



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**PROOF**

**ADJOURNMENT**

**Forgotten Australians**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 16 November 2009**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 16 November 2009  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Kroger, Sen Helen

**Source** Senate  
**Proof** Yes  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Senator KROGER** (Victoria) (10.00 pm)—In opening, I would like to associate myself with the comments that Senator McLucas has made about the forgotten Australians and share her empathy, appreciation and understanding of what so many have experienced and still deal with. In my first speech over a year ago I spoke about the importance of family for me and quoted Thomas Moore:

Family life is full of major and minor crises—the ups and downs of health ... success and failure ... is tied to places and events and histories. With all of these felt details, life etches itself into memory and personality. It's difficult to imagine anything more nourishing to the soul.

Sadly, hundreds of thousands of children were stripped of the opportunity to experience these ups and downs, these normal failures and successes, and these major and minor crises that we all have enjoyed. Sadly, their souls had little, if any, opportunity to be nourished. Today, Australians had the opportunity to witness our parliamentary leaders shelve their political agendas and recognise the torment and suffering of hundreds of thousands of children from the 1920s through to the late 1960s. It was a moving ceremony, with many of the brave victims present, supported by family, friends, and community and group leaders. Many of those who attended today we have come to know as child migrants and lost innocents. Today we extended a deserved apology on behalf of the nation.

A word, in and of itself, means absolutely nothing. The *Book of James* famously reminds us that faith without works is dead. Considering the application of that sentiment today, we may conclude that an apology without action is meaningless. That is why I welcome the commitments that both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition made today. Their genuine concern and action in this matter is admirable and respected by many. I note with gratitude the many charitable and religious organisations that have in the past been involved with state care programs and have published public apologies to those abused and neglected whilst in their care. Similarly, most state governments have issued apologies to victims.

The Hon. Malcolm Turnbull earlier today drew attention to a quote at the beginning of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee's *Forgotten Australians* report. Nelson Mandela said:

Any nation that does not care for and protect all of its children does not deserve to be called a nation.

Of the 39 recommendations in that Senate report, the very first recommendation has now been accomplished. The report wisely recommended:

That the Commonwealth Government issue a formal statement acknowledging, on behalf of the nation, the hurt and distress suffered by many children in institutional care, particularly the children who were victims of abuse and assault; and apologising for the harm caused to these children.

I note that the Prime Minister today pledged to advance some of the 33 recommendations made in the Senate report on child migration titled *Lost innocents: righting the record*. This action is also welcomed.

In my home state of Victoria today there were two events which coincided with the national apology. One organised by the Interim Service for Forgotten Australians and the other by MacKillop Family Services. I commend both organisations for their initiative and coordination of today's events. On a day such as today it is important to recognise the organisations that remain committed to this important work—of which there are many—but in particular I would like to note the Care Leavers Australia Network, the International Association of Former Child Migrants and their Families, and the Alliance for Forgotten Australians.

Without the determination and resolution of these organisations to pursue what is right, there would be no apology and, sadly, no acknowledgement of past evils. I must also acknowledge the continuing work of the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect—NAPCAN—and Adults Surviving Child Abuse, who I have worked closely with and support in whatever way I can.

Today the Australian parliament acknowledges the individual experiences which children had whilst in institutional care. In many instances they were taken from disadvantaged circumstances with the objective of more appropriate care but were frequently separated from their family and, in the case of British child migrants, moved to the other side of the world. We have heard of the conditions to which they were subjected to: from brutal, isolated and emotionally inadequate to physically, emotionally and sexually

abusive. Whilst not all children claimed mistreatment, the personal stories of so many are heart-wrenching. We know that there are 500,000 of these survivors nationally and 90,000 survivors in my home state of Victoria. No words can ever be sufficiently adequate in recognising the trauma inflicted by these events, and they should not be forgotten.

In reading some of the submissions to the Senate's inquiry into institutional care, I was overwhelmed by the horror, abject fear and misery that these children endured rather than knowing and enjoying unconditional love. During the ceremony today, I saw the anguish of the past on so many faces. I can only imagine the continuing pain from a lifetime of torment that needs and demands our support and understanding. I also want to recognise and note my admiration for the strength and courage that was shown today by so many who chose to come and share. I am humbled by that strength and fortified by the collective will. As a nation we must ensure this dark chapter in our history book is not ignored but used to assist us in shaping our future.

I read the testimony of Mrs Deborah Findlay to the Senate inquiry who told of her ordeal as a ward of the state. She wrote at some length about this, and I wish to share just a little of it with you. She starts by saying that she is writing this story because she believes it needs to be told. She was born in 1964 and, at the age of two, was made a ward of state. She was placed in the Alexander Toddlers Home in Ballarat, Victoria in 1966, then transferred to the Ballarat Children's Home on 19 September 1969 where, until 1979, she spent her whole childhood in state care. I will quote her from this point in her story:

While in the care of the Ballarat Children's Home in Victoria I was subjected to physical, sexual, emotional Abuse constantly walking a fine line of terror, fear, hate and shame.

From 1971-1978 my cares physical abused me such as:

- 1) I was made to have cold showers every morning, due to bed-wetting.
- 2) Had my face rubbed in my wet sheets of my bed?
- 3) I was belted with a cane, belts, bats anything that they could get their hands on.
- 4) Had my mouth washed out with hand soap?
- 5) Dragged along the hallway carpet by my hair.
- 6) Kick in the stomach and body while I was on the floor.
- 7) Made to stand in hallway in the cold at night.

8) Made to clean on hands and knees cleaning metal strips on carpet runners cleaning hours on end.

9) Had my ears pulled upwards that I was standing on my tippee toes.

10) Thrown up agents the hallway wall.

I reflect on her life. Mrs Findlay is now 45 years old, five years younger than I am. And yet she has experienced such enormous tragedy and torment in her life. In her submission she continued to recount the emotional abuse she received. I cannot bring myself to mention the physically and emotionally violent atrocities inflicted upon her but, needless to say, no person should ever, ever have to experience what she has, let alone a child who has every right to expect that we will protect them. For the neglect and abuse inflicted on so many innocents by governments, churches and charities, we say sorry.