



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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Questioner
Speaker Boyce, Sen Sue

Source Senate
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Senator BOYCE (Queensland) (10.20 pm)—I would like to associate myself tonight with the earlier remarks of other senators and of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in the Great Hall in making the apology to the forgotten Australians and the lost innocents, the child migrants of the past. It was an honour to be part of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee, which recommended that this apology be made. And it was a delight to have the opportunity today to be part of such a raw, emotional but uplifting experience as the apology.

I met a man who came from the Sunshine Coast, in Queensland, who was proudly wearing his CLAN colours—CLAN being the Care Leavers of Australia Network. He told me that he had spent 16 years in an orphanage and very briefly went through an account of his experiences there. But when he got out of that orphanage he became involved in what he called motorcycle clubs. Others would have referred to them as outlaw motorcycle gangs. But it was in those gangs, or clubs, that he found someone at last who cared about him—a sense of belonging somewhere, where someone cared. He spent time in jail because of that involvement, so he has now given away being involved in motorcycle clubs and has started his own motorcycle club. He was there proudly wearing the result of that lifetime of getting to the stage of being happy in his own skin and being able to function as part of the law-abiding community. But it was a long, long road for him.

I met another man today who, when I asked him where he was from, said he came from Ireland in a very broad Australian accent. He had come to Australia more than 40 years ago, and today was the day he could remember that and feel better about the fact that now it was being recognised, now it was being accepted and now it was being apologised for; people were saying sorry.

I think the speeches today by both the Prime Minister and my leader, the opposition leader the Hon. Malcolm Turnbull were superb. I want to quote a little from the end of the speech made by the Prime Minister:

... 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 colour and hue, to do all in their power to never let this happen again.

We have already had people tell us about the sacred duty that we should all have as adults, to protect children. But the problem is that even though we can say we will never let this happen again we know it has happened again, we know it will go on happening whilst we have institutions that are not open and easily accountable to the community. I was interested to see in the *Courier Mail* today this comment from a woman who calls herself 'Mum of Brisbane':

So the apology is for the abuse in care up until the 1970's. Where is the apology of the 80's and 90's—that is when I was in care, being abused under the watchful and knowing eyes of the Dept—

meaning the Queensland Department of Community Services—

...Why try to make out this ended long ago when you know it didn't.

Probably the most awful truth for all of us to try and face is that this was not done by unknowing people; it was done as systematic abuse, as the Prime Minister said today, as systemic abuse. The system was set up to be an abusive system, and while we continue to have institutions where people are not easily able to speak their mind you will continue to have the same problem.

I was pleased to hear the Prime Minister say today, in terms of the aged-care needs of the forgotten Australians, that there would be a special needs component. The reason that there is concern about the aged-care needs of the forgotten Australians is that they will be re-institutionalised, as everyone who goes into an aged-care home is. Institutions can function well, but they are always institutions. Whenever we put people in special places away from the community we accept that those that are vulnerable may be abused and may be exploited. But we go on doing it because it is an efficient and economical way of dealing with some of the issues that we find too hard to deal with in our communities.

This has got to be where we start to think about institutionalisation across the board, not just to comfortably try and tell ourselves that this is in the past and that this will not happen again, that if a state government builds an institution for children with disabilities or an aged-care home it will be different, that this time these institutions will be good

institutions. An institution can only be as good as the people who constantly watch, constantly check and constantly tell themselves: 'This happened before, it can happen again, it will happen again if we do not continue to remind ourselves over and over that it is absolutely and unfortunately a part of human nature to behave in diabolical ways towards people less powerful'. The only way we can stop this from being an apology that will have to be made again in 50 years or 60 years or to a new group of vulnerable people is to keep reminding ourselves that this can happen, it is happening now and it can continue to happen until we open up the institutions, until we stop assuming that there can ever be good institutions without constant and total vigilance.

I can appreciate the sentiments of the people who suggest that we should talk now about the 'remembered Australians' not the 'forgotten Australians', but I think we need to continue to remember the lessons of the forgotten Australians today, tomorrow and forever.