



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

Main Committee

**NATIONAL APOLOGY TO THE
FORGOTTEN AUSTRALIANS
AND FORMER CHILD MIGRANTS**

SPEECH

Monday, 16 November 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner	Responder
Speaker Rishworth, Amanda, MP	Question No.

Ms RISHWORTH (Kingston) (5.34 pm)—I rise today to support the motion before the House. It is with some sadness that I rise to speak because, over the last few months and years, I have heard many stories of the forgotten Australians, of some of the issues they faced and the emotional, physical and sexual abuse that some of them suffered. So it is with sadness that I rise to support this apology, but I am very pleased that this bipartisan apology has been made. I think it is very important that we do acknowledge that there are over 500,000 forgotten Australians—people who as children spent a period of time in homes, orphanages and other forms of out-of-home care between the 1920s and the late 1970s. I also recognise the 7,000 former child migrants who arrived in Australia through the historic child migration scheme and were subsequently placed in homes and orphanages.

I recognise that this apology does mean different things to different people. For some, this apology is something they have fought very hard for, and for others it only awakens a lot of memories of the things that happened to them in the past. So this apology does mean something different to everyone. It is my hope that this apology will start a process—whether it is a continuing process or the start of a process, for some it might be the end of a process—and will mark something in that process and mean something very special to people.

For me, the ongoing consequences of the abuse that these people suffered are not surprising. It is not surprising that the severity of abuse, the feelings of not being secure and of being lonely have led to the damage caused to these people. I am not surprised about that, but hearing firsthand some of these stories has been very moving for me and also, as I have said, very saddening.

I was particularly moved by the stories of two women in my electorate who have been fighting for an apology for a long period of time. In fact, in South Australia under a process before a former Supreme Court judge, Ted Mullighan, a lot of the state wards came forward. There was a large inquiry into what had happened to them. Both of these women were involved in that and have been involved for a long time in telling their stories. They have been brave enough to tell their stories so that others could identify with them and be willing to speak out.

The important part—the Prime Minister did talk about this; it was a theme in his speeches—is being able to tell one's story, to be able to express it and be heard without people judging, to be heard without people not believing. Just being able to tell that story is an incredibly powerful process. I do know that Mr Mullighan also found the same experience during his inquiry. He said a number of times that telling their story was a huge part of the process. Certainly the two women in my electorate, Josephine Cavanaugh and Lila Ophof, have also found that telling their story has been an incredible part of the process. I would like to acknowledge some words from Josephine.

A division having been called in the House of Representatives—

Sitting suspended from 5.39 pm to 5.59 pm

Ms RISHWORTH—I was speaking about two of the women in my electorate, Josephine and Lila, who attended the apology today. I want to quote Josephine, who said: 'We can't change the past, but we can look forward to the future and let the healing begin.' Today is a very special day for her. It was also a very special day for her because she finally got to meet some of the relations whom she had never known. In fact, today was the day that she met her aunts for the first time. Josephine had a very lonely childhood. She was separated from her 16 brothers and sisters. She says that during her time at the Sisters of Mercy orphanage she was fed bread and water, beaten and sent to solitary confinement. This was a very difficult and upsetting time for her.

At age 13 she was forced to relocate to Adelaide, where she lived on the streets for a few years. Since that time she has been piecing her life back together. She has been trained as a chef and has done courses in mining skills and communications. She has also raised two children. What she has been able to achieve is a real testimony to Josephine's strength of the character.

Lila told me that the most important thing for her about the apology today was that she no longer felt forgotten, which she had for a long time. She said to me that now she would be one of the remembered Australians. It was also very empowering for her to hear that she was not to blame. How can a three-year-old be blamed? For so long she had believed that she was to blame for her mother giving her up. She still does not know why, and a question that she is continually asking is, 'Why did this happen to me?' But today was a time for the powerful realisation that it was not her fault. She was just a child and there was a duty to look after her. She experienced an awful childhood, one with no love and no care. That has been really awful for her.

Lila was not funded by any of the organisations to come here today. I want to pay tribute to a company in my electorate, Wirra Wirra winery. Many in this chamber may be familiar with their wine. They have no relation whatsoever with Lila. Our office spent some time trying to find some sponsorship that would enable Lila to come over and hear and see this apology. Wirra Wirra were incredibly generous, paying for her airfare and enabling her to be part of this. I cannot give a big enough shout out to them, because in a time of need for someone who had been forgotten for so long they acknowledged her and helped her get here.

This has been a great process for both of them. Both of these women are very keen to support and help others who have been in this. In fact, Lila says that since there has been some publicity and because her picture has been in the paper others have come up to her and thanked her for what she has done. Both of them have a very strong and real commitment to helping others.

I support this motion. It was a very emotional day for both of these women and for the many people here. It was a very emotional day for me. I feel honoured and privileged that these forgotten Australians have been able to share with me and with many other people their often very personal and sad stories, stories that have stayed with them for so long. I hope that sharing those stories—without judgement and without people disbelieving them—and gaining real recognition and acknowledgement will help some of these forgotten Australians move on. In conclusion, today marks a point when these Australians and child migrants are no longer forgotten. They will be acknowledged and remembered for many years to come. In saying that, while they will be acknowledged and remembered, I hope that we also—as other speakers have said—learn from those mistakes of the past. No child should ever have to experience what these close to 500,000 Australians went through. I commend the motion to the House.