



“So what then is to be done?”

...many Forgotten Australians and child migrants continue to need help in tracing their families. That is why we'll be providing a National Find and Connect Service that will provide Australia-wide coordinated family tracing and support services for care leavers **to locate personal and family history files and reunite with members of their families, where that is possible.**”

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on the occasion of the national Apology to the Forgotten Australians 16 November 2009

There are many research tools that might help us reunite Forgotten Australians with their families, but the most effective, the most efficient, and sometimes the only tool we have is the Australian Electoral Roll.

The Commonwealth electoral rolls provide the full name and address of the voter. Being able to track people using their full names (first and subsequent given names as well as the family name) gives the researcher the best opportunity to trace an individual or family group over time. At best a researcher will be able to isolate the person sought. At worst, having a person's full name narrows the search considerably – in one known example from 60 down to 5.

The full name and address of someone on the electoral roll at the time of a child's birth helps match up a likely parent with that child. The starting point to trace family for a man who was born in Adelaide but who moved to Kalgoorlie for work, for example, is South Australia. His parents are unlikely to have been living in Western Australia at or around the time he was born. Without access to the South Australian or Commonwealth electoral rolls, the search is over before it begins.

Family groups can be roughly identified by using the electoral rolls. By following a pair of individuals (husband and wife) in the rolls over time, as their children reach their majority and are entered on the roll, there is even a chance of identifying others in the family group who may have been previously unknown.

It is well understood that Australia has a very mobile population and without access to other states' or the Commonwealth's electoral rolls, it is impossible to search for family members within Australia. Many Forgotten Australians now living in Western Australia spent time in institutions in other states and would like to connect with family members in those other states, if only they could trace them. Access to the Commonwealth electoral rolls could provide that opportunity.

The concept of family for me? It's like a foreign country you've never been to: you might as well say China.

Kerry Lowdon, 2004

In attempting to find information about or reconnect with living family for our clients, agencies are already being forced to use old electoral records, the White Pages, Facebook, guesswork and even bad debtors websites, all of which have old and/or out-of-date information. These searches may or may not reveal possible matches. If they don't then there are no other places to look. If they reveal a number of possible matches (eg with a common name), the information needs to be cross-referenced to refine the number of responses and the next step is direct correspondence by phone or email or letter, depending on what contact information is available.

Any direct contact in that regard runs the risk of revealing third party information. At the very least any contact would need to name the person being sought (ie "I am trying to get in touch with Joe Bloggs") and if their name was Joe Bloggs, further information would have to be revealed to ascertain whether this Joe Bloggs was the one being looked for. That questioning, however delicately handled, is likely to reveal information about either the client or a third party to a possible stranger.

The Australian Electoral Rolls are the most valuable resource currently available for finding a context for the early lives of Forgotten Australians and, possibly, enabling them to connect with family. While as many sources of information as possible are used in such searches, access to the electoral rolls provides the safest, most accurate and most recent source of information.

Politicians have access to these rolls by virtue of the work they do. Cannot agencies such as ours also be licensed to access the rolls because of the work that we do?

Surely then this can be done.

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