

NSW Police Commissioner Michael Fuller speech to '78ers at Sydney Police Centre on 9th August 2018

Good afternoon to all,

It is a pleasure to be here today, and I also acknowledge the traditional owners as its been done and for those five individual speakers for some really powerful stories and in the last 18 months, through Parrabel and some of the other meetings we have had.

The stories that I've heard have made me embarrassed – and not just to be a police officer, but it was much, much broader than that.

I have got a written speech and the reason it's written is because you get one chance to try and heal the wounds in 40 years and its tough. To give you some sense of comfort, I was rewriting it on my way over here. Because I thought to myself, 'Well, what do I say?'

What do you say?

I will read it because it's important. It's more than just the words.

I will start with as the Commissioner of Police; I am personally sorry.

I will also finish with that, but I will put that into some context if that's ok, as I read this for you here.

2018 marks the 40th year anniversary of the first Mardi Gras in 1978. It was a cold night in Darlinghurst on the 24th of June when a small group formed to commemorate the international gay solidarity day.

The violence and almost 200 arrests that followed in June, July and August established an historical landmark for Sydney's gay community and for NSWPF.

Some 38 years later, as we know, the NSW Parliament issued an apology to those participating in the events of 1978 for the harm and distress that you experienced.

The Sydney Morning Herald also apologised for their part in exposing participants to further hurt and suffering through publishing their names and more personal information. And at the same time, our Corporate Spokesperson, now Assistant Commissioner Tony Crandell, on behalf of New South Wales Police, formally apologised on behalf for our actions.

Since that time, I have personally met with a small number of the 78ers, and I have read, and I have listened, and I have listened more today to their stories and those of others.

Particularly gay men during the 70's, 80s and 90s who were shamed, embarrassed, abused and assaulted and murdered just because they were gay, lesbian, transgender. They were just simply different.

To the '78ers, thank you. The movement for equality began with you, which is a pretty powerful statement.

As the New South Wales Police Force Commissioner, I am truly sorry for the way that you, and the LGBTQI community, were treated back in '78. The actions of police – and society – and the laws behind them at the time were wrong.

They caused a deep and damaging rift between police and, in particular, decent citizens who just happen to be gay.

To the LGBTQI community, I'm sorry for our mistakes in the past. We acknowledge the pain and hurt caused by the actions of government agencies driven by the indifference of society.

But with my personal vow never to take a backwards step, the NSW Police Force has worked extremely hard to mend this relationship over the last few decades. I give you a personal undertaking, we won't take a backwards step.

Our GLO programme has been instrumental in trust and confidence in policing services amongst members of the LGBTQI communities.

Today, our organisational commitment receives national acknowledgment and endorsement as a healthy framework of community engagement, that continues to build relationships of trust between the police and LGBTQI communities.

Today's police force, the police force I am privileged to lead, is diverse and we are proud of that diversity. Our relationship is growing, it's healthy and we are positive about the prospects of a better future together. But I felt that future wouldn't be the same unless I came here today to say sorry.

So, in closing the speech, the challenge is for me not to take a backwards step, to continue to endorse and promote diversity and the fact that we march now at that same time I think is a powerful statement.

Tony Crandell, I feel as a police officer, has done more to bridge the gap than any other senior police officer has and I want to thank you for your courage for your leadership, followed by Jacky, you and your team.

I ask that you continue to challenge me as the Commissioner and you've talked about some other things today, some other opportunities, that I will take on board.

My one challenge is this, we have so many decent police out there today that want to help. We need to give the community confidence that they can come forward and report crimes. Will I promise you will get every one right? I wish I could, but I can't.

My great fear is that someone is sitting at home today, a victim of a crime, and they don't have the confidence to reach out.

Maybe it isn't north-western NSW or southwestern NSW but there are good people in this room that will take the call.

And those of you who work closely with NSW police know who the good police are.

And I would just ask as a small challenge from me in the relationship, that hopefully today does close some wounds that have been open for a long time. I can't imagine if I came close to making the mark in terms of what an apology looked like, but I would just ask that we want to continue to grow the relationship.

We don't fear the criticism, we don't fear the past, we acknowledge the past, but I can't take those steps forward without you as a community and without you understanding that we will make mistakes, but those mistakes aren't based on biases of 1940.

When I was a ten-year-old boy sitting on a beanbag watching tv naive to all of it.. now some 40 years later we have stories that make me sick. I can't change that. But I can make you a promise we won't make a backwards step, but I would much rather step forward in a partnership.

And that's why I am here today.

Thank you ladies and gents.