

**SOUTH AUSTRALIAN
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
SUBMISSION TO THE
SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REFERENCES COMMITTEE
INQUIRY INTO CHILD MIGRATION**

DECEMBER 2000

Introduction

The South Australian Department of Human Services regards the Inquiry by the Senate Committee into British child migrants as an important initiative and welcomes the opportunity to present its views and concerns about this sensitive issue.

Around 8,000 child migrants were sent to Australia during the British Child Migrant Scheme. It appears children came to South Australia in the late 1940s through to the 1950s. These children, predominantly female, were placed in the care of the State and most girls were placed initially at the Goodwood Orphanage.

In 1987, the British Child Migrant Trust was established in Nottingham, England, when the enormity of the British Child Migrant Scheme was first exposed.

Later in Australia, the Commonwealth government funded the Child Migrant Trust Australia Inc. offices in Western Australia and Victoria. To date, there is no designated program through State or Commonwealth Governments for South Australia. Child migrants living in this state are serviced by the Victorian Trust. This system is not always effective, or practical, as counselling is a key feature of the service provided.

In February 2000 the Australian government responded to the British Government's response to the House of Commons Health Committee report. This response indicated that all State and Territory governments, being the providers of health and welfare departments in Australia, endorsed the recommendation.

The Department of Human Services (through Adoption and Family Information Service) is the government service point for all former child migrants in South Australia.

The child migrants, being former SA State wards, have emerged as a distinct client group due to their unique circumstances and history. The critical issues relating to this group are accessibility to relevant, timely services directly relating to their separation and migrant status, duty of care issues concerning the government and the Catholic Church and health and wellbeing matters as a result of their past experiences.

Some child migrants in other States have examined the possibility of civil legal action. Many child migrants have managed their lives by putting the issues on hold. For most, we understand that it is only now that they have started to confront these highly emotional issues and have begun to deal with them. These particular child migrants are feeling somewhat debilitated as they come to terms with these issues. Most people are in the fifty to sixty year age group and have anticipated enjoying their later years in fulfilling careers or retirement. Confronting their painful childhood experiences has resulted in feelings of renewed grief, distress and displacement in their lives. A

lack of access to specialist services exacerbates the problem further adding to their despair and sense of powerlessness.

South Australian child migrants have mentioned experiencing difficulties in accessing services through the British Child Migrant's Trust. Other agencies, such as International Social Service, who administers the funding to assist with reunion expenses to the UK for eligible child migrants, appear to be limited in their capacity to respond to the individual needs. These difficulties generally are related to the limitations of the eligibility criteria for access to the funds as well as to the inability of some of the migrants to understand and complete the required submission. At times, the limited resources available to child migrants in SA have meant that no servicing has occurred.

Due to these observations, the Department's purpose in making this submission is to assist the British child migrants in accessing timely and relevant short and long term support.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Inquiry seeks information on *Child Migration to Australia under approved schemes during the twentieth century, with particular reference to the role and responsibilities of Australian governments and to the issues in the following paragraphs:*

Term of Reference (a)

In relation to government and non-government institutions responsible for the care of child migrants

- (i) *whether any unsafe, improper, or unlawful care or treatment of children occurred in such institutions*

Child migrants have recently related to departmental officers the following experiences and allegations, which they claim occurred whilst residing in Goodwood Orphanage and whilst being wards of the State:

Physical, sexual and emotional abuse

- sheets soiled with urine placed over the head of a child as a punishment for enuresis
- being beaten almost daily as a further response to enuresis. Sometimes this involved being beaten with a strap or feather duster after lights were put out and the child had gone to sleep, thus increasing the child's anxiety at bedtime
- sexual abuse during a work placement, by a male resident of the household, whilst the child was a ward of the State
- "floggings" with a leather belt, sometimes on bare flesh and in front of other children
- children shut in cupboards as a punishment
- a child's hair (long plait) cut off without consent
- children told that contact with relatives and friends in the UK would not occur

- children told that letters from relatives and friends in the UK would not be given to them, and indication that letters were withheld
- children deprived upon arrival of monies in their possession
- children deprived of some of their few possessions
- information withheld about families and their personal history in the UK.

(i) *whether any serious breach of any relevant statutory obligation occurred during the course of the care of the child migrants*

On arrival, the children became wards of the State government, thus obligating a duty of care. The former child migrants allege significant breaches of the statutory obligation of duty of care by making the following claims:

- removal of a many children their country of origin without the knowledge or consent of the children's parents. Children were frequently brought up to believe incorrectly that they were orphans without relatives in Britain
- many children were never given copies of their birth certificates or details of their family background or medical history. As a consequence they commenced their adult life in Australia without any formal or legal documentation relating to their identity
- failure to investigate allegations of abuse when disclosed to police and welfare authorities.

