



DEBATE PACK

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The Practice of Forced Adoption in the UK

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Summary

On 12 July 2018, there will be a debate on **The Practice of Forced Adoption in the UK**, chosen by the Backbench Business Committee. The debate will take place in the Commons chamber.

This debate pack provides a brief background to the issue, along with a selection of news articles and Parliamentary material.

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The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

1. Background

This debate refers to the period following the Second World War in which many unmarried mothers were coerced into giving up their children for adoption. As Alison McGovern, submitting this debate to the Backbench Business Committee noted:

An ages-old issue has been part of Britain's hidden history, and that has been the practice of women and their babies being forcibly separated by parts of the state—be it the national health service, or social workers and others. That happened predominantly in the 1950s and '60s, but with a small number of cases afterwards.

This is a case that you will all be aware of from the media, with coverage particularly of young mums who were told that it would be “for the best” if they gave up their child. That is not something that we would consider to be the right approach now, but it happened, and an estimated 500,000 British women are affected by this.¹

This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as the ‘baby scoop era’ in North America,² also occurred in the US, Canada, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand.

A variety of cultural attitudes and institutions were at the heart of this issue. According to a report compiled by the Community Affairs References Committee in Australia, in the early 20th century, anglophone countries such as the UK were looking for an alternative to institutionalisation for children without homes. Post-war, policies and institutions also became influenced by behavioural psychologists arguing that a new born's environment was essential for their future prosperity. A ‘clean break theory’, advocated by psychoanalysts like John Bowlby, suggested that adoption as soon as possible was desirable so that babies could form bonds with their adoptive parents and avoid the negative consequences of a poor upbringing. Furthermore the “prevailing theories” of the time “advocated that the psychological and financial qualifications of a married couple were superior to those of single mothers and impoverished families.”³ Christine Cole, looking at the background to the issue in Australia, argues that various values - including attitudes to class and eugenics from places like the UK – further justified and provided a “modern ‘scientific’ basis for child removal.”⁴

On top of this, unmarried British mothers were often “rejected by their families and ostracised by society.”⁵ Institutions that these mothers

¹ [Backbench Business Committee, transcript from 12 June 2018](#)

² [What was the “Baby Scoop Era”? The Baby Scoop Era Research Initiative](#), undated

³ [Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices](#), Commonwealth of Australia, 2012

⁴ Christine Anne Cole, [Stolen Babies - Broken Hearts: Forced Adoption in Australia, 1881-1987](#), University of Western Sydney, June 2013

⁵ [MPs to demand apology for forced adoptions in UK](#), Guardian, 7 July 2018

turned to, such as the Church of England, the Catholic Church and the Salvation Army, often believed that the mother was 'emotionally disturbed' or 'discredited'.⁶ As such, they forcefully made the case for adoption, and, according to some reports, made the decision on behalf of the mothers.⁷

The **Movement for an Adoption Apology** (MAA) is campaigning for a national apology to these mothers. As they write in their mission statement:

We seek recognition and acknowledgement of the pain and grief suffered by many birth parents and their children because of the unethical adoption practices of the past. We believe that this can only be achieved by a full Parliamentary apology with cross-party support.

[...] For many years, until at least the 1980s, pregnancy outside marriage was severely frowned upon, and frequently young women who found themselves in this situation were given little choice but to give in to the strong pressures which were exerted on them by the authorities to have their babies adopted. They were not given information about the welfare services, including housing and financial help, which were available at the time. There was no question of these women being found to be unfit mothers; they were simply prevented from becoming mothers at all.

This experience so traumatised many of these women that they have suffered years of mental and/or physical ill health ever since, and many were unable to have more children. In some cases, fathers also, even when wishing to help, were refused a say in their child's future, because the child was classified as illegitimate, and thus these fathers also became unwilling parties to these adoptions.

