

SUBMISSION TO AUSTRALIAN SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REFERENCE COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO CHILD MIGRATION.

Historical Overview

The British child migration schemes to Australia in the twentieth century have their origins in two related movements : the role of child philanthropy in the era before the advent of the welfare state and the support for land settlement and rural development in the former Dominions of the British Empire. Child migration received financial and other support from both the British and Australian Governments during the decades from the 1920s to the 1950s. It was also celebrated in the press and elsewhere as a way of 'child rescue', providing new opportunities for British children who were represented as being disadvantaged. The various child migration schemes brought to Australia approximately 6000 child migrants, about half of whom arrived before the Second World War and about half in the years 1947-67. These were small numbers when compared to the 80000 child migrants sent to Canada from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s but nevertheless the various child migration schemes had a significance beyond mere numbers involving a number of important philanthropic and religious bodies. Prior to 1939 almost all the Australian child migrants arrived under the auspices of the Fairbridge Society and Barnardo's. After the Second World War, the majority of child migrants to Australia came under the sponsorship of the Roman Catholic Church but a number of the Protestant Churches were also involved. Over the period 1912 to 1967, most child migrants were sent to Western Australia but all Australian States received some children, with relatively large numbers going to New South Wales and Victoria.

The rationale for child migration changed throughout the twentieth century. The original aims were encapsulated in the intentions of the Fairbridge Society which established a farm at Pinjarra, Western Australia in 1912 to provide training in agriculture for boys and domestic service for girls. This was a model later followed by both Barnardo's and the original Roman Catholic child migration scheme initiated before 1939. The model received support from the interwar British and Australian Governments because it fitted the purposes of Empire Settlement in the period 1919-39 and the specific aims of rural development in Australia . With the advent of the Second World War this original rationale for child migration had far less significance even though many of the child migration schemes still concentrated on a system of providing rural and domestic skills. Australian Government support for child migration after 1945 rested essentially on the creation of the post-war immigration programme with the aim of substantially increasing the Australian population. With the advent of the welfare state in Britain, there was little positive support from the British Government for child migration while there was even active opposition from organised social workers in the wake of the 1948 *Children's Act* which emphasised the importance of keeping children within the setting of their own families rather than placing them with philanthropic societies. The 1948 Act, however, still allowed philanthropic societies and religious groups to send children to Australia. Unlike their counterparts prior to 1939 many of the child migrants arriving with the revival of post-war migration in 1947 were placed in Australian institutions and

orphanages which had only remote connections to the original intent of child migration for rural and domestic training.

Parental consent and the recruitment of children.

The vast majority of the child migrants had at least one parent still living when they were sent to Australia. One of the more controversial issues associated with child migration is thus the question of the knowledge and consent of parents of the child migrants to the migration of their children. The issue of parental consent for migration had a long history in Britain. The issue related closely to patterns of British working class life and the role of philanthropic and religious societies in the care of children. In the period prior to the inauguration of the welfare state in Britain working class parents often used the philanthropic societies in periods of economic and family crisis preferring to place their children with such societies rather than having the state intervene under the existing Poor Law which could lead to children being placed under compulsion in the workhouse or a state orphanage. Many child migrants sent to Australia had spent much of their early lives in orphanages of the state or a philanthropic society. The organisations often then lost contact with parents and assumed either formally or informally the role of *in loco parentis*. The decision to send children overseas was thus sometimes taken without the knowledge or consent of natural parents. During the late nineteenth century Barnardo's, which sent the majority of child migrants to Canada, was criticised for this practice.

There is no doubt that the practice of sending children overseas without knowledge or consent of natural parents continued into the twentieth century. However, research suggests that this was more common amongst the child migrants arriving in Australia prior to 1939 than after 1947 when government regulations in Britain made the practice more difficult. Moreover, what has not been often recognised is the role of parents in actively supporting the migration of their children. For instance, in the case of the Fairbridge Society, the longest established and best-recognised of the Australian child migration schemes, parents actually enrolled their own children with the Society from the inception of its scheme in 1912. After 1947, more than half the children arriving under the auspices of the Fairbridge Society had been enrolled with the Society by their natural parents. The Society also sought to migrate children in sibling groups where possible. From the beginning of the Fairbridge scheme, the children on the Fairbridge farms were also encouraged to write home to family or relatives living in England as a way of ensuring them that they were being treated well in Australia.

