Branching Out
October 2009

Brief History of the Apology Alliance Australia
Feb 2008 – Oct 2009

How the Alliance was born

The loss of a baby to adoption is an horrendous pain, and in the past a cruel, hidden agony, as it was rarely acknowledged or recognised that these mothers suffered. Her loss was hidden behind a veil of deceit and secrecy that was 'closed adoption'. The propaganda promulgated by state welfare and child adoption agencies was the lie that these children were 'unwanted'. Mothers were made to feel that having their child forcibly taken was punishment meted out because they gave birth outside marriage. These mothers were not informed of the available financial benefits that would have assisted them to keep their children, nor any of the alternatives to adoption, such as foster care or access to long day-care centres for their children if they had to work. Being young and naive the legality of what was being done was never questioned, it was only years later mothers as a group uncovered the truth. At the time they were told, by unfeeling adoption workers, to forget about their babies, go home and get on with their lives.

From some ground-breaking efforts by a few courageous mothers and adoptees in the '70s and '80s came both a validation of their claims of pain and grief by the efforts of innovative researchers, who uncovered the deceit and immoral practices of those who purported to be assisting the mothers in their time of need, as well as slow changes in various state laws to allow separated families to access information about one another. Many support groups formed, which, besides supporting the emotional needs of members, lobbied for recognition of their pain and trauma of the loss of family, asking the governments – State and Federal – for inquiries into the past immoral and unlawful practices of the adoption industry. Two states – NSW and Tasmania - have had inquiries but apart from those involved, little or no public recognition has developed and although the NSW Inquiry recommended that an apology be given by those persons responsible for causing harm to mothers, no apology has been forthcoming up until now. It was apparent as separate entities the support groups were not achieving recognition and realisation by the general public, and more importantly the family members who were separated by adoption, of the crimes perpetrated against them.

Two events were catalysts for the formation of the Apology Alliance. One was the apology given to the Stolen Indigenous Generations the other was the upcoming launch of an anthology of mothers' stories funded by the Department of Community Service: 'Releasing the Past: Mothers' Stories of their Stolen Babies', edited by Christine Cole, researcher and author. Cole was aware that the Indigenous community had worked tirelessly and effectively as a cohesive group, as had the

Forgotten Australians and the British Migrant group. Cole's intention therefore was to unite the groups in a common quest: to elicit acknowledgement of past human and civil rights abuse and gain a Federal apology. Consequently, the Alliance was formed so 'Natural Parents could have a National Voice'. Broadly the Alliance serves all the groups – both support groups and professional organisations - by keeping them connected and informed of relevant issues. When there is an important issue that all groups wish to support, the Alliance co-ordinates it and writes letters, or puts together a submission on behalf of the members. For instance, the Alliance co-ordinated with all support groups and post adoption centres to send a submission to the Queensland government to overturn the veto system in Queensland so adoptees could gain access to information about their families – thankfully the Bligh Labour government has acknowledged the need for adoptees to know their biological ancestry and adoptees can now access that information.

In October 2008 an email was sent to more than 100 politicians and a letter posted to the Prime Minister with a copy of the Mothers' book stating the reasons why we needed an apology and its importance in assisting us in our healing process. It was endorsed by all member groups of the Alliance. The Alliance was further galvanised by the promotion of intercountry adoption and the stated intention of a media personality, Deborra-lee Furness, to overhaul adoption laws both domestically and intercountry. A panel was formed to advise the government on matters pertaining to overseas adoption. It consisted of adoptive parents and two intercountry adoptees. The Alliance lobbied to have a natural family representative but though not successful it still informs the government on relevant issues concerning intercountry adoptions from the natural families' perspective.

Apology Alliance of Australia: a brief history

During November 2008 there was strong media coverage during "National Adoption Awareness Week" given to the Deborra-lee Furness campaign to promote overseas adoption and make Australia - which she accused of being anti-adoption, - proadoption.

Members of the Alliance believed that a realistic picture of the pain and loss inherent in adoption was not getting any media attention. Consequently, Janice Kashin, an Alliance member, decided she would place a 'Declaration of Profound Loss' in The Australian. The Apology Alliance contacted all its member groups and post adoption resource centres and all agreed to support Janice's initiative.

The following appeared in *The Australian*, November 21, 2008, with a list of all the Alliance
member groups:

DECLARATION OF PROFOUND LOSS
We the undersigned:
MOURN the loss of our children
TAKEN FOR ADOPTION
MOURN the loss of our families of origin
DENIED US BY ADOPTION
MOURN the loss of our brothers and sisters

CAUSED BY ADOPTION
MOURN the loss of grandparents
DENIED US BY ADOPTION
MOURN the loss of our rightful position in life
DECREED BY ADOPTION

•There was also a verbal (broadcast on Channel 7) and written apology delivered to ALAS, a member group of the Alliance, by Professor Ian Jones in June 2009 on behalf of the Royal Brisbane Women's Hospital for the suffering caused to unmarried mothers by past practices.

APOLOGY ALLIANCE ACHIEVEMENTS to date:

• To capitalise on our media attention because of RBWH's apology, the Alliance connected members with media, leading to mothers speaking out twice publicly, on Channel 7 News in NSW, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia.

• This led to the Hornsby Hospital, in June, 2009 issuing a public apology on Channel 7 news, to all mothers mistreated and forcibly separated from their children at their institution.

• Subsequently the West Australian Deputy Premier, Dr Kim Haines, stated publicly that his government intended to apologise to all mothers and children forcibly separated in his state. He has personally apologised to the author of this article and to another Alliance member in September, on behalf of the State Government of Western Australia.

• Representatives of a W.A. Catholic institution are formally meeting with members of the Apology Alliance to negotiate an apology from their institution

• Three representatives of the Apology Alliance met with the NSW Minister for Community Services, Linda Burney formally requesting an apology from the NSW Premier.

• Co-ordinated teleconference on 10 September 2009 between representatives of various member groups and representatives of the Hon Jenny Macklin's office (Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) "to discuss how the Commonwealth can assist with the healing process … so we can chart a path forward with the dialogue we are so keen to have"

• As a result of the input from the teleconference, the apology is 'on the table' but it was stated that more input from all members of the Apology Alliance members is needed. The Federal government wants to hear from all family members impacted by past practices on how an apology would assist them in their healing process. I personally hope that those who believe that an apology will assist them with their healing process will contact Jenny Macklin's office and let her representatives know how important it is to you.

Extract of an article by:

Barbara Maison
September 23rd 2009

Footnote: On the 29th of September, 2009 the Attorney-General made an additional appointment to the National Intercountry Adoption Advisory Group.

"The Attorney-General has appointed Ms Evelyn Robinson as a discretionary member of NICAAG, until 30 March 2012."