

Senator SIEWERT

A number of the members of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee are in the chamber and we would like to speak very briefly to this report. We would like to speak for longer but our time has been limited, so we have agreed to allocate the time amongst ourselves. I found this committee inquiry probably the hardest I have ever done because of the stories I heard about the forgotten Australians and their time in institutions in this country. It was very harrowing. I think all the committee members who heard about the pain and suffering also found it very tough participating in this committee.

The report makes 16 recommendations for further work that we believe needs to be done. Progress has been made in implementing the recommendations from the *Lost Innocents* and the *Forgotten Australians* reports, but there has not been enough progress. So we have made a further 16 recommendations, to which my fellow committee members will also speak. The first two recommendations relate to the need for an apology. These recommendations resulted from the call for an apology from virtually every witness before the committee. It was therefore essential for us to have this as our first recommendations. We believe there needs to be a formal statement of acknowledgement and an apology to the children who suffered hurt and distress or abuse and assault in institutional care. We believe this recommendation has not been picked up from the *Forgotten Australians* report, and we have reiterated the need for that.

We also believe there is a need for the Prime Minister to write to the relevant churches and religious agencies requesting that they provide formal statements concerning the need for such bodies to make reparation to children who suffered abuse and neglect in their care in the last century. We believe there needs to be further work done in the provision of redress schemes in the states that do not yet have redress schemes—those states being South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria. We are calling for government and Commonwealth leadership in this area to encourage these states to pursue putting in place redress schemes. We note there is a range of redress schemes around the country—some are better than others—and we believe there needs to be better coordination of those redress schemes. We have suggested that the Council of Australian Governments looks into these issues.

We believe that this action is very strongly needed. We also believe that the churches need to take steps to ensure that the processes for handling abuse allegations are consistent across all jurisdictions across this country. We have heard various stories from all our witnesses that the redress schemes across the country are different. They have had different support and receptions from various church organisations. We believe there needs to be greater action by the churches and religious organisations in providing support, redress and reparations to the children who were in their care. In view of the time, I seek to continue my remarks at a later date and thoroughly recommend this report to the Senate. I urge the government to implement the recommendations. It is a crying shame that the recommendations from the previous two reports have not been fully implemented, and we urge the government to take on these recommendations very rapidly and see that they are implemented.

Senator MOORE

I want to acknowledge the presence in the gallery of a number of people who are survivors of care in this country as well as those people who support them and members of their families. Today I want to acknowledge their patience in waiting for this report to be brought down and I also reflect that that patience is part of the lives that they have led, because they have been forgotten—in fact, they have been lost. Those were the issues that were the titles of our previous reports in this place. In 2001 and 2004, the Senate brought down inquiries that exposed the horror of some experiences of care in this country.

At that time, there was great media interest. There were statements made. I still believe that the day in 2004 that *Forgotten Australians: a report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children* was brought down was one of the most moving experiences for everybody in this place. However, our Community Affairs References Committee believes that, whilst there were so many recommendations made in those previous inquiries, there was a need to go back to have a look at just how much work had been done and whether in fact there had been real implementation and acceptance of the recommendations. We all know that recommendations are made and not always agreed, but our committee felt that time had gone by and we had continued to have experiences working with the people who had given their own lives to our committee. They had come to us talking about their experiences and expressing their pain and frustration, and so many of us shared those experiences. We felt we needed to go back to see what had occurred.

Senator Siewert has pointed out most of the recommendations our committee has made, and I promise this gallery and this place that we will not forget the people who are known as forgotten Australians or those people who are identified as child migrants.

For the sake of the process in the Senate, I ask the gallery if it could not always applaud; we can do that outside! I know there are other members of the committee who wish to speak.

This issue will continue. There will not be a process of being forgotten by anyone in this place. We will work with governments—we must. I think there will be some disappointment, because I do not think we will be able to meet all the needs that people have expressed. But in terms of making a commitment from the people who have worked together so strongly on this issue over many committees—I see that Senator McLucas, who was the chair of the committee in 2004, has come in. Today I also want to take particular note of Senator Andrew Murray, who did so much in this place and outside in the committee to keep these issues on the agenda. Whenever we have discussion in this place about the work for people who are known as ‘lost innocents’ or forgotten Australians, Senator Andrew Murray’s name will be held high, because his work continues as well.

Where do we go from here? This committee report will be put on the process today. We will go back to the government and also to the governments at state levels because we know there is a shared responsibility here. We must continue to work together on these issues. These people’s lives must now be acknowledged; no longer can people be referred to as ‘lost’ or ‘forgotten’.

Senator HUMPHRIES

I also had the privilege of sitting through and participating in the forgotten Australians inquiry and the more recent inquiry, the report of which comes down today. 'Privilege' may be a strange word to use in respect of that process, because it was searing and heartbreaking to hear stories told by Australians of a tragic and disgraceful chapter in Australia's history. We saw evidence of so much neglect and abuse that Australians would not have imagined was going on in their own communities over so many years. In earlier reports we made recommendations to ensure, firstly, that the processes were properly brought to the public's attention and, secondly, that means of redress were put in place for those who had experienced those tragic outcomes.

