

## **Files reveal Whitehall unease 'Dumping' of children caused concern, but policy remained in place until 1967**

New evidence that there was serious unease in Whitehall over the policy of sending thousands of child migrants to Australia, Canada and other British dominions from 1929 to 1967 has emerged in official files released by the National Archives in Kew, west London.

More than 150,000 child migrants, with an average age of eight or nine, were shipped from Britain in a programme which was organised by the voluntary church societies.

It was only eight years ago that the Roman Catholic church in Australia made a formal apology for abuse, including rape, whippings and slave labour, that British children had experienced at its homes and farms.

The real motivation behind the scheme was revealed in a report of a speech by Sir John Norris, the representative of the governor of Tasmania, to the annual meeting of the Big Brother migrant movement in Hobart in 1951. He said: "We must realise that in this vast country of ours we must populate or face the possibility of losing it to some of the millions of Asiatic that menace us. Reason tells us we must include in our scheme migrants from European countries but, as far as possible, we want migrants of British stock with whom we share a common culture and way of life."

The files also contain:

Case studies such as the story of Arthur and Derrick, aged nine and seven, who were to be sent to Australia after their mother died of TB. They were unmanageable at home and had become bedwetters. The then London county council complained they were being "dumped" but the Home Office feared it was powerless to stop it.

Concerns over St John Bosco Boys' Town in Glenorchy, Tasmania, which was run by the Silesians society. John Moss, a Home Office inspector who visited the home in 1951, was deeply concerned that there were no women involved and recommended that it should not be approved unless a matron was employed. When inspectors went back three years later, they reported: "Father Coles was still in charge. He was resigned to the poor quality of migrants sent to him. His main worry seems to be three migrant boys who have a very low IQ of 80. While I do not think he wishes to press for the removal of these boys, he wishes to be sure that he does not get any more boys of this low quality. He still faces the problem of bedwetting with some of the boys, but this seems to disturb him chiefly because of the housekeeping problem to which this gives rise."

The report to the Home Office's children's department said Coles did not attach "very much importance to having feminine influence on the premises" and said the boys came into contact with women "through visits of an occasional nature and during holiday periods".

Although officialdom raised no real concerns about the possibility of abuse, they did voice concerns privately about the 'preventive policy' adopted by the Silesian order that ran St John Bosco and other boys' towns. This involved the boys being deprived of contact with the outside world and never left alone out of sight of one of the Catholic brothers.

Comments by Arthur Calwell, the Australian immigration minister who stepped up the scheme after the Second World War: "Fortunately, the number of orphans in Britain due to air raids is only about 3,000. The people of the mother country do not want others to take charge of those children. They think they are capable of doing so and indeed that is their responsibility."

Complaints made in the late 1950s, saying British child migrants were "poor physical specimens, lacking in intelligence and undisciplined".

This article was amended on 19 November 2009. The original said that a St John Bosco Boys' Town in Tasmania was run by the Silesian brotherhood. This has been corrected.