

Prime Minister
Transcript of address at the apology to the Forgotten Australians
and former child migrants
Great Hall, Parliament House
16 November 2009

Today, the Government of Australia will move the following motion of apology in the Parliament of Australia.

We come together today to deal with an ugly chapter in our nation's history.

And we come together today to offer our nation's apology.

To say to you, the Forgotten Australians, and those who were sent to our shores as children without your consent, that we are sorry.

Sorry - that as children you were taken from your families and placed in institutions where so often you were abused.

Sorry - for the physical suffering, the emotional starvation and the cold absence of love, of tenderness, of care.

Sorry - for the tragedy, the absolute tragedy, of childhoods lost, - childhoods spent instead in austere and authoritarian places, where names were replaced by numbers, spontaneous play by regimented routine, the joy of learning by the repetitive drudgery of menial work.

Sorry - for all these injustices to you, as children, who were placed in our care.

As a nation, we must now reflect on those who did not receive proper care.

We look back with shame that many of you were left cold, hungry and alone and with nowhere to hide and nobody to whom to turn.

We look back with shame that so many of you were left cold, hungry and alone and with nowhere to hide and with nobody, absolutely nobody, to whom to turn.

We look back with shame that many these little ones who were entrusted to institutions and foster homes instead, were abused physically, humiliated cruelly, violated sexually.

And we look back with shame at how those with power were allowed to abuse those who had none.

And how then, as if this was not injury enough, you were left ill-prepared for life outside - left to fend for yourselves; often unable to read or write; to struggle alone with no friends and no family.

For these failures to offer proper care to the powerless, the voiceless and the most vulnerable, we say sorry.

We reflect too today on the families who were ripped apart simply because they had fallen on hard times.

Hard times brought about by illness, by death and by poverty.

Some simply left destitute when fathers damaged by war could no longer cope.

Again, we say sorry for the extended families you never knew.

We acknowledge the particular pain of children shipped to Australia as child migrants - robbed of your families, robbed of your homeland, regarded not as innocent children but regarded instead as a source of child labour.

To those of you who were told you were orphans, brought here without your parents' knowledge or consent, we acknowledge the lies you were told, the lies told to your mothers and fathers, and the pain these lies have caused for a lifetime.

To those of you separated on the dockside from your brothers and sisters; taken alone and unprotected to the most remote parts of a foreign land - we acknowledge today that the laws of our nation failed you.

And for this we are deeply sorry.

We think also today of all the families of these Forgotten Australians and former child migrants who are still grieving, families who were never reunited, families who were never reconciled, families who were lost to one another forever.

We reflect too on the burden that is still carried by our own children, your own children, your grandchildren, your husbands, your wives, your partners and your friends - and we thank them for the faith, the love and the depth of commitment that has helped see you through the valley of tears that was not of your own making.

And we reflect with you as well, in sad remembrance, on those who simply could not cope and who took their own lives in absolute despair.

We recognise the pain you have suffered.

Pain is so very, very personal.

Pain is so profoundly disabling.

So, let us together, as a nation, allow this apology to begin to heal this pain.

Healing the pain felt by so many of the half a million of our fellow Australians who were children in care - children in our care.

And let us also resolve this day that this national apology becomes a turning point in our nation's story.

A turning point for shattered lives.

A turning point for governments at all levels and of every political hue and colour to do all in our power to never let this happen again.

For the protection of children is the sacred duty of us all.

This is the motion that later this day this Government will commend to the Parliament of Australia.

Care leavers from around Australia and abroad;

Representatives of the Care Leavers of Australia Network;

the Child Migrants Trust;

the Alliance for Forgotten Australians;

the Leader of the Opposition;

my ministerial and parliamentary colleagues;

representatives of the state governments of Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria;

Her Excellency the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom;

His Excellency the Ambassador of Ireland;

His Excellency High Commissioner for Malta;

ladies and gentlemen;

friends, one and all;

Our purpose today in this Great Hall of this great Australian Parliament is to begin to put right a very great wrong.

To acknowledge the great wrong that has been done to so many of our children.

And as a nation, to apologise for this great wrong.

And, as a nation, to resolve that such systematic abuse should never happen again.

The truth is this is an ugly story.