We went further in this most recent report of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee in order to bear witness to the reality that much of the work we recommended be done through those earlier reports has not yet occurred. There is not a need for further research into what has occurred. There is not a need for further analysis of what steps governments need to take. There is a need for action. That action is missing, particularly on the part of a number of state and territory governments. The action is missing on the part of many churches and other institutions that are and were responsible for the delivery of care to people in their charge. The purpose of this committee's report is to bear witness to the fact that that work is not yet concluded and must be prosecuted by the necessary authorities.

We recommend that the Commonwealth plays a leadership role in this exercise. The Commonwealth was not directly responsible for the administration of many of the facilities where children received abuse, but the Commonwealth funded, through child endowment, the care of those children and the Commonwealth today plays a leadership role in these matters. The call for action to be pursued by the states through the agency and intervention of the Commonwealth is perhaps the most important recommendation of the committee. I particularly note and endorse the call made by the Chair of the Community Affairs References Committee, Senator Siewert, that the government should focus on the need for the Prime Minister to seek from providers of care a statement of their position on redress, reparation and apology to those who were abused in their care and table the result of the work of that inquiry here in the parliament so that the Australian community can see what it is that has occurred and what is yet to occur. These Australians should not be forgotten. They should be honoured for their experience and given every support they need in order to participate fully in the community of which they are part.

Senator XENOPHON

I would like to talk briefly about this important report. Whilst I was not part of the committee process, I am sad to say that this issue is something I know a great deal about because a significant amount of the abuse detailed in the report occurred in South Australia. In South Australia we had the Mullighan inquiry into this. The victims of wards of the state who were the subject of systematic abuse were dubbed 'takeaway kids', and their plight first came to light during a series of reports by the local version of the Seven network's *Today Tonight* program. I am pleased to say that Rohan Wenn, who works with me, was the reporter that broke those stories, and it is something that we still discuss on a regular basis because it made such a profound difference in triggering the Mullighan inquiry.

For many years there have been claims by former wards of the state that they have been the victims of systemic abuse and systematic abuse; that children have been taken from state care and abused and then simply returned to have their reports of abuse ignored. I would like to pay particular tribute to Ki Meekins, a survivor of state care and a shining example of the resilience of the human spirit. It is because of the strength of people like Ki that these shocking stories have finally been told and acknowledged. We now need to focus on making amends and helping survivors of state and religious institutions. This report is an important step in that process. It is a valuable report. It is a report that needs to be acted upon with a great degree of urgency because the hurt is still there. These victims are still suffering and we need to make amends.

Senator BOYCE

I would very much like to endorse the comments made by my fellow members of the Community Affairs References Committee on this report and inquiry. I did not have the honour of being involved in the previous two inquiries but from the work that we did on this I now have just a small taste of the problems that have been experienced by the forgotten Australians and the lost innocents. My own particular area of interest is disability, and within the disability sphere there have been many, many examples of horrific abuse and trauma experienced by people, not only by those who are present in the gallery today but by many others as well.

I particularly acknowledge the support of the secretariat in producing this report at what has been a very busy time. The secretary of the committee, Mr Elton Humphery, was involved in the earlier inquiries and the wisdom and patience that he was able to bring to this inquiry was very helpful to all of us. I would also like to pick up on the comment made by my colleague Senator Humphries in his description of this as a ‘disgraceful chapter’ in Australia’s history. It is a disgraceful chapter in not only the history of Australia but also many other countries. The reports of the Irish inquiry are horrific in their description of abuse, time after time, in church-run institutions. Government departments just let it happen in the case of more than 250,000 children in Ireland.

It was a disgraceful chapter in Australia’s history, but it is not a closed chapter. In my view there are two reasons why it is not a closed chapter. It is partly because we have not fully redressed the hurt and injuries done to the lost innocents and forgotten Australians. As the report points out, what this requires is a full and real apology from all the players involved—the federal government, the state governments and real action from the churches. I would like to read briefly from our report:

The Committee received very little evidence in relation to statements issued by churches and agencies since the Forgotten Australians report, which reflects the fact that there has been little action by churches and agencies since that time.

We hope that our call for the Prime Minister to use his authority to push the churches into real action—real apology and real attempts at redress rather than public relations stunts that sweep things under the carpet—will actually happen. The other reason that I think this is not a closed chapter is that although it is far more subtle and far less out in the open, institutionalisation is still happening in Australia and the damage of it is still being felt by Australians. Time after time we have been having state governments, supported by federal government funding, developing institutions. They might be smaller but they are never going to be any better. I would like to briefly conclude by using a quote from the *Irish Times* in relation to the Irish inquiry which I think is just as relevant to us here. It said, ‘Abuse was not the failure of the system. It was the system.’