It is possible that a government enquiry will be needed to reveal the full extent of the unethical practices and the damage suffered by these birth parents. However we recognise that such an enquiry would take time to set up and therefore we ask for a start to be made now, with a parliamentary statement of intention to examine all the facts.⁸

When introducing this debate to the Backbench Business Committee, Alison McGovern MP said the following about the campaign for an apology:

Alison McGovern: [...] That group of women run a great campaign calling for a public apology— that is what they would like to see. The offer has been made by other states in the face of this issue—for example, in 2013 in Australia and more recently in Ireland—and I would like to see the Government take that approach of being open and frank about what happened in the past, acknowledge that we would see things differently now and apologise for whatever role that they played. It is about giving a platform to people's stories, which have been hidden away. That

⁶ [Forced adoption: the mothers fighting to find their lost children](#), *Observer*, 27 October 2013

⁷ [Forced adoption: the mothers fighting to find their lost children](#), *Observer*, 27 October 2013; and [Mothers who were forced to give up their babies for adoption are long overdue an apology](#), *Evening Standard*, 11 June 2018

⁸ [Mission statement for the Movement for an Adoption Apology](#), MAA, 3 October 2011

would go some way—we cannot undo what happened in the past, but we can acknowledge that it happened and say that, in the light of how we feel about these things now, it wasn't right that it happened.

[...]

Bob Blackman: I am just wondering whether there was a policy in force in the NHS, a Government policy or something that was making this happen. Or was it as you were saying, peaceful persuasion—"It's in your best interests", and so on—which is markedly different? I don't think it was the right thing to do, but—

Alison McGovern: But that is the very reason to have the debate, because the answer is that we don't know. There hasn't been transparency to date, so it may be that the Government will consider what papers they hold, which might contain evidence either way, which would be helpful to those affected.⁹

Although few mainstream commentators dispute that the attitude towards these women was unethical, questions have been raised as to whether an official UK Government apology is necessary, as Sam Leith, writing for the Evening Standard, explains:

[I]s it "the state and its institutions" that need to apologise? The separation of unmarried mothers from their children was largely a private-sector concern. The women were in the first place ostracised by their families and their communities, and the institutions that took their babies were in the control of the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church and the Salvation Army.

The government may not have extended the hand of friendship as it now does; it may not have pressed to protect these vulnerable women and support them financially and morally against bullies and zealots. It is that far culpable. But it was not the government that made the moral weather: it was the church, the press, and that contemptible thing, "respectable opinion". The likes of you and me, in other words.¹⁰

The UK Government has not apologised, nor committed to an investigation of the issue. In the documentary **Britain's Adoption Scandal – Breaking the Silence**, shown on ITV in November 2016, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster and head of the Catholic church in England and Wales, did apologise. Although the full documentary is not available via ITV, ITV News does have a [news article on this documentary](#), including some clips.

Northern Ireland's Department of Health announced in January 2018 the establishment of a working group to look into "Magdalene laundries", where unwed mothers were often separated from their children and made subject to what some call 'forced labour.'¹¹ This will

⁹ [Backbench Business Committee, transcript from 12 June 2018](#)

¹⁰ [Mothers who were forced to give up their babies for adoption are long overdue an apology](#), Evening Standard, 11 June 2018

¹¹ [Stormont officials commission research on Magdalene laundries in the north](#), Irish News, 11 January 2018

take the form of **research** commissioned by the Northern Ireland Executive, rather than an inquiry.¹²

There are campaigns for apologies and inquiries in other countries in which unwed mothers were pressured into the adoption process. However, only Australia has formally apologised, following a Senate inquiry, on 21 March 2013.¹³ This followed a public apology by the Australian Roman Catholic Church in 2011.¹⁴

In June 2018, the Irish Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, recognised the issues of forced adoptions and the omission of adoptive information from birth certificates. This followed the revelation that between 1946 and 1969, 126 people, whose adoption was orchestrated by St Patrick's Guild, did not have their adoptive status recorded on their birth certificates. It is expected that there will be many more cases. As well as contacting those affected, Mr Varadkar also suggested that, subject to the result of a scoping exercise, a "full analysis" of records might be carried out by the Irish Government.¹⁵

It has been reported that the New Zealand Government is considering "how grievances related to forced adoption could be aired. That process may involve a select committee inquiry."¹⁶

¹² [Magdalene laundry and mother and baby home victims to finally get their say](#), Belfast Live, 11 January 2018

¹³ [National Apology for Forced Adoptions](#), Australian Government: Attorney-General's Department, undated

