. Another baby was stabbed by a man trying to kill her mother. So too a 10-year-old girl was gang-raped in Aurukun, the offenders going free, barely punished. A boy was raped in another community by other children. Is this not an emergency, the most disturbing part of it being its endemic nature and Australia's apparent desensitisation to it? Yet governments responsible for delivering services and security have resisted elements of a Northern Territory style intervention.

I ask the Prime Minister to report to this parliament regularly on what his government is doing to save this generation of Aboriginal Australians from these appalling conditions. I also offer on behalf of the opposition my unconditional support to participate in the commission for policy which he proposes. This is far, far more important than any of the things that would normally divide us as a nation in philosophy and politics.

Our generation has over 35 years overseen a system of welfare, alcohol delivery, administration of programs, episodic preoccupation with symbolism and, at times, even excusing the inexcusable in the name of cultural sensitivity, to create what we now see in remote Aboriginal Australia. With good intentions, perhaps like earlier generations, we have under successive governments created lives, in many cases, of misery for which we might apologise. I certainly do. The best way we can show it is to act, and to act now. I challenge anyone who thinks Aboriginal people get a good deal to come to any of these communities and tell me you wish you had been born there.

The first Aboriginal Australian who came to this parliament was Neville Bonner. A Yagara man abandoned by his non-Aboriginal father before his birth on Ukerebagh Island in the mouth of the Tweed River, Neville was born into a life of hardship known only to some who are here today as visitors. He grew up in a hollow that had been carved by his grandfather under lantana bushes. The year before his mother's death when he was nine, she sent him to a school near Lismore. He lasted two days before the non-Aboriginal people forced his exclusion.

It was to his grandmother Ida he attributed his final success. Arguing that at 14 the boy must go to school, she had said to him: ‘Neville, if you learn to read and write, express yourself well and treat people with decency and courtesy, it will take you a long way,’ and it did. Through a life as a scrub clearer, a ringer, a stockman, a bridge carpenter and 11 years on Palm Island, it brought him to this parliament in 1971, as the events of this motion were nearing an end. He said in prophetic words to the Liberal Party members who selected him: ‘In my experience of this world, two qualities are always in greater need—human understanding and compassion.’

When he was asked by Robin Hughes in 1992 to reflect on his life, Neville observed that the unjust hardships he had endured ‘can only be changed when people of non-Aboriginal extraction are prepared to listen, to hear what Aboriginal people are saying, and then work with us to achieve those ends’. Asked to nominate his greatest achievement, he replied: ‘It is that I was there. They no longer spoke of boongs or blacks. They spoke instead of Aboriginal people.’

Today is about ‘being there’ as a nation and as individual Australians. It is about Neville Bonner’s understanding of one another and the compassion that shaped his life in literally reaching out to those whom he considered had suffered more than him. We honour those in our past who have suffered—many of whom are here today—and all who have made sacrifices for us by the way we live our lives and shape our nation. Today we recommit to do so—as one people. We are sorry.

Honourable members applauding—

The SPEAKER—Order! Whilst it might seem redundant, to signify their support, I invite honourable members to rise in their places.

Honourable members having stood in their places—