Crown Apology to Survivors of Abuse in Care

**Rt Hon CHRIS HIPKINS (Leader of the Opposition)**

Can I start by acknowledging and fully supporting the words of the Prime Minister in delivering the formal apology on behalf of successive Governments who have failed you, survivors, your families, whānau, kāinga, hapū, iwi, your communities, your support networks, and New Zealand as a nation. I want to acknowledge all of you—those who are physically here at Parliament today, those who are watching all across the country, those who find it too painful to engage in this process at all, and those who have died before today finally arrived.

Among the community of survivors are many intersecting communities who have jointly suffered from neglect, from abuse, from trauma, from torture, and they have carried their scars over lifetimes and over generations: Māori survivors, Pacific survivors, Pākehā survivors, Deaf survivors, disabled survivors, survivors who experienced mental distress, takatāpui, mahu, vakasalewa, palopa, fa'afafine, akavai'ne, fakaleiti, fakafifine, and all Rainbow survivors. Today is a hugely important day for all of you to finally hear what the Crown has failed to give you for all these years: an apology.

It's a hugely important day for us, the representatives of the Crown and of successive Governments, that we finally—finally—acknowledge the thousands of confronting experiences of neglect, abuse, trauma, torture, and that we finally own up fully to our failings and offer our sincerest apologies. We are sorry. Today, all of Aotearoa New Zealand will bear witness to the truth, to what survivors experienced, to our decades of wilful ignorance, denial, minimisation, and to our conviction to end such horror and vile acts from continuing.

As the royal commission found, around 250,000 people were abused, and an even higher, untold number neglected. We will never know that true number. Many people entering into State and faith-based institutions were undocumented, records were incomplete, they've gone missing, and in some cases, yes, they were deliberately destroyed. Every corner of New Zealand has been affected by this abuse—a family member, a neighbour, a colleague, a friend.

In 2018, we started the long-overdue process of acknowledging that the abuse happened, and so we could hear from those who have had to live with the repercussions of that. To those who shared your stories with the inquiry, thank you. To those who've chosen not to recount those memories, we wholeheartedly understand. To those who died before they were given the opportunity to be heard, rest knowing that you are heard today. I give my thanks to all of those who were involved—to the commissioners, assisting counsel, the Survivor Advisory Group of Experts—I can name but a handful, but my gratitude goes out to everyone who was instrumental in this inquiry. It was an enormous task.

While necessary and welcomed, for many the inquiry and associated events stir up and exacerbate the pain and the suffering, and I know that, for many, today will be painful. The things that we speak about today rise from the worst of human nature. They show us how immoral and reprehensible it is that we, as the Crown, not only allowed it to happen and ignored it but further punished those who spoke out. I want you to hear that we have heard—that, while we can never fully understand what these experiences were like for you, we have heard your testimonies.

The royal commission shows us that many survivors who entered State or faith-based care and institutions were forced into them due to discriminatory attitudes and harsh conditions that were beyond their control: racism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and cruel attitudes towards people who simply needed support. What these people—what you, the survivors, and your loved ones—experienced spans an unimaginable spectrum of horror; horror perpetuated within a system that allowed it, by people who you should have been able to trust: caregivers, staff, peers, other residents, police, medical practitioners, teachers, social workers, nurses, nuns, priests, and religious ministers.

You lived without care, affection, love, emotional support, and connection. Many of you experienced psychological and emotional neglect and abuse, being institutionalised and denied your personhood. Physical and sexual abuse and violence was a common experience. Many were deprived of an education or punished for having special needs. Deaf survivors were punished for using sign language. Blind survivors were punished for using echolocation. Survivors also experienced physical neglect. They were denied food, shelter, water, basic hygiene. Female survivors were often denied menstrual products. Many were placed in solitary confinement, often for long periods of time, and neglected whilst there.

Survivors were not allowed to express who they were, and they were often punished when they did so. Too many were neglected medically, yet also subjected to unnecessary and invasive procedures without consent, and some of you were tortured. All of this at the hands of State and faith-based institutions that were entrusted with providing care and protection to you—taonga, who should have been loved and nurtured. Not only has this immeasurable harm and trauma hurt you—the children, young people, and vulnerable adults who experienced it directly—but also your families, your whānau, your kāinga, your hapū, iwi, and communities. The intergenerational and collective harm caused cannot be overstated. Survivors were often targeted based on race, sexual orientation, disability, and gender, and isolated from their cultures, their language, their sense of self, and from their families.

Māori survivors found themselves in a system that inherently worked against them, and care settings that were blatantly racist. Many Māori survivors were made to feel whakamā—shame at having been stripped of their identity as Māori. Whakapapa and mana motuhake were transgressed, and people were severed from their whānau. Marae, hapū, iwi lost people who would otherwise be sitting on the taumata or the paepae, passing on cultural knowledge.

Pacific survivors were punished for who they were, with their cultural needs and existence not only neglected but actively destroyed. There are stories of Pacific survivors who were told they didn't belong in this world and that they had no identity. For Pacific survivors, it was not only being actively dislocated from their kāinga, communities, and church but also the harm experienced in various institutions that breached the va'a, resulting in shame, isolation and an inability to fully embrace life.