And its ugliness must be told without fear or favour if we are to confront fully the demons of our past.

And in so doing, animate, once again, the better angels of our human nature.

I believe we do a disservice to those who have been the victims of abuse if in any way we seek to gloss things over.

Because the truth is great evil has been done.

And therefore hard things must be said about how this was all possible in this country of the fair go.

Unless we are now transparent about what has been done in our nation's name, our apology can never be complete.

Because let us be clear - these children, both from home and abroad, were placed in care under the auspices of the state, validated by the laws of the land.

It is estimated that more than 500,000 children were placed in care under various arrangements over the course of the last century.

This is no small number.

Let us imagine that more than half of the city of Adelaide was drawn from children who had been placed in institutional or foster care.

This is no small number.

In recent weeks, it has been my privilege to meet some of these children, most of them now middle-aged.

And some perhaps a little older again.

And I take the intervention from the floor - some younger than that again.

Here is something of their stories as told to me.

Last week I sat down with Garry for a cup of tea at his home here in Canberra.

Garry told me he had five brothers and sisters.

His father was an ex-serviceman who, in Gary's words, drank himself to death.

When Garry was four or five, he remembers being taken to the steps of the local police station with his brothers and sisters and told to wait until his mum returned, who had promised ice creams for all.

She never returned.

As Garry recalls, "I never got my ice-cream".

A fortnight later, he was committed as a ward of the state.

He told me his twin brothers had been fostered to a good family in Wollongong.

But he was taken to an institution and separated from his sisters, who were placed elsewhere.

All this, at the age of four or five.

Alone, absolutely alone, devastatingly alone in the world.

He told me that, at the age of six or seven, he tried to hang himself from the swings because he wanted to be with his brothers.

He was later placed in a rural home for older boys where he remained until the age of 13.

He remembers being picked up from the train station on a freezing night in a big red truck with a row of numbered seats. He was told to sit in seat number 3.

He was given, a number.

As Garry said, "my number was always three, it sticks in your head".

The culture of this home, as Garry described it, was one of institutional violence as boys were made to beat each other, to beat other boys to the ground, in front of their peers.

At 13, he was transferred to an institution where he remembers a kindly cook taking him under her wing.

But it was during this time Garry says, he suffered sexual abuse from other men.

Garry later got into drugs to help escape the psychological torture he suffered through years of what was so-called institutional care.

Garry has led a tough life.

But Garry is a survivor.

He proudly introduced me to his seven beautiful children - all doing well at school and the older ones already planning for their future.

And showed me with pride the carpenter's trade certificate he earned through study in 2005.

When asked by CLAN (a community organisation established to help survivors of institutional abuse, and known to so many of you here today) when asked by CLAN to write down his story Garry said, "what am I going to write down, you can't put tears on paper".

It has also been my privilege to sit down with twins Robyn and Judy last Monday when I was in Bathurst.

They told me too, that their mother left home when they too were barely five years old. They were then placed in a church home.

Judy remembers the day they were first taken to the home and her sister Robyn bolted from the gate and ran away.

They later found her and dragged her back.

Robyn and Judy remember that they kept waiting and waiting for just someone, someone to come and pick them up - but no-one, no-one ever came.

They recall being hit with belt buckles and bamboo.

They said the place they grew up in was utterly, utterly loveless.

They said it always made them feel like second-class citizens.

At the local school, they were described as "Home Girls".

They looked with envy as other children were picked up by their parents after school.

Robyn told me that, 40 years later, "it stays with you, I still dream about it".

But you know something? Both Robyn and Judy too are fighters.

While emotionally scarred by their experience, they too have beautiful children and partners who care for them. But the wounds run deep. They run very deep.

And then there was Gus.

I spoke to Gus on the phone, he is from Queensland.

Brought out to Australia from Ireland, again at the age of four or five, in the 1950s - as a child apparently born out of wedlock, having earlier spent time in a Catholic institution in Ireland.

Gus' story was truly horrific. His was a tale of physical and sexual abuse over more than a decade. In Gus' words, "that did me terrible mental damage".

He finally tracked down his mum, 10 years ago.

She had gone to the United States. But he then discovered she had passed away.

Gus had limited educational opportunities and has been in and out of gaol a number of times during his life.

