

COMMITTEES: Community Affairs References Committee: Report

Senator CROWLEY (South Australia) (11.06 a.m.) – I present the report of the Community Affairs References Committee on child migration, entitled *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record*, together with the *Hansard* record of the committee's proceedings and documents presented to the committee.

Ordered that the report be printed.

Senator CROWLEY – I move:

That the Senate take note of the report.

This report describes a very sorry chapter in Australia's history. It is a very unusual report, and the first thing I want to do is thank the secretariat, Elton Humphery, Christine McDonald, Peter Short, Leonie Peake and Ingrid Zappe, because they have done an extremely wonderful job in dealing with this very challenging report. First of all, it is a historical document. It was not one you could fling together in a short while. We needed to make sure that the inquiry took its place in a sad history on this subject. There were 252 submissions plus 93 confidential ones. That is a fair amount to read through. There were also previous Australian state government reports – in Western Australia and the Forde inquiry in Queensland, which was not exactly to these terms of reference but very similar – an extensive United Kingdom report, and also the history of child migration to other parts of the British Empire, to Canada in particular, in the 19th century. So there was a very extensive amount of reading necessary to accompany our report.

Secondly, those confidential submissions contained stories of great hurt, pain and anger. They required the people who were presenting them to recall memories that they had spent years suppressing. The staff of the secretariat had to read them and they had to know those stories. The committee read them and listened to the witnesses telling the stories, and so did the Hansard officers. I made a point of contacting the Hansard people and asking how they were coping: fortunately the Hansard people who accompanied our committee hearings were people with community service and counselling backgrounds and they could cope. If you sit, as we did, for some time four hours or more listening to the stories of extreme tragedy and abuse, it is very perturbing and it was necessary for everybody at the end of the hearings to debrief themselves, including the people from Hansard.

Tough and all as it was for all of us, it was nothing to what it was for our witnesses. Those witnesses, with great generosity, recalled to the front of their brain things that they had been suppressing for many years. I believe our committee owes a great debt of gratitude to those witnesses who were prepared to come and tell us those stories. In this report we may have an emphasis on the stories of tragedy and disaster because many of the people who have coped and succeeded, despite being child migrants and going through the same kind of institutional care and difficulties, did not write submissions to tell us how they had coped. We appreciate that the emphasis is on the hard things that happened, but that is a priority concern of this whole child migration inquiry process. As I said, we could not have had a report without the generosity of so many of those witnesses.

We have established beyond doubt – it was known but I think it is important that we have it in a report – that it was both the British and the Australian governments who signed off and agreed to this child migration program. The responsibility to protect the children, to have the duty of care, was then transferred from the Australian government to state governments. But, in the transfer to the state government's relevant minister and then on to the receiving agencies, while the responsibility was transferred the care and protection was not. Too often we had stories of how it had failed. We heard arguments about the standards of the day: if you look back now you could be wrong because you do not know what the standards of the day were. It was not lawful in the early

fifties to sexually abuse children. It was not lawful in the fifties to physically assault and beat and flog children. It was probably outside of the law to demean, humiliate and monster children. Even so I think we would say that many of the stories were outside of the standards of the day. Many people growing up in Australia at that time, even in some of the institutions of that time, did not suffer the degradation that the child migrants in those institutions suffered.

Two of the most important issues that recurred again and again in this report were that, whether the children were beaten, whether they were sexually abused or not, every one of those children suffered a loss of identity. 'Who am I? Where did I come from? Do I have a family? Where is that family?' were questions that were true of every child migrant. That is why, amongst other reasons, our report is called *Lost innocents: Righting the Record*. The children were lied to; the children were misled; the children were taken from their homes and their homeland; they lost their identities; and they finished up in institutions where many of them were victims of physical, sexual and psychological abuse. It is important to know that when those children went looking for their families they found that records about them had been falsified. It is not clear to the committee, and we cannot say absolutely, that the falsification of these records was known to the UK government, but it would be a bit of a surprise if it was not. There were shocking stories like, 'Well, we've got too many Margarets; you can be called Mary.' That is tedious and belittling. Even more importantly, there were other accounts where people's names were more deliberately falsified, particularly their surnames, so that trying to find a birth certificate or a ship's manifest that had your name listed so that you could one day perhaps try and find family was a very difficult task. Many of our recommendations go to assisting the migrant children with trying to right the record to find their families.

