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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**FORGOTTEN AUSTRALIANS**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 16 November 2009**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Mr IRONS** (Swan) (1.22 pm)—Today I rise to speak on the motion put to the House by the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Ms Jenny Macklin, and responded to by the coalition shadow minister, Mr Tony Abbott. I also thank the member for Blaxland for his kind words and I look forward to the member for Corio's address after mine. I support this motion. Personally it is a privilege and an honour to be able to do so. I only hope that, in the time that I have, I can do justice to the people who so richly deserve the apology delivered this morning by the Prime Minister of Australia and the Leader of the Opposition, Malcolm Turnbull, in such a bipartisan manner. Wasn't it just an emotionally charged, electric situation? I think it was just fantastic. Well done to you, Malcolm, and well done to the Prime Minister.

I would first like to acknowledge a few people today, on indulgence. I would like to say hello to the CLANNies, to the forgotten Australians, to the Maltese and UK migrants who are in this chamber today and to those across Australia watching or listening. I welcome you and hope this day begins a new journey for you. I know the apology will never take away the memories and the pain of your childhood, but I live in hope that we will see the Australian community embrace you and we will see you, our fellow Australians, as our sisters and brothers and we as a nation will love you as sisters and brothers.

Talking about brothers and sisters, I would also like to welcome my brother Robert Dix, who was at the apology this morning and is in the chamber now. Hi, Bobbi. Robert and I were separated when I was six months old and reunited when I was 35 years of age. I am proud to have you here today, Bobbi. It is special for me. I am pleased you could make it here today to see the apology to our fellow Australians. Even though we missed 34 years of our lives together, we will make up for it with our remaining years. We can never make up for the loss of our brother Raymond and our sister Jennifer, who are both deceased. Both of them suffered in orphanages. I am fortunate to be here today to speak on their behalf.

The disconnection from family that many people experience when institutionalised or removed from their family and placed in care is something that only someone who has been in that situation could

understand. The family—the mothers, the fathers, the grandparents and the siblings—left behind also experience disconnection and pain from the separation. I know from discussions with Robert that this deeply affected him when he was younger. He did not know where his siblings were, if they were being looked after or if he would ever see them again. Then he had to deal with his own levels of abuse at home—physical abuse from our dad and mental abuse from our mother. This is just an example of the dilemma and confusion and sorrow of thousands of Australian families and siblings who were left behind to ponder and wonder about the fate of the children entering orphanages.

But today is about an apology to all of you here today and to all those who could not make the journey but who are watching and listening. This apology has not just occurred without years of hard work by some very dedicated people. Some of them are here today. I acknowledge my parliamentary colleagues Richard Marles, Jason Clare, Senators Claire Moore, Rachel Siewert and Gary Humphries and, especially, former senator Andrew Murray, who drove this process from a parliamentary point of view from the start, single-handed. I also acknowledge Jo Gash, who I know has taken a particular interest in this. I acknowledge Leonie Sheedy—how are you, Leonie? Where are you? Do not hide up there! How are you going?—and Joanna Penglase, the co-founders of CLAN, otherwise known as the Care Leavers Australia Network. They have toiled for nearly 10 years with this apology at the top of their agenda. About eight months ago I received a call from Leonie saying: 'Hello, Steve. I have searched you. I have brought up your speech in parliament. You're a homie. You're one of us.' I did not know what she was talking about, but I do now. It has just been a great pleasure to have been involved with this last eight months of the journey. Leonie is a fantastic person. You deserve everything you get, Leonie. I acknowledge Harold Haig, whom I met through this apology process, and Caroline Carroll, from the Alliance for Forgotten Australians. To Caroline Carroll and Harold Haig, well done. They served on the apology committee. To Minister Macklin and the FaHCSIA staff who are also on the committee, I acknowledge your work and the dedication to bring this event to fruition.

