



Adoption Jigsaw

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Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Department of House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Dear Sir

I am writing to explain why access to the AEC rolls is essential to our work and that of other agencies funded to assist people separated from their biological family through adoption, fostering or institutional care. I understand that Legislative change would need to occur in order for us to access the Australian Electoral Rolls.

As you will be aware the Federal Government has acknowledged the damage of forced family separation in National Apologies to the Stolen Generation, Forgotten Australians and Forced Adoptions. In each Apology the Government took responsibility for their role and stated that the Government would assist with search and reconnection. The decision in 2013 to withdraw access to the Australian Electoral Rolls makes a mockery of the Apologies and has decimated our ability to help some people find and contact with their biological families.

Our researcher is one of Australia's most experienced researchers with over 17 years' experience in adoption search. There is no question that search through the Electoral Rolls is the most efficient and often it is the ONLY way to search.

In response to my letters Mr Ed Killesteyn states – *“The AEC is not the only possible source of information about the location of Australian citizens. Indeed, the AEC is not the only source of electoral Roll information as each State and Territory has their Electoral Commissions and their own electoral Rolls”*.

It is true that access to each State and Territory's electoral Rolls – both past and present, would enable us to search effectively. I have made appeals to the WA Electoral Commissioner, WA Premier and the State Library to purchase rolls for other States. All have stated that this is NOT possible, the WAEC has stated that it is outside their mandate to obtain other States Rolls for non-electoral purposes. State Libraries around Australia have incomplete sets of Rolls prior to 2009 and do not have a mandate to change this situation. In some States eg NSW, agencies cannot even access their own State Rolls.

Without question Electoral Rolls are the bedrock of search, it is much more than current listings. Often we are unable to find the sought person and have to search laterally by going to old Rolls and building up a family tree to enable us to search for other relatives. We can ask other States to help us with current listings (except NSW and Victoria) but we cannot do detailed background searches for each other.

This leaves us with the following search options:

Telephone books	<p>These can be very useful for cross referencing but not as a primary search tool. They do not list Christian names, thus a search for a Joan Andrews may yield many hundreds of J. Andrews as the J may be for John, Justine, Josephine, Joe, Jack etc. It is not feasible to write to hundreds (and for some names, thousands) of people.</p> <p>Many phones are in the spouses or de-facto's name and we may not have that information.</p> <p>Many people do not have a landline and may not have their mobile number in the phone book.</p>
Ancestry.com	<p>This can be very useful for historical search and building a family tree, however it does not include current information and therefore there is no mechanism to link people to a current address. There is no information for South Australia.</p>
Facebook and Social Media	<p>Social media can be useful for an unusual name. However, if it is a common name ie Joan Andrews you can yield thousands of possibilities often with no ability to filter results. Many people have privacy settings that do not allow you to know in which country or town they reside.</p> <p>Most of our search is for birth parents now in their 60s-80s, who are less likely to have a Social Media presence.</p> <p>We are very concerned at people using facebook indiscriminately and have had a number of distressed clients who have been approached by the searcher sending messages to their children or other relatives. It is important that messages through facebook do not identify adoption and my experience is that they are often ignored.</p>
On-line search sites	<p>It is an offence under the WA adoption Act to identify someone as being involved in Adoption. Other States have similar restrictions. Even if that were not the case it can cause great distress to publically name someone as being involved in adoption. Many birth mothers are not computer literate and most often only one party to the adoption is searching.</p>
Commercial rolls	<p>We are now paying to use some commercial sites and it can be useful. However we have found them very incomplete and out of date eg in a recent mail out of 35 letters, 12 have been returned as NATA and no one has come forth as being the right person. This means we do not know if the right person has received a letter but does not want contact or whether they have simply moved address and the new people not returned the letter.</p>
Death Notices	<p>We frequently use death notices to build up a family tree of the searched for party, however once we have a name we still need to find their current details.</p>
Ryerson Index, Trove, National Archives of Australia, Historical Societies in country towns	<p>These can be useful sources to obtain information and build a family tree. However they do not provide current contact information.</p>
Land Title Searches	<p>These can be helpful however they rarely help us to locate current details.</p>

It is ironic that we find it easier to search in the UK than we do in Australia. In the UK we can access a combination of the Electoral Roll/telephone book online and we can apply for any birth, death or marriage certificate.

Even with access to Electoral Rolls, search is often very time consuming and inaccurate as there are many people with the same name eg there are 50 men called Stephen Taylor and a further 32 spelled Steven Taylor just in WA. Thus I would need to send out 82 letters and if they do not respond I do not know if they haven't received the letter, are not interested or they are the wrong person. If we could access a year of birth (of course we would prefer a complete DOB) on the Rolls we could reduce the number of letters to a few.

I have made many submissions requesting access to Dates of Birth, but I have been refused on the grounds of Confidentiality even though I would be happy to sign a legally binding non-disclosure agreement. I find it inconceivable that WA politicians can access Dates of Birth on the Electoral Roll and that they are used to send birthday cards to their constituents on significant birthdays- eg a 60th birthday. I don't know if Federal politicians have the same access to Date of Birth.

We want to fulfil the letter and spirit of all three Apologies - to redress the wrong done. No one has a right to a relationship but everyone has a right to locate family members and ask if they will agree to contact. The best and often only way to ensure people can be found is by allowing full access to the Australian Electoral Rolls, at the very least for Government funded search agencies.

Yours sincerely

Isabel Andrews
Coordinator