The other thing that was very important was that many of the migrant children, now adults, felt it was so important to at last have the opportunity to tell their story, to be heard and to be believed. Many of them who escaped from homes as children told us of contacting the police or being taken to a hospital where it was obvious that they were beaten black and blue, but they were not taken seriously. The police, the authorities, the doctors and the nursing staff ignored their accounts of what was happening to them and nothing happened. For that reason, our report is called *Lost Innocents*. These were innocent children. They were lost – lost to themselves, lost to their country of origin and lost to their families. We heard stories of mothers who had written a pile of letters, none of which were passed through to the children, so that when a child left an institution five or eight years later they found amongst the records a pile of letters from a mother they had not known, whom they were told had died, a mother who the committee heard had been told that their children were dead. When you hear these stories you realise the importance of having an opportunity to put on the record the true story.

The other important point I want to raise is that the damage done to those children does not stop with those children. Any record of outcomes for child migrants to this country shows that they have a much higher incidence of suicide, marriage breakdown, drug abuse, alcoholism and so on. Many of the people told us that it was very hard, in fact near impossible, for them to maintain good relationships. The wonderful thing is that, despite the abuse, the pain and damage, many have gone on to make successful adults. They have survived.

The important message coming out of this report – one of a number for me – is that we have drawn a line in the sand and made clear that this kind of behaviour is extremely bad for children. One memorial to the witnesses to this committee and to this report is that never again should this happen to a child in Australia. 'Never again' ought to be one of the conclusions of this report because we know the damage done to children does not stop with them. It is passed on to their children and their children's children. It is an extremely expensive process if you look at simply the hard economics and forget the human suffering. The cost of support services to the children and grandchildren is extremely expensive and there is also the damage done to them and the harm they wreak on themselves and others. For economic reasons alone you would ensure that it never happened again. More importantly, as our committee heard again and again, for basic human

decency, for the better way to care for children and for ordinary things like loving children you would ensure that children were never again picked up from one country and taken to another, passed through many authorities until they finished up in institutions that were cold, harsh and unloving and in many cases physically, sexually and psychologically abusing.

I believe this report does close a very important chapter in the history of migration to this country. I think it is an important story that has to be told. We make a number of recommendations that helped people trace their family, look for the records and write that record. We ask that the government acknowledge the Australian government's role in all of this. (Time expired)

Senator KNOWLES (Western Australia) (11.17 a.m.) – Today, as Senator Crowley has said, we have seen the tabling of the report on child migration to Australia. Firstly, I would like to thank all the witnesses who gave so much of themselves to the Senate, via either verbal or oral evidence. It must have been enormously hard for those people to come forward again. The trauma associated with the retelling of their horrific stories is not something that any of us underestimate. Secondly, I would like to thank the secretariat staff – Elton Humphery, Christine McDonald, Peter Short, Leonie Peake and Ingrid Zappe. The sheer volume of material that was presented to the committee and the weight of evidence provided created a huge task for the secretariat staff. As usual, the level of professionalism, dedication and attention to detail has been second to none.

I now move to the committee's inquiry, its conduct and its deliberations. Having been in the Senate for nearly 17 years, I have sat on many inquiries; however, I have never been part of an inquiry that has been so graphic, so sad and yet so real. Many Australians – and I was certainly one of them – are aware of the past practice of child migration. I lived most of my childhood in Western Australia, and many of the children were sent to Western Australia. I was aware of young girls and boys being brought to Australia and placed in institutions. Many of those young boys and girls were about my age. I thought, rather simplistically at the time, that they were all orphans because they lived in orphanages. My family would often invite some of those children to our home for meals or events, such as Christmas. They always seemed so grateful, but now with hindsight I think they were never truly happy.

What I never knew was that so many of them were living a life of sheer hell on earth. The parents of those children thought their children had died and the children thought that their parents had died. They were all very much alive, but fractured throughout the world. The stark realisation for me during this inquiry, hearing the terrible tales of endurance, was that those entrusted with the care of innocent children betrayed that trust far beyond what anyone of sound mind could ever contemplate. As a Western Australian I well remember the name and the reputed reputation of Brother Keaney. The public impression of him was of almost a saint for what he had allegedly done for orphaned children, as opposed to what he had allegedly done to orphaned children. Given that high opinion that most had of Brother Keaney, to subsequently learn of the horrific actions of this beast was almost beyond belief. If one were to read some of the evidence given to the committee about this creature, they would be left in no doubt as to why the committee has made a very strong recommendation that he be stripped of his OBE.

Sadly, Keaney of course was not the only man or woman of the cloth who did shocking things to children. Some have died, some have had to face justice and some have got off scot-free. I want to state quite clearly here that I do not and will not subscribe to any school of thought that all Christian Brothers or nuns at the time were guilty of such atrocious actions, nor will I subscribe to any belief that those who have a vocation to serve their faith today should be in any way vilified by way of association. In many respects I think it is quite the reverse. The Christian Brothers and nuns of today have sought to extend themselves to offer support and assistance in every way, shape and form to those who suffered at the hands of their predecessors.