As we know, today is about the forgotten Australians and the lost innocents. This is your day. I would

now like to relate some stories I have heard from these people. They are graphic, but it is important that these stories are told and that all Australians know about the physical, mental and sexual abuse that you suffered. Ralph Doughty today gave me some background information and I promised I would read one part of it. The report of the Senate inquiry into children in institutional care report concluded:

... that there has been wide scale unsafe, improper and unlawful care of children, a failure of duty of care, and serious and repeated breaches of statutory obligations.

It found:

Such abuse and assault was widespread across institutions, across States and across the government, religious and other care providers.

In other words, the abuse and cruelty occurred nationally, as was the case in Ireland.

Now I am going to talk about Cheryle Warner, who wrote to me recently about a redress scheme. Part of her letter was very powerful, and I thought I would read it out today. Cheryle, are you here in the chamber? Welcome, Cheryle. Cheryle recently spent some time in my office to tell her story to the local newspaper. She also took the time to send me this note. I will take some of those thoughts and relate them to you:

I was 49 when I began my redress application. I am 51 now.

I am standing at my third REDRESS.WA rally now, thinking how I had tried to tell the government they had opened a Pandora's Box. We are talking about restoring peoples honor, dignity and self worth. We were talking about possibly the most abused child generation in the state, we are certainly talking about one of the most impoverished, both economically and psychological target groups in the state.

... ..

This REDRESS.WA idea, as honorable and genuine as I believe it was, has never been important in the eyes of this Government.

There has been no processes or procedures implemented.

We are still in wading through the bleak black ice we know as "bleak depression" in limbo waiting for something....ANYTHING... to happen. Some sort of show of good faith, at least,...like where is the memorial we were promised, at the very least where is the blueprints or pictures of ideas for this memorial...where are the free psych sessions, how do you access them, etc...

Instead, here we are two years later, still attending Rallies outside Parliament house, crowds of fragmented, damaged and broken people waiting for Moses to lead us out of misery.

... ..

The plan was to make amends to those thousands of forgotten, abused and not afforded the duty of care all child have a born right to, by previous governments. These applicants had been wards of the state and had been neglected by the governments of their times. Consequently children and babies were left open to the mercy of predatory ,cruel, tortuous inhumane foster placements and subsequently these once innocent children's lives had been affected socially, psychological, physically, for decades, and some continue to be to date, and others that may never thrive. Some have passed down their demons to there children without awareness.

Many countries around the world that have taken steps to acknowledge, apologise and make amends offer genuine support, with most countries offering an ex gratia payment. I have never made any secret that I see this as an obscene amount from the WA government—between \$10,000 and \$80,000. It was an indecent proposal to begin with. Good Lord! How does one arrive at any fair dollar value on these sorts of heinous crimes against children? What price for lost opportunities, lost childhoods and lost lives? Who can say?

Cheryle goes on to say:

Hence there was no negotiating. I knew from the start \$80,000 would seem like a lot of money to the lower socioeconomic group. In reality I knew it could make things a bit more comfortable for the abused and their immediate families for the short term but would not be life changing for the majority. Many applicants have subscribed to my views about the money but if you look at it in real dollars it just does not add up. When you consider that on average I was beaten and tortured 6,000 times between the ages of 13 months and 16 years, this works out at about \$6 a beating, a rape, an indecent assault, assault and battery and, in some cases, torture in all of its military style. I have spent over \$50,000 in psych fees. I am only one of the thousands with stories like this, and others have worse. However, I chose to go along with the Redress process. I figured I would get some benefit from it, be it emotional or cathartic, but I got that wrong. I thought I would be able to help my kids out—give them a small holiday and a small investment somewhere. Thus I chose to put in an application. Money is a great motivator to those in lower socioeconomic brackets. However, greater than this is the opportunity for me to reclaim my sense of dignity and autonomy. With these thoughts I opened the application form and began writing.

