



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

ADJOURNMENT

Western Australia: Redress Scheme

SPEECH

Tuesday, 18 August 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Tuesday, 18 August 2009
Page 91
Questioner
Speaker Irons, Steve, MP

Source House
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Mr IRONS (Swan) (8.39 pm)—I began my life as a ward of the state in Victoria. I spent three years in an institution as a child and then I was taken into foster care by the Irons family until I was 18. Even as a foster child I was still a ward of the state; a responsibility of the Victorian government. Whilst my time in the institution and foster-care system was ultimately a good one, I know that many others have painful stories to tell. I know that there are people who bear lifelong emotional scars from what is one of the saddest episodes in Australia's history. Members of my own family were physically and emotionally scarred from their early childhood lives, and the only window I have into the world of institutional and foster-care abuse is through their experiences.

As I stated before, I can only begin to imagine the horrific experiences people suffered. Only a couple of months ago, I met with the members of the Care Leavers Australia Network, otherwise known as the CLAN, an organisation that provides support for people who have suffered in care. I sat with the 'clannies' for the tabling of the Community Affairs References Committee report *Lost innocents and forgotten Australians revisited*. It was an emotional day and I felt privileged to share the moment with them. The report describes the progress that has been made towards objectives in the *Lost innocents: righting the record* report tabled in 2001 and the *Forgotten Australians* report tabled in 2004. The term 'lost innocents' is used to describe a generation of child migrants brought to Australia from the UK. Responsibility for their safety was passed from the Commonwealth to the state governments and then on to various other agencies. The term 'forgotten Australians' is used to describe Australians who have experienced institutional and out-of-home care; it is that category that I fit into.

Over the last decade, parliament has received many graphic and disturbing accounts about the treatment and care experienced by children in these settings—again, under the responsibility of state governments across Australia. After meeting with the clannies and hearing what they had been through, I decided to support their cause. Two months later, I was disappointed to learn that the Liberal-National government in Western Australia had closed a redress scheme and decided to cut back on a compensation scheme for the victims of abuse in state care. As

you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am a strong supporter of the Liberal-National government in Western Australia. Colin Barnett is doing a very good job and I understand the financial constraints that he is under at the moment. However, I think the WA government has got this one wrong and I urge it to reconsider its decision. What the WA government has unknowingly done with this shelving of the scheme is unite three groups in WA. They were not previously connected, but they are now united in their goal to see the compensation cuts reversed and have their scheme reopened.

These three groups are the forgotten Australians, the child migrants and the stolen generation. Incidentally, they would all prefer to be known as the 'Remembered Australians'. A redress scheme has existed in Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia. No other states or territories have had a redress scheme but some have supported the CLAN with funding to assist these, our fellow Australians, in their search for peace of mind. Under the WA scheme, many of the remembered Australians had to come forward to tell their stories and reopen their life wounds to get this redress—an emotional experience just on its own in the reliving of the horror and abuse. Last weekend there was an article by Jessica Strutt in the *West Australian* about a group of these people protesting against the reduction and cancellation of the redress scheme introduced by the previous government. CLAN co-founder Leonie Sheady, who flew from New South Wales to be at the protest, said:

Care Leavers came forward with great courage and rehashed old memories and told their tragic and horrifying histories on the understanding there would be fair and reasonable redress of up to \$80,000. Now they feel betrayed.

Leonie tells me that future silent protests are planned. It took a lot of courage for these people to come forward and share their stories. It is wrong to change the rules now. The Western Australian government must reconsider this decision.

Clannies are also pushing for a formal acknowledgement and apology to the lost innocents and forgotten Australians. I support this call but people need to remember that an apology is not enough. In my first speech in parliament I referred to the apology to the stolen generation and the symbolism of it. I said while the apology may help some people get over

the pain of the past, we need to address the problems still facing the Indigenous population of today with real solutions, not just words. The same is true here. In conclusion, I call on the WA state government to reverse its decision which saw the compensation scheme payment reduced from \$80,000 to \$45,000, and to reopen the scheme to be used for future claims. I also call on the federal government to urgently consider the recommendations of the report *Lost innocents and forgotten Australians revisited*.