Gus, reflecting back across the years, and in the great tradition of Australian understatement, said he had led a 'colourful life'.

Gus too, is a fighter and survivor.

Whether it is Garry or Gus or Robyn or Judy, there is an eerie similarity to so many of the stories. Stories of physical, emotional or sexual abuse.

Stories of the lack of love. Experiences which stay with them to this day.

Each told me that such was the trauma they experienced in institutional care that they suffered such things as bed-wetting for many, many years - while in care.

This, of course, is deeply personal. Deeply, deeply personal.

But each wanted me to share this part of their story too because it underlined the trauma they had gone through.

But trauma with an ugly double-twist because each time this happened, they were publicly humiliated and publicly punished by those supposedly responsible for their care.

In the conversations I was privileged to have with these great Australian survivors, for each of them this apology today was important.

And for countless thousands and tens of thousands besides, this apology is important.

Important because it does not seek to hide that which they experienced.

An apology that acknowledges the very personal pain that has been caused.

An apology which, it is hoped, will bring some healing balm to wounded souls.

And not just to the handful that I have been so honoured to meet.

But to all those whose cases are reflected in the Senate reports over many, many years. And to those also whose stories will remain forever untold.

There are tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of these stories, each as important as the other, each with its own hurts, its own humiliations its own traumas - and each united by the experience of a childhood without love, of childhood alone.

For some, this has become a very public journey of healing. For others, it remains intensely private - not even to be discussed with closest family and friends even today.

And such privacy must of course, be respected.

Whatever your journey today, and whether you are here in Parliament House in Canberra with us or watching or listening across the country or across the world, my hope today is to reach out to you all on behalf of this nation, Australia, and to speak what has so often been unspoken.

And to offer you this profound apology.

To apologise for the pain that has been caused.

To apologise for the failure to offer proper care.

To apologise for those who have gone before us and ignored your cries for help.

Because children, it seems, were not to be believed.

Only those in authority, it seems, were the ones to be believed.

To apologise for denying you basic life opportunities; including so often a decent education.

To apologise also, for just how long it has taken for the Australian Government to say sorry - so many Senate reports, nearly a decade of deliberation, and a unanimous recommendation that the Commonwealth apologise.

And finally we do so today.

Today is also a day for all those who have refused to remain silent.

The champions of this day.

Those driven by sheer tenacity.

By an unswerving sense of justice.

Those who kept the flame of hope alight.

People like Margaret Humphreys, people like Harold Haig, people like Leonie Sheedy and Joanna Penglase, people like Bonnie Djuric, and People like Walter Tusyn who campaigned tirelessly for this day as Tasmanian representative of the Alliance for Forgotten Australians, only to pass away on the 30th of last month.

And people like former Senator Andrew Murray, because Andrew Murray's work has simply been extraordinary.

I rang Andrew recently and asked him about the importance of this apology.

His response was succinct when he wrote in reply:

"the Senate (and others) have carefully examined these matters and rightly and unanimously recommended an official Commonwealth apology. As a result, the states and the main churches, charities and agencies have apologised (although some are better apologies than others...),

Andrew Murray continued "it is time for the Commonwealth to complete the circle."

It is also important today to honour the advocacy groups who have stood by you through thick and thin - advocacy groups such as: Care Leavers of Australia Network (CLAN); groups like The Child Migrants Trust, advocacy groups such as the Alliance for Forgotten Australians - and many, many others.

But beyond these individuals and organisations stand an army of people who have quietly gone about their business over the last decade or more to take this story of sustained institutional and personal abuse from the margins of government deliberation to the very centre of Government consideration.

For all victims of abuse, today, you are all owed a profound debt of gratitude for having stood by them with such solidarity and strength.

So what then is to be done?

The Australian Government has assembled a comprehensive response to recommendations contained in the two Senate reports - "Lost Innocence" and "Forgotten Australians revisited".

This response will be tabled in the Parliament in the coming days.

The overwhelming message I have received and Minister Macklin has been receiving has been the need to be heard, the need to be acknowledged and the need for the nation to apologise.

It is important however, that this not be regarded as a single point in history. Our view is that it would be helpful for the nation, however painful, to properly record your experiences, where you deem that to be appropriate.

This can assist the nation to learn from your experiences.

