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Child Migration

12.33 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Gordon Brown): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I wish to make a statement.

Until the late 1960s, successive UK Governments had over a long period of time supported child migration schemes. They involved children as young as three being transported from Britain to Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The hope was that those children, who were aged between three and 14, would have the chance to forge a better life overseas, but the schemes proved to be misguided. In too many cases, vulnerable children suffered unrelenting hardship and their families left behind were devastated. They were sent mostly without the consent of their mother or father. They were cruelly lied to and told that they were orphans and that their parents were dead, when in fact they were still alive. Some were separated from their brothers and sisters, never to see one another again. Names and birthdays were deliberately changed so that it would be impossible for families to reunite. Many parents did not know that their children had been sent out of this country.

The former child migrants say they feel that this practice was less transportation and more deportation—a deportation of innocent young lives. When they arrived overseas, all alone in the world, many of our most vulnerable children endured the harshest of conditions, neglect and abuse in the often cold and brutal institutions that received them. Those children were robbed of their childhood, the most precious years of their life. As people know, the pain of a lost childhood can last a lifetime. Some still bear the marks of abuse; all still live with the consequences of rejection. Their wounds will never fully heal, and for too long the survivors have been all but ignored.

When I was first made aware of this wholly unacceptable practice, I wrote to the Prime Minister of Australia to urge that together, we do more to acknowledge the experiences of former child migrants and see what we could achieve. It is right that today we recognise the human cost associated with this shameful episode of history and this failure in the first duty of a nation, which is to protect its children.

Shortly, I shall be meeting a number of former child migrants here in the Palace of Westminster to listen first-hand to their experiences, and as Prime Minister, I will be apologising on behalf of our nation. To all those former child migrants and their families, to those here with us today and those across the world—to each and every one—I say today that we are truly sorry. They were let down. We are sorry that they were allowed to be sent away at the time they were most vulnerable. We are sorry that instead of caring for them, this country turned its back, and we are sorry that the voices of these children were not always heard and their cries for help not always heeded. We are sorry that it has taken so long for this important day to come, and for the full and unconditional apology that is justly deserved to be given.

I would like to recognise the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) as Chairman of the Select Committee on Health, and of his predecessor the former Member for Wakefield, David

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Hinchcliffe. For their commitment to this cause, I would also like to praise all past and present members of the Commons Health Committee and the all-party group on child migrants. I would also like to pay tribute to the work of the Child Migrants Trust and the International Association of Former Child Migrants and their Families, which have campaigned for justice over many years. I know that the House will join me in paying special tribute to Margaret Humphreys, who founded the Child Migrants Trust and has been a constant champion and fighter for child migrants and their families.

Although we cannot undo the events of the past, we can take action now to support people to regain their true identities and reunite with their families and loved ones, and to go some way to repair the damage that has been inflicted. I can announce today support for former child migrants that includes the establishment of a new £6 million family restoration fund.

There are many painful memories as a result of the child migration schemes, and for many, today's apology will come too late for them to hear it. We cannot change history, but I believe that by confronting the failings of the past we show that we are determined to do all we can to heal the wounds. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney) (Con): On behalf of the Opposition, I welcome what the Prime Minister has said and the moving words of the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who spoke last November of

"the tragedy—the absolute tragedy—of childhoods lost."

This was something that happened under British Governments of all parties, and the apology made is on behalf of all of us.

We on the Conservative Benches join the Prime Minister in sending our good wishes to those affected, including those in London today and those attending events in other countries. We join him also in praising campaigners such as Margaret Humphreys and the Child Migrants Trust, as well as the work of the Health Committee.

It is hard to believe that this went on for so long that the last children sailed in 1967, after most of us in the House were born. Anyone who studies what happened—it happened systematically and for so long—will be profoundly shocked at the splitting of families, the lies and abuse that took place, the official sanction that made it possible, and as the Prime Minister said, the heartache that it caused.

In his apology, Kevin Rudd emphasised the projects that the Australian Government are supporting to provide what he described as a solemn reminder of the past. Bearing in mind our very close ties with Australia and the other Commonwealth countries affected, it is important that we do all we can to assist in that work.

It is right to judge a society on how it cares for its most vulnerable, especially our children, so should not our legacy to future generations be to do all that we can to make sure that the lessons from these appalling events are learnt and applied, so that such terrible mistakes can never happen again?

The Prime Minister: I am sure the whole House would want to thank the Leader of the Opposition for his eloquence in stating that there is not just Government support, but all-party support for the action that we are taking today. I believe that these sentiments will be shared in every part of our country.

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Mr. Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): Of course, I add my own voice and that of my party to the Prime Minister's apology for Britain's role in the child migrants programme. An apology—we all know this—will never heal the extraordinary pain and hardship that was inflicted on thousands of vulnerable children and their families, but I hope today's apology will go some way to start to atone for Britain's record in this shameful episode in our history.

I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to all involved in recognising the plight of those who suffered, including current and former Members of this House, but especially the Child Migrants Trust and the International Association of Former Child Migrants and their Families, which have done so much to try to heal the pain. I specifically welcome the Prime Minister's announcement that he will establish a family restoration fund—that is very welcome indeed.

I pay tribute to those child migrants in London today and, of course, those who are not. The suffering that they endured is simply unimaginable; the apology they are now owed is unlimited.

