The Royal Commission is sitting today on the land of the Larrakia people – the traditional owners of the greater Darwin area. I acknowledge their deep spiritual connection with this land and sea country and I would like to pay my respects to Larrakia Elders both past and present.

The Royal Commission has now conducted public hearings in each of NSW, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia. This is our first public hearing in Darwin. We will hold a public hearing in Tasmania towards the end of the year.
This hearing is concerned with the events which took place at the Retta Dixon Home which was provided for Aboriginal children. It opened in 1946 and closed in 1980. Although the site remains there is only limited physical evidence of the facilities occupied by the children.

In recent years many Australians have come to understand more about the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than previously. That knowledge has come from many sources. One in particular is the 1997 Bringing Them Home Inquiry conducted by the Australian Human Rights Commission which is generally acknowledged as providing a wider community understanding of the impact of governments and institutions on the lives of many Aboriginal children.

The Inquiry records the fact that from the late 19th century until the early 1970’s Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in institutions run by the State, religious organisations and charities or adopted by non-Aboriginal families. Retta Dixon was one of these facilities. The Human Rights commission records that many Indigenous children who had
been removed from their families were cruelly treated – many suffered physical and sexual abuse. Recognised as the Stolen Generation these impacts resonate today.

Since the Royal Commission began to engage with the general public in April last year we have been mindful of the need to ensure that we honoured the obligation in our Letters Patent to provide an opportunity for survivors of sexual abuse as children to have an opportunity to tell their story. As I have mentioned on previous occasions the Commonwealth Parliament amended the Royal Commissions Act to enable us to hold private sessions which provide an opportunity for survivors to speak with a Commissioner and talk of their childhood experience and its consequences for their lives. By this means thousands of people will have the opportunity to tell their story and contribute to our work in both public hearings and the development of appropriate policy responses to systemic issues.

The Royal Commission began our engagement with the Australian community in April last year. As of last week, 827 Aboriginal people have contacted us.
This represents 18% of all people who have made contact. Of the people coming to private sessions 9% are from Aboriginal communities.

Aboriginal people have given evidence in public hearings. In particular the Parramatta Girls Home public hearing received evidence from a number of Aboriginal witnesses. Many Aboriginal organisations and advocacy groups have engaged with the Royal Commission through submissions to Issues Papers and participation in roundtables.

In June 2014, the Royal Commission delivered Aboriginal-focused private sessions in Broome and Kununurra in the Kimberley region of Western Australia.

In July 2014, we hosted the Cherbourg Weekend, which brought together 50 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survivors to participate in a mix of private sessions and group forums, supported by traditional cultural healing practices.
In May 2015, we will deliver private sessions for people from the Tiwi Islands. We have been working with Elders on the island throughout this year. A number of Tiwi survivors have already registered for private sessions.

Apart from these activities we have conducted community meetings and forums in Aboriginal communities in areas as diverse as Ballarat, Alice Springs, Central West NSW, Adelaide, Darwin, Geraldton, Tenant Creek, Brisbane, Canberra and Wagga. Many people have made contact with us following these occasions. We are also working with Aboriginal inmates in prisons across Australia to make sure they can get in touch with us to share their story if they wish to do so. To facilitate our work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people we have six Aboriginal staff and provide regular cultural Awareness Training for Royal Commission staff.

I have previously emphasised that the Royal Commission must be selective in the choice of institutions which it considers in public hearings. This is true of all institutions, including those where Aboriginal children lived. The hearing in Darwin this week is an important chapter in our work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.