

# Forgotten Australians

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AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN  
FORGOTTEN AUSTRALIANS  
FAMILY & COMMUNITY SERVICES

*Two Democrat initiated Senate inquiries and the 'stolen generation' inquiry reveal that upwards of 500,000 children were removed from their families and placed in institutional and other forms of out-of-home care in Australia last century. That so many endured a childhood deprived of love, a good upbringing and security is certainly sad. That so many were subject to abuse and neglect, including criminal sexual and physical assault, is unforgivable. That so many are scarred and live on the margins of society as adults with few programs to assist them is scandalous.*

*"For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century... the welfare system condemned [children in care] to a loveless existence, isolated from their families and communities: layer onto this a superstructure of physical and sexual abuse, and the emotional desolation of the children living in this environment is complete."*

**Joanna Penglase (2005)**  
*Orphans of the Living: Growing up in Care in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Australia.*

## Our Action Plan

- Continue to advocate for targeted support services for the communities of 'forgotten Australians'.
- Urge the Australian Government to reconsider its decision not to establish a national reparations fund for the survivors of institutional abuse and other care settings.
- Continue to get politicians and policy makers to truly understand the scale and effect of child abuse – that a harmed child often produces a harmed adult.

## Issue One: Inquiry evidence

Bit by bit, a hidden history of Australia's children has been revealed by a trilogy of inquiries:

- the Aboriginal 'stolen generation' inquiry that produced the 1997 *Bringing them Home* report;
- the Democrat initiated Senate Community Affairs child migrant inquiry that produced the 2001 *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record* report; and
- the Democrat initiated Senate Community Affairs inquiry into those non-indigenous, non-child migrant Australian children raised in institutional care that produced two reports: *Forgotten Australians* (2004) and *Protecting Vulnerable Children: A national challenge* (2005).

The one sure truism to emerge from these inquiries is that if you harm and break the spirit of a child, a damaged adult is more often than not the result, and it does not end there. It is also the case that survivors of childhood trauma can go on to produce another generation of victims. Additionally, the long-term social and economic costs to society are massive.



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Evidence did reveal that with the love and support of family and friends, some care leavers have had good outcomes. However, for far too many, their adult lives have been scarred by substance abuse, relationship breakdowns, mental and other health problems, anti-social behaviour, welfare dependency and unemployment. Premature deaths are also not uncommon, often from suicide.

Many have led and are leading lonely, marginal lives from which there appears no escape. One 70-year old lady poignantly summed this reality up by writing that: "Every now and then a door opens in the memory bank and the ghosts escape to make us lonely children again".

## Issue Two: Poor Government response

When the Coalition Government responded to the 39 unanimous recommendations of the *Forgotten Australians* in 2005, the overall reaction was one of disappointment. Its refusal to even consider a national reparation fund, as then existed in Canada, Ireland and even Tasmania, (and now Queensland) indicated a callous approach and a complete lack of understanding of the enduring legacy of tragic childhoods spent in state 'care'.

Any hope of closure or long-awaited justice for care leavers was dampened with this refusal. Instead, they were left with seeking redress either through the courts or from the organisations (mainly churches) that ran the institutions. While the courts have proved insurmountable because of the statutes of limitation or the passage of time, compensation systems set up by the churches and other receiving agencies have been criticised as more about controlling a process to ensure they pay as little as possible. Care leavers are often left feeling powerless and further abused.

Many of the other recommendations concerned the provision of support services that are specifically targeted towards the unique needs of care leavers. On constitutional grounds, most of these were deferred to the States and Territories. However, the response thus far has been slow.

## Issue Three: Policy shift required

The *Forgotten Australians* and other reports comprise an important source of primary research material. They are not just about hidden pasts, but are also about the present and can inform the future of our nation. The scourge of child abuse continues and is a matter of national importance requiring a national approach. The Commonwealth have shown some leadership with its intervention into the remote communities of the Northern Territory. However, this must be extended right across Australia as child sexual assault and abuse is widespread. It is a matter of national importance that requires – in concert with the States and Territories – a long-term national approach. Once politicians and policy-makers break the barriers of ignorance and gain real understanding, once they grasp that the huge social and economic costs of childhood trauma across the lifespan justify prevention, limitation and remedial measures, then we will be able to better protect our children and help those who have been harmed.



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