

New Zealand government makes empty apology to people abused by the state

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On November 12, New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon and opposition leader Chris Hipkins read out apologies in parliament to hundreds of thousands of people who were abused while in the care of the state and in church-run facilities.

In July, a long-running Royal Commission of Inquiry issued a 3,000-page report, which implicated successive governments in systemic abuse inflicted on generations of children, youth and disabled people. From 1950 to 2019 it is estimated that more than 250,000 people were abused or neglected while in foster care, schools, orphanages, military-style boot camps, psychiatric hospitals and other settings.

The horrific nature of what the inquiry found cannot be overstated. The commissioners documented many instances of rape and sexual abuse, routine and brutal beatings, the use of electro-shock therapy as a form of punishment, racism towards Māori and Pacific children and sensory deprivation. Deaf and blind people in care were prevented from learning sign language and braille. Many mothers were coerced into giving up their babies for adoption.

The publication of the Royal Commission's report created a crisis for the National Party-led government and the opposition Labour Party. Survivors are demanding the resignation of senior officials who knew about the abuse and sought to cover it up in order to shield the state from liability.

The aim of this week's public apology was to contain the fallout by making a show of listening to the survivors, learning the lessons of past wrongs and "healing" the nation in order to move on.

Many of those who attended the events at parliament in Wellington, or who watched from other parts of the country, remarked on the hollowness of the proceedings, under conditions where perpetrators have

been protected for years by the state, most victims have received little or no redress and abuse in state care is still common.

Prime Minister Luxon hailed the "courage" and "persistence" of survivors who pushed for justice for decades. He admitted that in some cases the abuse they suffered amounted to torture, and that people "struggled to get help from government agencies when you came forward to report your abuse."

He promised to implement a redress scheme, but no details have yet been announced. Luxon said an interim \$32 million will be set aside to settle existing claims from about 3,500 survivors, "while we work on the new redress system."

Luxon declared that his government was "carefully considering" the 138 recommendations in the Royal Commission's report and was working to bring about "better protection to prevent the suffering of vulnerable and voiceless people." He said vetting and training for staff had improved, and "We have started the process to remove the ability to strip search children in care, provide new search powers for people visiting youth justice facilities, and to strengthen restrictions for people working with young children."

Yet the government is proceeding with the establishment of new military-style boot camps for young offenders—a central component of its "tough on crime" agenda. Similar facilities were condemned by the Royal Commission for their systemic brutalisation of young people, including beatings and sexual abuse.

Abuse survivor Ken Clearwater, speaking to Radio NZ, pointed out that children remain at risk from rising poverty and underfunded services, including recent cuts to disability care. He said the government was "apologising for what happened in the past, but the policies are still in place that are making it no different

than when we were in the past.”

Sonja Cooper, a lawyer representing several abuse survivors, released a statement describing the apology as “tone deaf and not survivor focused.” She condemned the failure to provide redress and said the apology was “the same rhetoric we’ve heard from successive governments, namely that this is a historic issue that no one wants to see happen again.”

In reality, Cooper said, “our so-called historical shame is not that. It is a current shame. Countless children are still being taken from their homes and placed with people who abuse them, degrade them and neglect them.”

According to the Independent Children’s Monitor, 519 children were abused and neglected while in the care of Oranga Tamariki (the child welfare agency) in 2023, including 95 cases of sexual abuse and more than 400 of physical abuse. This represents about 9 percent of the total number of children in care—up from 6 percent in 2019.

A report published by the Human Rights Commission in July revealed that there were “regular assaults” in the country’s youth justice facilities. The report quoted one inmate who said: “If we have a fight in here or the staff hurt us, it is what it is. We can’t do nothing about it, no one’s even listening to us anyway.”

Staff often failed to intervene to prevent violence among children and “access to timely healthcare does not always occur with some [young people] waiting long periods of time to have their health concerns addressed.” There was a “high use of searches and restrictive practices like restraint holds and secure care (seclusion).”

The government’s apology ignored calls for accountability. The Royal Commission implicated dozens of government ministers and bureaucrats: The Spinoff published a list of 112 “politicians and senior public servants who oversaw decades of harm and neglect,” including police commissioners who had failed to investigate abuse or to take action to stop it.

Survivors have called for the resignation of Una Jagose, the current Solicitor-General, who is mentioned repeatedly in the Royal Commission’s report. As a Crown lawyer during the 2000s she was heavily involved in fending off claims by abuse victims.

Jagose delivered an official apology prior to Luxon, but her speech was drowned out by boos. “I am sorry

that survivors of abuse in care were not always treated with dignity by us lawyers,” she said, prompting one survivor to shout: “You never treated us with dignity!”

An official apology by Oranga Tamariki chief executive Andrew Bridgman was also interrupted by someone shouting: “Shut down the boot camps!”

While Jagose and other bureaucrats are certainly culpable, they were acting on instructions from successive National and Labour Party administrations. Labour leader Hipkins acknowledged the complicity of his party, telling parliament: “We apologise for ignoring you. For punishing you for speaking out. And for leaving you unsafe and unheard.”

No politicians have faced any consequences for overseeing the systematic brutalisation of hundreds of thousands of children and other vulnerable people.

As social inequality continues to widen and society becomes increasingly militarised in preparation for war, the capitalist class has nothing to offer generations of young people except lives of poverty and barbarism. These conditions can only be ended by the working class through the fight to abolish capitalism and to build a socialist society, which will eliminate social inequality, poverty and all forms of oppression.



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