This is another letter written by Brad, who wrote about his experience in care:

During the Christmas period of 1979, in the early days of my admission to Parkerville, all the kids left in the home who had no-one to go to for Christmas were herded into one of the old disused cottages, St Pat's. From memory there were approximately 20 children, possibly more, aged from younger than me to late teens, crowded into a cottage, and two hippie social worker types were employed to look after us. There were a few other adults who dropped by but they seemed to be friends of the two hippie types. This was a small one-bedroom cottage across from the cottage in a chapel. It was called Blue Cottage. It was rented by an ex-resident who was around 17, I guess. He used to hang around the

group cottage a fair bit and some of the others had been to his cottage with him to listen to records. On my visit to Blue Cottage he played Pink Floyd's album *The Wall* album, at my request, and after smoking either a cigarette or a joint, I can't remember, he had a bit of a play around with my penis. By this time I had been regularly abused by my stepfather so he wasn't exactly Robinson Crusoe in my sex life, and thus it's never really been a big deal for me in the context of things. And therein lies the problem. Isn't it a bit sad that a nine-year-old boy can push the situation of being abused to one side both mentally and emotionally without a second thought? As an adult, I think that's sad.

From Bruce, one other Western Australian who contacted me:

I called your office last week as you are a friend who knows my journey and the effect it has had on my life. I thought I was one person who really needed to hear the 'sorry' word. I am a retired minister of religion currently on a disability support pension due to ill health. I was made a ward of the state of Victoria in 1954, born 1952. I was in St Anthony's Home in Kew, St Joseph's Home in Surrey Hill and the Taurana Boys Home. These days what I do recall has had a huge effect on my life in every way—ways that have seen much trauma, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, loss and separation in my life. I recall my days as a little boy working at Surrey Hills from the age of four in a laundry, being bashed and beaten, always being filled with fear, having one meal a day, no toys and no mummy or daddy to say they loved me and tuck me in of a night in a warm and secure home. No Christmas, no birthdays, just being beaten, seeing your little mates falling down in the laundry exhausted from malnutrition and at times falling down dead. Just the regimental discipline of the Black Cape Brigade (the nuns) waiting with canes to flog us again. Steve, we ate the moss off the walls, we drank our own urine and even at times tried to eat our own faeces. We were so hungry and neglected, while in the distance we could smell in the air the kitchen that provided them with their daily meals, while at night we were locked up like animals in cages, with a cyclone gate and padlock, to await another day of the same.

I have said in this place before that I began my life as a ward of the state of Victoria. I spent three years in an institution as a child and I was then taken into foster care. Even as a foster child I was a ward of the state; a responsibility of the Victorian government. All the children who were wards of state—and there were those who entered institutions without being made a ward of state: all the child migrants from Britain and Malta, all the children in foster care—were the responsibilities of the governments of the day.

I welcome this apology and support the motion and encourage all my fellow colleagues to support it and the forgotten Australians. We must not forget reparation. I call on the governments, churches and charities to deal with this now, not later. We can now only be judged as a nation by our ability to repair and rebuild these Australian lives, because we have failed these children in the construction of them. We have failed them in the

nurturing and care that they would have expected to get from institutions, the nurturing and care they would have got in a family home. We have failed them by treating them with systematic abuse.

Everyone asks about the reasons for children being in orphanages—whether it was an economic situation or a breakdown of the family unit. There are numerous reasons, and I have even heard of people putting their children into orphanages to prevent them from being a burden on the rest of their family.

In closing, today we have heard stories from forgotten Australians with a range of emotions and experiences. We have heard about having trouble creating relationships, about having trouble trusting particularly authorities but anyone, about the abuse that these individuals suffered and about the lack of nurturing and care and love. They all have their own stories. They are all stories that must be told, and we need to recognise them, particularly in our role as parliamentarians as we go out into the community to make sure that we advise and look after those people and create an environment where all future children in Australia will be nurtured and cared for and loved. To all the forgotten Australians I can only say that I will continue to work to make sure that you are remembered.