



# Lib MPs demand a free vote on apology

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BRENDAN Nelson's leadership will be tested today when a group of Liberal MPs demand he allow them the right to vote against the parliamentary apology to the Stolen Generations.

Up to 10 Liberal MPs are demanding Dr Nelson allow a "free vote", to give them the right to vote against the apology.

Other Liberals, who would not be named, were furious that Dr Nelson had not ruled out a free vote, arguing that to allow it would make the Liberal leader look foolish.

The Nationals met in Canberra last night and decided that as long as the apology was balanced and not too extreme in its language, they would vote with Labor to say sorry.

Nationals senator Barnaby Joyce told *The Australian* that to vote against the motion would be to create a bigger political headache for the Coalition.

Dr Nelson would not say yesterday whether he would allow a free vote. "I will discuss that issue with colleagues before I discuss it with anybody else," the Opposition Leader said.

West Australian Liberal MP Steve Irons, who won the seat of Swan at the November election, called for a free vote because he

did not want to vote for the apology motion, which, he said, went against the wishes of people in his community.

"My vote would be no," Mr Irons said. "I've got a lot of empathy as I've been through that process myself.

"I was a ward of the state at the age of six months and put in a babies' home for three years but I don't think we need to look back and I don't think it's going to make any difference."

West Australian Liberal senator Alan Eggleston joined Mr Irons in calling for a free vote.

"I'm not sure that it's an issue that requires people to be forced to take one position or another and I think a free vote is the best way to go for the Coalition and I don't think it will reflect badly on Brendan Nelson's leadership," Senator Eggleston said.

Tasmanian Liberal senator Guy Barnett said he would argue in the partyroom today that all MPs be compelled to vote for the apology.

West Australian senator Ross Lightfoot said it was a good idea to apologise — "it should have been done decades ago" — but thought a free vote was essential.

"Given the freedoms that the Liberal Party have had before with controversial issues, it also

allows people to vent their feelings without suffering any advance to their careers," Senator Lightfoot said.

Kevin Rudd said yesterday he would not show Dr Nelson the exact wording of the apology before Coalition meetings this week. Dr Nelson has refused to commit to supporting the apology without seeing the exact wording.

The Prime Minister said he would meet Dr Nelson in the next 24 hours, to go over the "principal content" of the apology.

"I will be conveying the clear content of what's there and I'm sure he'll have something to take away with him," Mr Rudd said.

He said the apology would take the form of a parliamentary resolution to be presented to both houses, rather than a declaration.

"Our belief is that a resolution of the parliament is an appropriate way of expressing formally the resolve of either the Government or the parliament, depending on which way the Opposition votes on this," Mr Rudd said.

"The objective here is to get, if we can do it, a unanimous resolution of the parliament.

"I think that's a really good outcome for the nation, if we can do it."