As a result, the Australian Government is supporting projects with both the National Library and the National Museum which will provide future generations with a solemn reminder of the past.

To ensure not only that your experiences are heard, but also that they will never ever be forgotten.

And in doing so we must always remember the advice of the sages - that a nation that forgets its past is condemned to relive it.

Second, we also know that you are deeply concerned about practical support to help survivors and their families negotiate what can still so often be damaged lives.

For example, I know many of you are concerned about living in aged care facilities as you grow older and the need for access to proper aged care.

The Government will identify care leavers as a special-needs group for aged-care purposes, to ensure that providers are assisted to provide care that is appropriate and responsive, and provide a range of further counselling and support services.

Third, many Forgotten Australians and child migrants continue to need help in tracing their families. That is why we'll be providing a National Find and Connect Service that will provide Australia-wide coordinated family tracing and support services for care leavers to locate personal and family history files and the reunite with members of their families, where that is possible.

The service will provide a national database that will collate and index existing state identified records into a national searchable data base, accessible to state and other care leaver services and also directly to care leavers themselves.

Fourth, to make sure you are well represented, we have provided and continue to provide funding to advocacy groups such as the Child Migrant Trust, the Alliance for Forgotten Australians and Care Leavers of Australia Network, as these organisations continue to work hard to put your concerns front and centre.

Finally, governments must continue to commit to the systematic auditing, inspection and quality assurance of the child protection services they administer today.

Some 28,000 - 30,000 children are currently in the care of State and Territory Governments around Australia. Governments must put in place every protection possible to reduce the risk of mistreatment in the future.

And, as Andrew Murray reminded me recently, "if you hurt a child, a harmed adult will often result...aggregate those adults who were harmed in care and the social, the economic, the personal cost is huge".

In Andrew's words, we must do everything possible to break the cycle.

I recognise this is a difficult, complex and sensitive area of policy. But the nation must continue to lift its game in doing whatever practicably can be done to provide for the proper protection of little ones, of children.

Let us, therefore today in this Great Hall of this great Australian Parliament, seize this day and see this national apology to our Forgotten Australians and our Child Migrants as a turning point for the future.

For child migrants, for many of you, your mothers and fathers were alive and were made to relinquish their right to be your parents and to watch you grow into adulthood.

Some of you have said you would like to place the apology on the graves of your mothers and fathers back in England and on their graves here in this country as well. Today we dedicate this apology to them as well.

For the Australian-born care leavers, or 'Homies' or 'State Wards' or the 'Foster kids', the Senate named you the 'Forgotten Australians'.

Today, and from this day forward, it is my hope that you will be called the 'Remembered Australians'.

However, whatever I might say today, the truth is, I cannot give you back your childhood. I cannot rewind the clock on your suffering. Nor can I erase the past.

But what I can do with you is celebrate the spirit that has lived within you over the decades. A spirit that has stubbornly refused to be beaten.

A spirit that has turned you into the survivors that you are. The spirit that has enabled you to serve your country in times of war, even if you had been deserted by your country.

The spirit that enabled you to bring up families, despite the broken families from which you came. The spirit that enabled you to work and to make your own contribution to this, our land Australia.

And the spirit that caused you to hold fast that one day you would be heard, one day you would be believed, one day you would be acknowledged.

And that, one day, Australia's sense of a fair-go would finally prevail. That our fair go would be extended to you, and that the nation would offer you the public apology that you deserve.

My message to you today is that that day has finally come.

Let me also say this.

You were in no way to blame for what happened to you because it was the nation who failed you.

The institutions the nation created for your care, failed you.

To all of you here today in this Great Hall. To all of you watching around the nation.

Today is your day. Today is your special day. Today is your achievement.

This morning, I spoke to a 98 year old lady in my electorate in Brisbane.

Her name is Vera. If Vera is watching, 'hi Vera'.

I'm sorry that Vera can't be with us in Canberra today.

She said that the pain that she suffered having spent five years in a Queensland orphanage was pain suffered a lifetime ago.

But her hope that today, as a 98-year-old lady is that finally this day could herald a closing of the book on the past.
Today is for people just like Vera.

And today let us now go forward together, go forward with confidence, go forward with confidence into the future - as equal, as valued and as precious members of this one great family that we call Australia.