



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ADJOURNMENT

Forgotten Australians

SPEECH

Monday, 19 March 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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<p>Date Monday, 19 March 2012 Page 3360 Questioner Speaker Irons, Steve, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof No Responder Question No.</p>
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Mr IRONS (Swan) (22:10): Members in this place would be aware of the work I have done for the forgotten Australians. Following my recent newsletter to my electorate, I would like to update the House on the forgotten Australians and on a personal experience. I have a particular affinity and empathy for the forgotten Australians as a result of my own family history. Tonight, with the indulgence of the House, I would like to talk about a positive event that has recently happened in my life.

Many times over my life I have seen print and TV media showing siblings meeting for the first time after more than 50 years, and this has just happened to me. On 15 January I met my 52-year-old brother Richard for the first time. He is the last member of my biological family I had not met. This was the culmination of a long personal journey for me, and I want to take the opportunity today to reflect on that journey in this place—and in particular on the work I have done for the forgotten Australians since being elected in 2007.

I was born the sixth of 10 children in a family that could not make ends meet, so I was made a ward of the state and spent three years in a babies home. I was fostered by the Irons family at the age of three years. I had a positive fostering experience but, sadly, some of my biological siblings did not. In January my brother Richard made contact with me through the Victorian state Department of Human Services, and within a week I met him with my older brother Bobbi who I had been reunited with when I was 35 years old.

It was a special day for all of us and, besides the obvious physical similarities, we found that we had many common threads in our upbringing and had a similar working-class background. Richard now works for GM Holden in Dandenong. Robert is a spare parts driver for an automotive company. I was an apprentice electrician and a road crew worker for the Gas and Fuel Corporation in Victoria before coming to WA and heading on my path to politics.

Richard was adopted out as a young child to family friends but grew up not knowing he had any biological siblings. He recently managed to get his records and realised he was No. 7 out of 10. So, at the age of 51, he set out to find his family, which included me. Years before, my brother and sister had tried to find him, without any success, even though he only lived a

stone's throw away—but that is another story in itself. It took Richard the best part of eight months, after all the necessary checks, to find us and contact us through the Department of Human Services. When I instantly said yes I would meet Richard, the girl from the department was ecstatic and was just as excited as I am sure Richard and I were.

As I said on the day of the apology to the forgotten Australians, we can never make up for the loss of our brother Raymond and sister Jennifer—both of whom suffered in orphanages—but we are fortunate to be here to speak on their behalf. It is these experiences and the experiences of my siblings that have helped me in my role as a member of parliament and given me great empathy with the many people in our society who had a tough time in state care and are searching for their own families.

There was plenty of focus on the forgotten Australians a couple of years ago, but I would like to remind the House about the forgotten Australians through the words of the Care Leavers Australia Network:

Close to half a million children in Australia in the 20th century were brought up in 'care': as state wards, foster children or Home children raised in orphanages, Children's Homes, and other institutions, and in foster care. Many of these people are now middle-aged or older but still carry the burden of unresolved issues from this past.

Many are afraid to tell their friends, even their children, that they were in the care system because of the stigma it carried. Many were cut off from all contact with family members, and are still looking for them.

Most left the care system without any preparation or assistance for adulthood or for parenthood. Many are left with the scars of emotional deprivation and neglect, and of physical, sexual and psychological abuse.

It has also been a journey for me working for the forgotten Australians in and outside the parliament since being elected in 2007. I met Leonie Sheedy of the Care Leavers Australia Network early on and pledged to help her group towards achieving the recommendations of the report into the forgotten Australians, including a national apology. It was during this time, in September 2009, that I addressed a rally

in Perth for forgotten Australians who were upset about WA state government changes to redress. I met many Perth forgotten Australians at the rally and held subsequent meetings in my East Victoria Park office. Their story was common and saddening.

I fear I do not have enough time to finish with the information that I have here. As I am running out of time, I will conclude by saying how happy I am that Richard contacted me—I now have a younger to boss around. I really hope that now we have met we can make up for the lost years with our remaining years. I would also like to thank my constituents for the many messages of support I have received over the last two weeks.

The SPEAKER: On behalf of the House, I would like to thank the honourable member for that particularly moving contribution. I now call the honourable member for Wills.