Alliance for
Forgotten Australians
Patrons: Andrew Murray
Jack Thompson

Submission by the Alliance for Forgotten Australians to the Senate Inquiry into the Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices.

The Alliance for Forgotten Australians [AFA] welcomes this opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices.

Preamble

The Alliance for Forgotten Australians (AFA) was established in 2006 and launched in 2007. AFA is a national group of organisations and individuals from across Australia that promotes the interests of the estimated 500,000 people who experienced institutional or other out-of-home care as children in the last century, many of whom suffered physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse. AFA members live in all States and Territories. Some are members of existing support groups; others are working to set up support groups in States/Territories where they do not exist. AFA has a Steering Committee of Forgotten Australians and an Advisory Group. AFA works to advance its objectives at all levels of government in Australia. It works with the knowledge and cooperation of its members to advance issues at the Federal, State and Territory levels. It has received Federal Government funding over four years, enabling it to operate until June 2011 and to produce and distribute two editions of the information booklet, *Forgotten Australians: Supporting survivors of childhood institutional care in Australia.* Auspicing and Secretariat support are provided by Families Australia Inc.

The people who identify as Forgotten Australians are survivors of the roughly 500,000 children who found themselves in orphanages or Homes in the 20th century. Some were in State care, because the State considered their parents unfit; some had parents who were dead, in prison, missing or otherwise unable to care for them; some were given up by their parent/s because the parent/s could not provide for them, often because of death or injury from war. Sometimes these parents had to work and to use the Home as a form of child care. If they could, they paid maintenance to those running the Home

The Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee conducted an Inquiry into the experiences of these children and the outcomes for them as adults. The Inquiry allowed many people who had been children in the Australian institutional care system to tell their stories – often for the first time. The report, *Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children* (2004), revealed a history of neglect and cruelty, of abandonment and exploitation. Large numbers of these children experienced serious and often criminal physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect and assault in state-run institutions, orphanages, children's homes, foster homes, children's prisons and mental institutions.

For the surviving adults, now generally aged from around 50 up, the long term impacts may include: poor health; low education outcomes, including low literacy levels; a lack

of social skills; a lack of trust and security; inability to form and maintain loving relationships; inability to parent effectively; a history of depression or anxiety, including symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); and risk taking behaviours such as substance abuse.

The Commonwealth has an obligation to support Forgotten Australians for three main reasons:

1. The Commonwealth Government oversees State and Territory Governments, funding them to administer child protection systems and therefore having an overarching responsibility, in the national interest, for the care and protection of children.
2. Many of the children were in these institutions because their parents were, or had been, in the armed forces. They may have lost parent/s, through death or serious injury; many children also had parents who had returned from overseas war service with untreated post-traumatic stress disorder, unable to care for their children. Others, particularly young women without parental care, were classified as being 'in moral danger' and supposedly taken into care for their own 'protection'.
3. The Commonwealth Government made family support payments on behalf of these children, and made them to governments, agencies or institutions that failed to provide those children with proper protection, health care, nourishment, education and support.

The Commonwealth Government must, therefore, bear some measure of responsibility for the Forgotten Australians' experiences of abuse, assault and abandonment; this would extend to pregnancy resulting from sexual abuse while in care or resulting from their vulnerability when leaving care without adequate support.

In addition, the Commonwealth was complicit in the child migrant scheme, where thousands of children were separated from their families and brought to Australia, only to be exploited and, in many cases, abused.

Forced adoptions

One aspect of the treatment of women in those years was the readiness to condemn as 'immoral' young women who became pregnant outside marriage. Many Forgotten Australians found themselves in this position, often because of sexual abuse by a 'carer' or by someone in a position of trust. Others left 'care' around the age of fifteen, with little worldly knowledge and few survival skills. Unless supported by a caring family, such women were usually taken into institutions while they gave birth, and many have reported that unreasonable pressure was placed on them to surrender their children for adoption.

Origins Inc has argued that the constant and increasing demand for babies by 'respectable', religious married couples was a factor in forced adoptions, as was the prevailing attitude that single mothers could not be trusted to offer children stable homes.

AFA therefore welcomes this opportunity to add its voice to those condemning past adoption practices. We hope that the Australian Government, the State and Territory Governments and the Churches will take this opportunity to announce and commit to a

strong program of acknowledgement, redress and practical support. We call on the Australian Government to show leadership in addressing these issues.

There are many parents still trying to find their children and children still seeking out parents and siblings, with many unlikely ever to succeed in being reunited or reconciled. Sadly, many have died without any recognition, understanding, acknowledgement or validation, for the past wrongs inflicted upon them.

The formation of the group Origins by Dian Wellfare in 1995 provided an important voice for those affected by forced or pressured removal of babies at birth. Origins has done considerable work to ensure that grieving mothers, fathers and siblings are being heard.

As Forgotten Australians, we believe strongly that every child has the need for identity and strong family connection, for an authentic childhood home and to be able to make sense of place and identity. Every person has the right to seek connection with family, however difficult it may be after so many years apart, and to be supported throughout that reconnection. Reunion processes, where they do occur, are often prolonged, difficult and painful.

Family separation, as occurred for Forgotten Australians, Child Migrants and the Stolen Generation, has created a vast cohort of people without roots or family connections. They are often lonely and isolated. The former forced adoption policies and practices compounded this, by denying women the right to retain a connection with the next generation of 'family'.

This Federal Senate Inquiry is well overdue, and we at AFA encourage and congratulate those mothers, fathers, children and siblings willing to make submissions to the Inquiry.

We consider that those affected by past adoption practices need and deserve better support. AFA recommends that this include: ongoing counselling (with choice of counsellor) for all family members affected; better access to records; consistent legislation and practices across all States and Territories for those seeking information; and support with (voluntary) reunions. These survivors all need to have their pain and the wrongs that were done to them acknowledged and to have reparation and redress - as would be appropriate for all Forgotten Australians. We note that Origins is calling for a Royal Commission before any Apology, and we support their call for a full and open investigation of these issues.

AFA representatives would be happy to meet with the Committee to discuss these issues further.

Yours sincerely

Caroline Carroll
Chair
Alliance for Forgotten Australians
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