



Abuse victims need stories heard and believed

■ Steve Irons



“Imagine, if you will, one day lasting 14 years. Time stood still. It was the same thing over and over, with such repetition — the violence, the abuse, the humiliation, the fear that was instilled in us. The prayers we repeated endlessly, night after night, the beatings, the longing for a life that was good and whole, and yet, we had no idea what that would be like, to even dream about that.” (from *The Girl in the Locker*, by Sonia St Claire.)

This systematic breaking of the human spirit would be judged by Australian society today as reprehensible and abhorrent, yet our history paints a very different picture.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has sought to provide those innocents whose spirit was broken by depraved predators in our society with a voice to fight back and regain some semblance of control over the physical, sexual and mental abuse they suffered.

Having a voice is a powerful thing, and for too long these innocents have suffered in silence or had their claims of abuse dismissed by those who were meant to protect them.

As the release of the royal commission’s interim report revealed, we may never know the full extent of the abuse and trauma that was inflicted on children in institutions because of significant delays in reporting and high levels of under-reporting.

As a former ward of the State, I have championed the issues of

Forgotten Australians since entering Federal Parliament through my involvement with

the apology, calling for a royal commission, and have now added my support to the commission’s request for a two-year extension and associated resources to continue this inquiry on behalf of all those who, until now, have had no justice and no protection.

I have expressed this support to the Prime Minister along with the need to structure an independent national body to oversee the implementation of a redress scheme for funds contributed by States, churches and charities. These are key steps to give sufferers of abuse and neglect the closure they need, and to send a message to perpetrators, past and present, that society and government will not tolerate a repeat of this sorry period.

I announced this support this month at the 14th anniversary celebration of Care Leavers Australia Network, a support group for victims of child sexual abuse, where I launched an inspirational book about twin sisters, Sonia and Sarah, who spent their first 14 years in orphanages and children’s homes in Sydney from 1950 to 1964.

Sonia St Claire wrote *The Girl in the Locker* to not only have a written account of her life and her struggle to overcome adversity, but also to help others who have suffered the lasting effects of abuse.

I have read and been told many stories of those who have suffered abhorrent acts of abuse and neglect in institutions, and I thank those who, like Sonia, have had the courage to share these stories, particularly with the royal commission and by

putting pen to paper. Like Sonia, it is my wish that all those who have suffered abuse in their lives are able to find solace and come to believe, if they haven’t

already, that they, like everyone else in this world, are worthy of love and kindness.

The stories of the Forgotten Australians need to be believed, they need to hear an apology from their abusers and they need to be provided with access to services such as counselling to help them deal with the abuse and neglect.

We have all been on a journey through life, but we have a choice as to where we go from here — to perceive ourselves as the victims that perpetrators of any form try to make us, or to use this inquiry and stories like Sonia’s to find comfort and hope for a better future.

Steve Irons in the Federal Liberal member for Swan