

Tuesday 16 November 2010 at 11h50
House of Representatives Alcove Parliament House Canberra

Some remarks at the First Anniversary of the Apology to Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants

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Minister Macklin, Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants, distinguished parliamentarians and other distinguished guests – this First Anniversary of the Commonwealth's Apology to Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants is a time to remind ourselves of how far this campaign has carried us all – in Australia, in Great Britain, in Ireland and in other parts of the English speaking world.

It is also a time to remind ourselves how far we have to go.

I remain immensely grateful that the Commonwealth made a heartfelt apology on this day last year.

I remain immensely impressed by those individuals and organisations that continue to advocate strive and champion the cause.

I remain very pleased with the commitments and achievements of the Government on a National Find and Connect Service; funding the National Library of Australia and the National Museum of Australia to host history and remembrance projects, funding to assist the Alliance for Forgotten Australians, the Care Leavers Australia Network and the Child Migrants Trust; and a care leavers aged care project.

Federally and in the states there are now memorials and programs. Much has been achieved – not least being believed - since those brave men and women began their campaign for disclosure and justice over two decades ago.

This has been a road marked by many tears. Those miserable cold beings that wanted the stories never told have been defeated. The rejected the forgotten the not-believed are embraced remembered and believed. The stolen generation, the forgotten Australians and the child migrants are now a recognised and important part of our national consciousness.

The reports into institutionalised and in-care indigenous Australians, non-indigenous Australians, and child migrants all record the long-term effects of harming children. The central lesson is this - harmed children produce harmed adults; lots of harmed adults exact a very heavy cost on society.

Logically, governments should avoid that cost.

What is still to be done?

For the half million in care last century, the recommendations in the Reports that are still outstanding need to be addressed.

The most harmed deserve justice. In some churches and charities the cover-up goes on. Governments need courage. In some countries governments have secured significant reparations, proper compensation has been paid, criminal perpetrators have been exposed, and prosecutors have secured convictions.

Not yet in Australia.

For most of us, the apology is a good beginning rather than an end. For many, the pain of the past has been eased but the pain remains, affecting their lives, never forgotten.

There is a long way to go in Australia overall in absorbing the lessons from the past.

The past sends powerful warnings about the need to set and enforce minimum standards for those vulnerable current and future children in danger.

The slow progress towards more constructive policies, more resources for families in need and for child protection, leaves no room for any complacency that the issues arising from last century's harmed children can now be safely consigned to history books.

We must keep holding up the mirror to Australian society because the lessons from the past will help it better manage the future.

Thank you.