

Man sent as child from UK to Australia tells abuse inquiry: name the villains

Chair Alexis Jay asked to name and shame perpetrators of abuse of British children shipped abroad from 1947 to the 1970s



Child migrants picking peas at the Fairbridge farm school in Molong, New South Wales. Photograph: National Archives of Australia

Sandra Laville

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The UK national child abuse inquiry has been urged at the opening of its public evidence sessions to name and shame the perpetrators of the sexual abuse of tens of thousands of British children forcibly deported to Australia by the UK government and leading churches and charities.

David Hill, one of more than 4,000 children who were sent to Australia and other Commonwealth nations from 1947 to the 1970s, waived his anonymity at the opening of the independent inquiry on Monday to make an emotional call for justice for victims.

Hill is one of 22 former child migrants who will give evidence at the hearing. Many will testify of the extreme sexual and physical abuse they experienced when they were sent to Australia as part

of the child migrant programme.

He told the chair, Alexis Jay: “We will never be able to undo the wrongdoing to these children. But what is important to survivors of sexual abuse is where the inquiry is satisfied with the evidence, name the villains.

“Many of them are beyond the grave, but it would bring a great deal of comfort to the people who as children were their victims if they were named and shamed.”

Hill appeared in the inquiry hearing room in central London with a survivor who has also given up his right to anonymity, Oliver Cosgrove. Cosgrove was deported by the British state at the age of four. His lawyer, Imran Khan, said there would be no defence for institutions to say it had taken place a long time ago.

“When was it that the physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children was OK? Not now, not then, not ever.”

Other survivors were seated in the public gallery at the start of a nine-day hearing dominated by the voices of people sexually abused from as young as two and three years old, after the British government sent them away from their parents into domestic and labour servitude in Australia and other Commonwealth countries.

Henrietta Hill, QC, counsel to the inquiry, said it was the first time the sexual abuse of the former child migrants had been investigated in a public forum in the UK.

She said the focus of the investigation was from 1947 onwards when more than 4,000 children were sent to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and southern Rhodesia.

There were many reasons for child migration, she said. It was carried out by the British government and leading churches and charities including Barnardo's, the Church of England Children's Society, Cornwall county council and the Sisters of Nazareth. But it was not without its critics at the time and the inquiry heard that in 1956 a blacklist of institutions was drawn up by the British government after evidence of sexual and physical abuse came to light. It was not acted upon following political pressure from many of the charities and agencies involved.

The QC said cutting the cost to the taxpayer of looking after deprived children and providing white Anglo-Saxon labour for the colonies was one reason for the programme. Between the mid-19th century and the 1970s, more than 100,000 children were sent to the colonies.

They were taken from their parents, foster families and children's homes, put on to ships and not told what was happening.

Some who have given testimony to the inquiry said they were abused in England before their departure and in transit to the Commonwealth, she said.

“You are likely to hear very emotional accounts from former child migrants of the decades of pain their experiences have caused,” she said.

She said one key issue the inquiry would consider was reparation and whether responses to date had been adequate. In Australia, victims from the school in Molong won a settlement from the

state and federal governments of more than \$20m last year. But there has been no compensation paid by the UK government to the children the British state deported in such numbers.

Aswini Weeraratne QC, for the Child Migrant Trust which brought the issue of the forced migration of tens of thousands of UK children to light decades ago, said the 22 survivors who would give evidence had been sent from all over the country.

“It remains of fundamental importance for them ... to have their experiences heard and acknowledged in England and to have the British public share their sense of sorrow and outrage,” Weeraratne said.

“There is no valid argument that their treatment reflected the practice of the time... This was not about voluntary migration, but about forced deportation.”

She said of the one of the survivors giving evidence was five years old when they were deported from Surrey, another had been taken from Swansea and placed in Western Australia and another was taken from Cornwall and sent to New South Wales.

“Many were subjected to crimes; torture, rape and slavery ... From their evidence, a number of common themes emerge. They and their families were lied to, many parents were told that their children had been adopted by loving families, some children were told their parents were dead. Some have learnt after years of searching for their records that their parents tried to get them back. One foster mother campaigned to have her foster daughter returned to her from Australia.”

One survivor, known as A6, believed she was deported after telling the reverend mother at her Catholic home about her sexual abuse there.

David Hill, now 71, was born to an unmarried mother in Eastbourne, Sussex in 1946 and spent time in a Barnado's children's home in Essex before being shipped to Australia aged 12. His mother later found him and they were reunited. He went on to a successful business and public service career and became both chairman and managing director of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

He said he was sent to Australia to be brought up by the Fairbridge farm school in Molong, New South Wales, with his twin brother and older brother after the British government had drawn up its blacklist of institutions where there was evidence of abuse. He said he estimated 60% of children who were sent to the school were sexually abused.

Hill spent years researching the abuse of child migrants at the school in Molong and wrote a book on the subject, *The Forgotten Children*. “It was endemic,” Hill said. “I hope this inquiry can promote understanding of the long-term consequences and suffering of those who were sexually abused. Many never recover.”

For the government, Samantha Leek QC said: “Child migration is wrong. It should not have been sanctioned or facilitated ... The lifelong consequences for those involved are a matter of deep and sincere regret.”

Origins of the inquiry and its schedule

The independent inquiry into child sexual abuse (IICSA) was established in July 2014 by the then home secretary, Theresa May.

Its early stages were marked by controversy over successive chairs. Three former lawyers - Lady Butler-Sloss, Dame Fiona Woolf and Dame Lowell Goddard - resigned before the current head, Prof Alexis Jay, took charge last August.

The inquiry's schedule of work is expected to stretch to at least 2020. Jay has declined to give a finishing date.

The inquiry has divided its work up into 13 separate investigations. They are: children outside the UK; accountability and reparations: Rochdale and any links to the former Liberal MP Cyril Smith; children in custodial institutions; child sexual exploitation networks; Lambeth council; Lord Janner; Nottinghamshire councils; residential schools; the Anglican church; the Catholic church; and Westminster including any involvement by politicians. More strands may be identified in future.

The IICSA had already staged several preliminary seminars before its first major public hearing opened on Monday looking into abuses associated with UK child migration programmes to Canada and Australia.

The next full public hearing is expected to relate to the Rochdale investigation in October, followed by an examination of the English Benedictine Congregation, part of the Catholic investigation, in December.

Other public hearings already scheduled will examine online sexual abuse, due in January next year, and the diocese of Chichester, in March 2018, as part of the Anglican church investigation.

The IICSA is due to produce an interim report on its progress the following month, in April 2018.
Owen Bowcott

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