Pākehā survivors were similarly removed from their families, actively isolated from them, and often for nothing more than being poor. Pākehā survivors have suffered lifelong dislocation and disconnection from family and community. Their identity and mana also diminished. We should never overlook the horrors they endured.

Deaf survivors were seen as lesser, forced to communicate only orally. They suffered under audism and ableist attitudes, and they were punished if they were caught using sign language. Education centres for deaf New Zealanders like van Asch Deaf Education Centre and Kelston Deaf Education Centre should have been safe spaces. Instead, they became a hellscape for students where physical and sexual abuse were rife. Students were constantly belittled, others made to feel inferior.

Disabled survivors were shut away, stigmatised, and devalued for being disabled. They faced all types of abuse and extreme neglect. In their interviews with the inquiry, disabled survivors said that "abuse and neglect caused them to lose their sense of self, their personhood – the 'essence of being human' – and connections to their families, communities, cultures and language".

Mentally distressed survivors were shut away in institutions and experienced the full spectrum of abuse, neglect, and trauma that were par for the course in these places. Nothing they experienced was therapeutic or addressed their needs.

Rainbow survivors were forced into institutions and psychiatric wards engulfed in homophobia, where they were mislabelled with different mental health illnesses. Conversion practices were rife as a means to cure or to fix survivors, including the use of electric shocks. One such institution that used electric shocks and hurt, broke and tortured those who passed through their doors. That was the Lake Alice Hospital—a name now synonymous with the experience of trauma, and a shameful part of New Zealand's history. The horrors committed there and in similar places remain some of the darkest in our history.

Churches and other faith-based entities were also spaces where many suffered. They abused their power to harm people who they were entrusted to care for. Priests, ministers, and other religious leaders—those who should have been trusted—devolved into monsters behind closed doors, and they must also equally be held to account.

Successive Labour Governments, Ministers, ministries, and State institutions had a role to play in this neglect, this abuse, this trauma, this torture. They allowed systems they governed to continue to place children, young people, and vulnerable adults in care unnecessarily, and to hurt them while they were there. When survivors tried to raise the alarm, representatives of Labour also played a role in ignoring, punishing, and shaming survivors, drowning them out so they could never be heard. That was wrong.

So today, I want to tell you on behalf of successive Labour Governments, we also formally and unreservedly say sorry for the neglect, abuse, trauma, and torture that took place in State- and faith-based care institutions. We apologise for ignoring you, for punishing you for speaking out, and for leaving you unsafe and unheard. Today, I want to confirm that we hear you. We hear all of you, and we are sorry that that took so long. To each and every one of you who endured all that suffering, to your families, your children, mokopuna, your kāinga, your hapū, your iwi, your communities, we see your scars and we hear you. And we are sorry. You should have been safe, protected, and believed, and you were not. That is the ultimate injustice that we, as representatives of the Crown, must also bear the burden of.

I am sorry that the last Labour Government did not act more quickly to put in place an independent redress system. We, the Government, and representatives of the Crown, owe a huge debt to you. Redress has taken far, far too long, to the point where many have already died or fear they might do so before getting any compensation. Redress should be kept out of the court system, and it should be seen as an investment in our people. It's a national disgrace that it has taken us too long. I want to confirm that for the serious matter of redress and compensating survivors, we're taking the politics off the table. We're committing to finally paying back this debt. We welcome the Government's action to streamline that process, and we stand ready to work together to get this done as quickly and as efficiently as possible. There will be a big bill, but it's nothing compared to the debt that we owe those survivors. It must not be the reason for any further delay.

I'm under no illusions that neglect, abuse, and trauma in State care still happens today. For this apology to have any credibility, we must take concrete action to stop it. You've heard words before and now you want action—I hear you. One of the many things that sticks with me from reading the report, and from the accounts that we heard this morning, is that survivors emphasise time and again that they don't want what happened to them to happen to one more person. For many of you, this is just an important part of seeking justice and we have enormous work to do.

The inquiry and this apology must be a turning point, a point from which to embark on a pathway for us to not only right these historic wrongs but also fundamentally change our care system, change it so that State care is rarely necessary. When I met with Keith Wiffin to discuss my speech, he said to me, "The best prevention for abuse in State care is to keep people out of it in the first place." and I wholeheartedly agree. But when people are in care, it should be a safe and warm space for all, as it should always have been.

We welcome and support the Government's commitment and beginning the work to improve the safeguards for those in State care. There is much, much work to do, and we must not waste one more day. We also support the Government to work with local authorities to honour the unmarked graves and to remove the names of proven perpetrators from public places. For the guilty who remain nameless, we encourage the Government to ensure that all is done to hold those perpetrators to account.

I want to acknowledge in closing that for some and perhaps many of you, there will never be healing and closure. My hope is that this apology today offers at least some relief—that your fight to be heard has resulted in this apology.

Now is the time to forge a new pathway forwards. The royal commission set out survivors' dreams for the future—he māra tipu, a garden of growth—where every child, young person, and adult is loved, safe, and cared for in a manner that supports their growth and development into a thriving contributor to society. That's my dream too, and I hope that together we can achieve it for generations to come, and never ever again repeat the mistakes of the past. Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.

*Waiata—"Purea Nei"*