

SPEECH BY PREMIER NATHAN REES

HEALING SERVICE FOR NSW CARE LEAVERS SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2009

My colleague Linda Burney, Minister for Community Services
Other Federal and State parliamentary colleagues
Caroline Carroll, Chair, Alliance for Forgotten Australians
Frank Golding, Vice-President, and Steve Quinn, of Care Leavers
Australia Network
Carers and care leavers and friends

They say time is the great healer.

But nothing in this world is healed by being forgotten.

Which is why this ceremony is one of remembrance, even perhaps of celebration – a celebration of courage, of the power and strength of the human spirit.

We are gathered to remember the many thousands of children and young people who suffered neglect, hardship and cruelty while growing up in institutional care in NSW – in orphanages, in children's homes and foster homes in the decades leading up to the 1990s.

Many of those victims with all their painful thoughts, with all your troubled memories have joined us for this ceremony.

I thank you for doing so.

I thank you for your goodwill and your understanding because this is your ceremony – not one for government officials and bureaucrats but yours.

It is your suffering we remember today.

It is your pain we want to share.

Your scars we seek to heal.

That process of healing began officially, at least four years ago.

In 2005 a report of a Senate committee of inquiry found that from the early 1900s to the 1970s as many as half a million orphans or surrendered Australian children were mistreated by a system charged with their care.

Brothers and sisters were separated children led lives of neglect and despair some pressed into domestic service, their educational opportunities destroyed while many suffered physical, emotional and sexual abuse.

The committee's report, *Forgotten Australians*, estimated that as many as 200,000 children were placed in institutional care in NSW alone – the result of family breakdown, poverty, alcohol abuse, mental illness, domestic violence or the death of parents.

Those with little or no experience of such hardship cannot hope to comprehend the scale and depth of the suffering entailed.

In the words of the English poet, William Wordsworth, for many such victims:

*Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark
And shares the nature of infinity.*

Some children were removed from their families by the State, others were placed in care by relatives, including parents, who often had no other options.

Of course, such tragedies were not unique to this country.

They were common in many so-called advanced societies.

Remember that until the 1970s there was little State or community support for families in crisis.

In Australia, as in many countries, institutional care was one of the few options available for the children of the destitute, the desperate, the deprived.

Today, we know better.

But we must never forget those lessons of an earlier age.

I believe I can say that the NSW Government was among the first to respond to the Senate committee's report.

In June 2005, in the NSW Parliament the then Minister for Community Services apologised on behalf of the Government for the physical, psychological and social harm caused to children in NSW for the hurt and distress they experienced in the care of the State.

Today, ladies and gentlemen as Head of the Government, I go further.

Minister Burney and I together with Caroline Carroll and Steve Quinn will shortly unveil a memorial as a lasting tribute to the children who suffered in care in NSW.

To those many sufferers and especially those who have joined us today I say, on behalf of the Government:

I am sorry for any hurt and distress you suffered in the care of the State.

This should never have happened.

I am sorry that some of you were physically, psychologically or sexually abused.

This should never have happened.

I am sorry for any lasting disadvantages you have experienced as a result of your childhood suffering.

This should never have happened.

I am sorry that many of you have been unable to return to your families and loved ones.

This should never have happened.

I offer this apology also to your families.

And I express the hope that by acknowledging the realities of the past we can begin to heal those wounds, restore those lost families and repair those broken lives.

I began by saying that for all the sorrows we remember today, this occasion is one for celebrating the human spirit.

It is also an occasion for giving thanks.

Today we remember and thank those good and honourable carers who offered kindness and solace to the young ones in their care.

They are stronger for what you did for them.

We thank all those who have written to the Government with positive stories of your days in care.

Your stories will be studied and remembered.

We thank all those who took their caring duties as a sacred trust and helped build a nation renowned for compassion and generosity and social harmony.

We are a stronger nation for your efforts.

I want to acknowledge, in particular, the contribution made to this event by Steve Quinn, of CLAN Care Leavers Australia Network, who first put forward to the idea for this healing service, and the support of Caroline Carroll, of the Alliance for Forgotten Australians.

May those forgotten Australians be remembered from this day.

Let the apology we offer to those innocent children caught up in a system that failed you be engraved forever in Australia's memory.

No human organisation, no system of government, can guarantee a happy life for every child.

In every society, in every system, mistakes will be made.

Human error and misjudgement will always occur

Because we live in an imperfect world.

But in an imperfect world it is all the more important that we resolve to make amends.

So today to all care leavers we offer this public act of reconciliation this small gesture of compassion and contrition.

And in doing so we ask your forgiveness, and pledge that nothing that can be done to prevent a repeat of such suffering for other children will be left undone ...

... that innocent children already hurt by social and family tragedy will not lack for security, for our community's care and protection.

To the memory of all who suffered in care, we dedicate this day of healing.

ENDS