The Prime Minister: The child migrants who are with us today will be pleased to know that every main party—and, I believe, all the parties in this House are supporting both the apology and the efforts that we are making to deal with some of the problems that they still have by the creation of the new fund. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the eloquence of his tribute to what is being done.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): On behalf of the Health Committee, may I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for the Government's continuing support for former child migrants? In 1998, when the Committee decided to do the inquiry under the chairmanship of the former Member for Wakefield, David Hinchliffe, two members of the current Committee were involved—the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) and my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate). Does the Prime Minister agree that it was the independence and resources of that Back-Bench Committee which enabled this dark chapter in the UK's history to come out of the shadows and to make this day possible?

The Prime Minister: I do agree with my hon. Friend and I pay tribute to his personal work in making people aware of the problems that still had to be faced and the need for far further action than had been proposed. It was when he first came to me that I realised that the action we were proposing was insufficient to deal with the problem and that we had to work with the Australian Government to do far more. I acknowledge not only his work, but the work of all members of those Health Committees, and, indeed, the general work that Select Committees do to expose problems that need action.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset) (Con): I was a member of the Health Committee that spent two weeks in 1998 in Australia and New Zealand hearing the life histories of hundreds of former child migrants. I must say that those were two of the most harrowing weeks of my life just hearing their stories.

The Catholic Church in Australia, some 10 years ago, led the apologies from the receiving agencies, and a number of others have done likewise. The Australian

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Government issued their apology last year, but I remind the Prime Minister that the report we presented to the House on 30 July 1998 said to the British Government that

"an apology is in order".

The apology is therefore long overdue, but none the less, it is very welcome.

I should like to ask the Prime Minister a question. Sending agencies in this country were complicit in this trade in children. Has he had discussions with them that they should join him in this apology?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for the work that the hon. Gentleman has done and for his visits to Australia, which have helped to make what is happening today possible. I assure him that the reason that the apology has been made now is that we wished to consult the child migrants themselves about the form that the apology should take and how we should go about making it. That is why many child migrants are here in Westminster today, and I and other leaders will speak with them shortly and pass on the apologies of the whole House about what happened in our country. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that people made many mistakes in the implementation of this policy and in its design. We have to be vigilant to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again.

Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras) (Lab): May I join in welcoming the Prime Minister's statement? There have been several calls for public apologies for past events, and this one has the merit of being made to people who are still around to hear the expressions of regret. I am sure that other members of the Health Committee will join me in paying particular tribute to David Hinchliffe, the former Member for Wakefield and former Chair of the Committee. He became almost obsessed by the grotesque injustice of these events and, at one point, persuaded me as Health Secretary to sign over some money to help to fund the Child Migrants Trust so that it was better able to go about its task. I welcome the Prime Minister finding extra funds for the trust and I pay tribute to Margaret Humphreys and others. This is one of the most shameful incidents in modern times in this country, and when people say that we do not have the standards of the past, they should remember the standards of the people who did this sort of thing.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. He has taken a huge interest in this subject, and I join him in paying tribute to David Hinchliffe. As a Member of Parliament he took this issue up with great vigour, and since ceasing to be a Member he has continued to push for the changes that we are announcing today. The accounts that I have read of what happened to many of the child migrants are very harrowing indeed, and it is a reminder to us that we have to be vigilant and determined to eradicate injustice, wherever it may be found.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): May I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and agree with the comments about David Hinchliffe? More than 10 years ago, I went to Australia and New Zealand and heard the migrants' stories. It was very harrowing and horrible. I also welcome

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the additional money. The fact that we can now reunite some of the families will make some small amends for the troubles and difficulties that these children faced.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford) (Lab): I was one of the members of the Health Committee who visited Australia and New Zealand. I have been a GP for many years and I think that I have heard most stories, but never have I heard such harrowing tales of distress and loss as I heard from those brave migrants. I wish to place on record my tribute to those very, very brave people who were able to open their hearts to the Committee. We heard tales that I hope never to have to listen to again of abuse perpetrated by organisations whose job it was to protect children, but clearly failed to do so. I also wish to place on record my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Frank Dobson). He was the first Secretary of State to take this situation seriously and, as he has already modestly said, to find money to allow some of these migrants to meet their families and pick up some of the threads that they had so cruelly taken away from them.

The Prime Minister: Both colleagues who have just spoken are right. These harrowing experiences about which we have read were the fate of so many children who should never have been sent from this country, who should have known about their true parents, and who should have had proper support and protection. We must never allow it to happen again.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): In welcoming the Prime Minister's comments, may I encourage him not to forget a new generation of 65,000 children who reside in child care facilities in the UK, all of whom have huge potential that is so often unrealised? They all have God-given gifts and abilities that this nation needs. Can he reaffirm his commitment to the House to ensure that those children get the best support to realise their full potential?

The Prime Minister: I certainly can.

Mr. Parmjit Dhanda (Gloucester) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement. The first time I came to know of this was a few years ago when I was a Minister and proposals were worked up by officials to reduce some of the funding for these child migrants. Thankfully, we saw that off. At one stage, I had to tell officials that I would resign rather than allow that to happen, so I welcome the extra funding pledged by the

Prime Minister. Does he agree that, as long as any of these child migrants are still alive and with us, we must continue to fund and support them?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I thank him for his personal efforts. Because we have failed in the duty of care for so many years, we have a particular duty of care to the child migrants.