I do believe that the Australian Commonwealth governments of the day were conned by the British government into believing that all the children in question were orphans when in fact many were not. I think the Commonwealth and state governments were conned into believing that those in

whom the care of children was entrusted were in all cases fit to do so. The most unfortunate aspect of the role of governments is that they had totally inadequate checking procedures in place and, it seems, where gross irregularities were brought to the attention of the authorities they were rarely acted upon. I suppose that we can draw alarming parallels to what still happens in some cases today where children tell an adult about abuse and that adult either does not believe the child or fails to act on the claim.

Sadly, we are not just talking about dreadful sexual abuse but also about criminal abuse. We are talking about children who had their identities ripped from them, who had their families torn from them, children who were lied to for years, end on end, children who were denied any love or special attention, children who were denied their right to a proper education, children who had mail and gifts from family members withheld, children who were beaten senseless and, subsequently, of course, adults who have suffered horrendously. To think that many of these children in question have been extensively and excessively used also as child labourers is an atrocious but true proposition. To add further insult, the payments that were due to the children were withheld and no records were kept.

I must also recognise that there were some who state categorically that they were not the subjects of such abuse and have gone on to lead happy, fulfilling and prosperous lives. However, they seem to be in the vast minority. One must not overlook those who were sent from Malta. While the focus primarily has been on the British child migrants, many who suffered in similar ways came from Malta. For that reason, the committee has recommended that they have extended to them all the services that are recommended for the British.

I cannot help recognising the work of many who have devoted much time and energy to assist the former child migrants: the Child Migrants Trust, the Christian Brothers fund, C-BERS, which assists men and their families all over Australia, the Sisters of Mercy and the Poor Sisters of Nazareth. Equally, I refer to the International Association of Former Child Migrants and their Families, the Child Migrant Friendship Society of Western Australia, the British government and some of the state governments. The Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs also provides funding for this special group of people. In commending these organisations I observe that there are a number of the sending and receiving agencies that have, in my opinion, not done enough to make amends for past wrongs. I hope that they will consider making greater assistance available in the very near future.

Having heard so much evidence and having given it such deliberate and deep consideration, the committee has decided that the best thing governments can do now is to assist those affected to trace their families, have greater access to record archives, meet long-lost members of their families, assist with travel, provide counselling, provide educational services, and provide funds for permanent relocation, if that is what the child migrant wishes. This direction is in accordance with the wishes of the overwhelming majority of those so affected.

One sad reality is that it appears – and, of course, naturally follows – that Australian children were also the subject of the same levels and types of abuse suffered by the British child migrants. The report in no way overlooks their plight or their suffering. This report, however, is the product of specific terms of reference dealing only with the origin, treatment and outcomes of the child migration scheme.

I would like to thank the Prime Minister and the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Philip Ruddock, for providing their support for three members of the committee to travel to London and Ottawa. We realise that such approval is anything but routine, but it did help us to gain a better understanding of events that took place in those countries.

One thing that struck me throughout the giving of evidence was the will and ability of many to focus on the future as to what can be done by way of practical assistance. I do not believe that this

in any way is an unreasonable request. Therefore, I believe that our recommendations in this unanimous report reflect those requests.

I would also like to make an observation about the conduct of the inquiry. I think it has been done with goodwill, with a goal to achieve a satisfactory outcome for those people who have been affected, and in a bipartisan fashion. It is a pleasure to see that a committee can actually work again in such a way. I thank my fellow colleagues on the committee who made that happen. I have to say that to have a colleague on the committee who was more knowledgeable about this issue than us was also a great asset – a great comfort in many ways, but also a great difficulty. (Time expired)

Senator MURRAY (Western Australia) (11.27 a.m.) – I am going to struggle a bit with this. Mr Acting Deputy President, I ask that Senator Knowles might read the speech for me.

Senator KNOWLES (Western Australia) (11.28 a.m.) – Senator Murray's speech reads as follows:

I acknowledge the presence of former child migrants in the gallery. They represent all those who bravely opened their painful personal lives for the greater good of all the former child migrants. Their sacrifice of their privacy and their sharing of their pain was so that we should know and understand that it must not be in vain. The recommendations of this report of the Community Affairs References Committee, titled *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record*, must be adopted and carried out. The former child migrants deserve no less.

This report, as the title says, is a record as much as a report. In some ways it is itself a memorial. It is part of the great Australian story and it is a historical as well as an oral record. It is a report that chronicles evil, catalogues pain and suffering, and charts ruined lives. It is also a report that touches on the mystery and beauty of the human spirit. In its writing and its evidence it bears witness to those who have triumphed over adversity or to those who have found their own healing. We hear how other child migrants have been helped through the humanity, love, compassion and concern of their fellow human beings.