Term of Reference (b)

The extent and operation of measures undertaken or required to assist former child migrants to reunite with their families and obtain independent advice and counselling services

For the past approximately 50 years, no specific interventions or services were made available to the British child migrants. Current services are perceived to be minimal and not easily accessible to child migrants in South Australia.

- Establishment of Child Migrant Trust in Western Australia and Victoria provides minimal service and limited accessibility to South Australian child migrants
- Existence of International Social Services in Victoria provides minimal service and accessibility to South Australian child migrants

- Catholic Family Welfare in South Australia is sympathetic but has no specific programs in place to assist child migrants.

The Department of Human Services has:

- purchased “PHIND” (an indexed data base which contains records of child migrants to South Australia)
- provided key workers to meet regularly with a number of former child migrants living in SA
- liaised with the Trust in Australia and in the UK
- assisted with expenses for the Trust’s Senior Social Worker to travel to Adelaide to liaise with the key workers and to deliver services from a local base
- Investigated the possible inclusion of specific information relevant to child migrants on the DHS website.

These measures have provided support and some structure for the child migrants.

Term of Reference (c)

The effectiveness of efforts made during the operation of the child migration schemes or since by Australian governments and any other non-government bodies which were then responsible for child migration to:

- (i) *inform the children of the existence and whereabouts of their parents and/or siblings*

It is understood that no effort was made to inform the children of their families in the UK, until the establishment of the British Child Migrant Trust in 1987. It is also understood that, until that time the child migrants were not informed of how to access any records or information that were available about their family or the reasons for their coming to Australia, including why they were in an institution.

- (ii) *reunite or assist in the reunification of the child migrants with any of their relatives*

Due to the joint funding of the UK and Australian governments, monies are available for child migrants to be funded for travel to the UK for reunification purposes. However, there are restrictions on available funds if child migrants have already themselves financed a brief, previous trip to the UK. This has severely disadvantaged child migrants who have worked hard to fund their own trip to the UK when relatives have been located, but now find that they cannot apply for funds for reunion with other family members who have only recently been found.

(iii) *provide counselling or any other services that were designed to reduce or limit trauma caused by the removal of these children from their country of birth and deportation to Australia*

Current funding is channelled to the Child Migrant Trust in Victoria and Western Australia. As a result, specific counselling services have been established there. However, for South Australian former child migrants, access is neither practical nor conducive to therapeutic assistance, especially when counselling is the key feature of the needs of the client.

South Australian former child migrants have requested that strategies or programs be put in place to enable them to have better access to Child Migrant Trust specialist services. This is because there is no designated or targeted counselling or other service available in South Australia to meet the needs of these clients.

Term of Reference (d)

The need for formal acknowledgment and apology by Australian governments for the human suffering arising from the child migrant schemes

The Department has clear information that the former child migrants have indeed suffered enormously from their experiences as a result of the British Child Migrant Scheme. A formal acknowledgment of their experiences, losses and of the infringement of their rights would be seen

as a way of ameliorating some of their suffering. Some child migrants are clear that what they require is practical help.

Term of Reference (e)

Measures of reparation including, but not limited to, compensation and rehabilitation by the perpetrators

Consideration should be given to provision of reparations if it is seen that this will assist in the healing process for the former child migrants. Some, who claim that they were forced to work for no wages, have stated that they wish to be compensated for that work.

Others have asked that the eligibility criteria for access to travel funds be revised or reviewed in the light of the recent experiences of the former child migrants regarding reconnection with family and/or place of origin.

Some of those whose connection with the Church was damaged as a result of their experiences, have asked that programs or strategies be put in place that will enable them to explore reconciliation with the Church and reconnect with their faith.

Term of Reference (f)

Whether statutory or administrative limitations or barriers adversely affect those former child migrants who wish to pursue claims against individual perpetrators of abuse previously involved in their care

The major obstacle to child migrants who wish to pursue claims is the lack of sufficient records. The Department of Human Services holds files on individual child migrants, but these contain minimal information. Alleged incidents involving such matters as physical or sexual abuse were rarely recorded.

Child migrants have stated that they want the Statute of Limitation Law amended to enable them to charge offenders who allegedly abused them as children.

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DATE: