

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

**24 Feb 2010 : Column 302**

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.

## 24 Feb 2010 : Column 303

**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.

214