The experience has now thrown up people in all walks of life. It has thrown up poets and writers and men and women who have dedicated their own lives to caring for others. It has thrown up the permanently damaged and the ones in between. Suicide and early death have taken their toll. For the child migrant witnesses, the hearings were part of a long journey to be believed and understood. For the academics, historians and organisations, the hearings will give greater understanding. The inquiry has opened and closed a dark chapter in Australian history. For the committee, it represented a journey of great personal discovery. We have been asked at times to look into the face of evil. We have heard stories that made us weep – the secretariat, committee members and Hansard staff alike. For me, as a child migrant to Rhodesia at the age of four, it has also been a journey of self-discovery at the opening of my own private road which I am still walking.

I warmly thank Senator Rosemary Crowley and Senator Sue Knowles – the Chair and Deputy Chair – for taking on this task and for showing in their humanity and response how much we are joined by compassion rather than set aside by politics. They have been wonderful to work with on this essential project and I am personally indebted to them. I also thank the other committee members – Senator Gibbs, who sat next to me at most hearings and who was tearful or angry, depending on the story; and Senator Tchen. When you go through something like this together, because of the sheer emotion, intensity and depth of it, because of what you learn about human nature, you create bonds with each other which otherwise would not be there. Those committee members who have shared these times with me know what I mean.

I warmly thank the secretariat – particularly the professional, gentle, determined and thoroughly decent Elton Humphery. He assembled a remarkable writing, researching and organising team. This report is testament to Elton, Christine, Ingrid, Peter and Leonie who, with the committee, have produced a really weighty and well-crafted report which combines an intellectually sound and objective analysis of the problems with the very necessary passion that great distress demands. Of course, special thanks also go to Marilyn Rock, my researcher, and to my wife in particular.

As a historical record, by telling this story the report's job is done. Child migrants now know that we believe them. No-one on the committee realised before just how important that was to them. In terms of the report being a prompt to action, we are still in suspense. The resolution of this issue is impossible without early and full government action. Our recommendations are unanimous. They deserve the full unanimous support of all members and all senators in this parliament – and of members of all parliaments in Australia. Let the Commonwealth and state governments act quickly to make these recommendations come alive with the money, resources and political will that is necessary to deliver them. I moved the motion which got this work done by the Senate, but no remarks of mine would be complete without thanking Mr Beazley for providing the Democrats with the support necessary to get this motion up in the first place. He and I met at a protest vigil that the former child migrants held in front of parliament. He gave me his word then that he would support the inquiry.

The most important recommendations in this report – those that have the highest priority – are those that relate to the fundamental dominant needs as expressed by former child migrants themselves. Their first need is to discover and connect with their identity, their relatives, their family history, and their origin. Their second need is to be provided with specialist counselling which will help heal, at least to a sufficient extent, those who have been damaged by their experiences. That counselling must be available as a remedial measure for those who experience flashbacks and relapses.

I cannot let the topics of identity and counselling pass by without mentioning the amazing work of the Child Migrant Trust and its founder, Margaret Humphreys. Inevitably, as a crusader, she has had her critics and has made the odd enemy, but in both Great Britain and Australia her organisation has provided much of the stimulus that has assisted others hurt by this terrible policy to find some redress through this report. That organisation has also helped hundreds find their roots and get specialist counselling.

One thing that deeply concerned me about this report was my discovery that, if you add together indigenous Australian children, non-indigenous Australian children and the child migrants who were in Australian institutions in the last century, it is likely that the figure will run to somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000. From the stolen generation report and from this report it is quite apparent that a sizeable proportion of children in institutions were criminally, sexually and physically assaulted or damaged in the other ways outlined in the report. The proportion is likely to be highest among those who were in institutions run by Catholic orders such as the Christian Brothers and the Sisters of Mercy. The evidence is that a proportion of children who have been abused can themselves descend into alcohol, drug and substance abuse, domestic violence, crime, paedophilia, and other antisocial and criminal activity.

It seems to me that if we were ever to research the matter thoroughly, we might find that a lot of the cost and harm apparent in our society has, as its cause, the terrible treatment so many children received in Australian institutions. These knock-on generational effects have to be addressed because, if we can find a way to heal damaged people, we might be able to lessen the tremendous cost our society bears in the form of antisocial behaviour, domestic violence, suicide and crime.

To conclude, we now have this historical record of the story of child migrants, so let us look to the future and secure assistance for former child migrants. I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.