The assumption that the child migration societies deliberately separated families through migration certainly therefore requires some qualification. So is the often stated view that there was deliberate deception of children about the whereabouts of their parents. On many occasions the societies and orphanages had simply lost all contact with parents. In the files of the Fairbridge Society there is much evidence that efforts were made to find parents but without success. On other occasions, there is no doubt that efforts were made to 'protect' children from their past particularly if their mothers were unmarried when they were born. Even in the 1950s illegitimacy carried a social stigma which we now find hard to recognise.

Overall, it should be understood that the relationship between parents, their children and the institutions where the children had been placed was very complex and depended upon a number of circumstances. There were also different views about

children and childhood and the roles and rights of parents in the various schemes of child migration. Finally, while we need to listen to the views of former child migrants on these issues it should also be noted that memory is often selective and can change over time not only with the ageing process but with how an individual comes to see his or her own identity through the past.

Responsibility for the Care of Child Migrants

The vast majority of child migrants arrived in Australia under the age of twelve. The child migration societies had thus effectively assumed a duty of care until the child migrants reached the age of majority at twenty-one. This moral if not legal obligation appears to have been enforced by governments on an intermittent basis. From the establishment of the Fairbridge farm at Pinjarra in 1912 state authorities in Western Australia did maintain a 'watching brief' over that institution even agreeing to establish a school on the farm. From the 1920s, officials in Britain maintained an interest in child migration not least because of the financial support provided initially under the 1924 Empire Settlement Act. During the Second World War, the British High Commission in Australia produced a critical report on the Fairbridge Farms at Pinjarra. But the actual statutory obligations in Australia was not formalised until the 1946 *Immigration (Guardianship of Children) Act* of the Commonwealth Parliament which provided that the Australian Minister of Immigration would act as the formal guardian of all children brought to Australia as migrants under auspices of any approved government or non-government organisation. This power was then delegated to the various Child Welfare Departments and agencies in each of the individual states. In practice, the major scrutiny of post-1945 child migration arose from the British Government inquiries of John Moss in 1951 and a Fact Finding Mission of the Home Office in 1956. This latter inquiry led to calls for the child migrant organisations in Australia to modernise their arrangements, an indication of the growing gulf between the provision of child care in Britain, now increasingly under the control of professionally trained social workers and the situation in Australia where religious and other bodies still managed much of the child welfare institutions but with staff often without formal training.

The recent revelations of abuse of child migrants in certain institutions raises the question as to whether the scrutiny of government agencies and inquiries was thorough enough. But while physical and sexual abuse did undoubtedly occur this does not mean that sustained and systematic abuse of child migrants was a prevailing feature of the child migration schemes. Rather, the overall question of the care of child migrants needs to be understood within the context of prevailing norms about childhood and children. Corporal punishment was used frequently in the child migrant farms and institutions but such measures of discipline were also used throughout Australian schools until the 1970s. Many of those caring for child migrants were untrained with little understanding of child psychology or child development, but so were most Australian parents. Almost all the child migrants appear to have received formal education until the then general statutory school leaving age of fourteen. The images of the children being put to labour at an early age needs to be understood as part of the efforts of the original child migration schemes to provide young migrants with rural and related skills and training.

Summary

Child migration emerged as a response of imperial and religious philanthropy to what was perceived as a condition of deprivation amongst a section of working class children in early to mid-twentieth century Britain. In part this related to the ideological and moral perceptions of the principally ruling class and religious elite who were involved in child migration schemes. But there was also an underlying social reality to the material poverty of the lives of many of the child migrants. Those supporting child migration held what is now seen as a naïve belief that removing children from stark barrack-like orphanages to the rural surrounds of Australia would naturally improve their life chances. For some there is no doubt that material opportunities were better than if they had remained in Britain. But all forms of migration involve both loss and gain. Many of the child migrants already had disrupted lives even before arriving in Australia. Adjustment in early and latter life depended not only on their material needs but more intangible questions of personal and cultural identity. And only now are we beginning to understand the possible long term effect of the trauma of migration and separation from family and familiar surroundings. These multi-faceted aims, impacts and consequences of child migration should be recognised by the Senate Committee.

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