¹⁴ [Australia's Roman Catholic Church apologises for forced adoptions](#), Telegraph, 25 July 2011

¹⁵ [Adoption registration issue is 'another dark chapter' – Varadkar](#), RTE, 6 June 2018

¹⁶ [Exclusive: Inquiry on forced adoption considered](#), NZ Herald, 11 July 2018

2. Press articles

[Mothers who were forced to give up their babies for adoption are long overdue an apology](#), *Evening Standard*, 11 June 2018

[MPs demand apology for unmarried mothers who gave up children](#), *Observer*, 10 June 2018

['We must right a historic wrong': Women forced to give up their babies for adoption tell of their decades of heartache as MPs call for an apology](#), *Daily Mail*, 10 June 2018

[Magdalene laundry and mother and baby home victims to finally get their say](#), *Belfast Live*, 11 January 2018

[Forced adoption: the mothers fighting to find their lost children](#), *Observer*, 27 October 2013

2016 documentary

In 2016, a documentary on this subject **Britain's Adoption Scandal – Breaking the Silence** was aired on ITV. A number of news articles picked up on the programme in which the head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales apologised for previous 'forced adoptions':

[Baby adoption practices of past demand inquiry, say law firms](#), *Guardian*, 4 November 2016

[Cardinal's apology to mothers over babies handed over for adoption](#), *Telegraph*, 3 November 2016

[Forced adoption agony of half a million women whose babies were stolen by the church](#), *Mirror*, 3 November 2016

[Catholic church apologises for role in 'forced adoptions' over 30-year period](#), *Guardian*, 3 November 2016

[Church to apologise for forced adoptions](#), *Times*, 3 November 2016

[Campaigner demands apology from Scots Catholic Church for their role in forcing adoptions on 50,000 single mums](#), *Daily Record*, 6 November 2016

International cases

[Ireland] [The lawyers seeking justice for survivors of Ireland's forced adoptions](#), *Financial Times*, 5 July 2018

[Canada] [Canada Must Apologize For Forced Adoptions During The Postwar Years](#), *Huffington Post*, 21 November 2017

[Australia] [State says sorry for tearing mothers and babies apart](#), *Times*, 22 March 2013

[New Zealand] [Exclusive: Inquiry on forced adoption considered](#), *NZ Herald*, 11 July 2018

3. Parliamentary material

3.1 Parliamentary Questions (PQs)

Written PQ 208527 [[Adoption](#)] 11 September 2014

Asked by Ian Paisley (North Antrim)

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps her Department has taken to support parents and children who were victims of forced adoptions in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

Answered by: Mr Edward Timpson

I have a great deal of sympathy for those parents and children who were affected by pressures, during the post-war years, to give children up for adoption. Since the 1970s there have been major shifts in the way society sees the family, single mothers, and the needs of children and successive governments have done much to collectively resolve the social ills of the past. Society has become less judgemental and it is now, rightly, no longer considered a stigma for an unmarried mother to keep her baby.

The importance of facilitating greater openness in adoption has been recognised for a number of years. Adopted adults have the legal right to see their birth certificate and their adoption file in order to find out about their family history and the circumstances in which they were adopted. Both adopted adults and their birth relatives are able to apply to intermediary agencies for assistance with tracing family members. Intermediary agencies also provide counselling, support, and advice to adopted adults and birth relatives. Further changes through the Children and Families Act 2014 will extend the provision of intermediary agencies to assist a wider category of relatives, including the children and grandchildren of adopted adults, to help trace relatives and find out about their family history.

Written PQ 159740 [[Australia](#)] 17 June 2013

Tim Farron: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what assessment he has made of the apology by the Australian Prime Minister for the past treatment of unmarried mothers and the previous policy of forced adoptions in that country; and whether the Prime Minister plans to issue such an apology for similar past practices in this country.

Mr Timpson: The United Kingdom Government have not made any formal response to the apology made by the Australian Government. The Government have no plans to issue a similar apology.

Oral questions [[Adoption](#)] HC deb 3 Sep 2012, c.5

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): One of my constituents, who is here today, has spoken to me about her continued grief at having been forced to give up her son for adoption in the 1970s. Will the Secretary of State take a moment to read about the experience of my constituent, and give her the recognition that she is seeking of the fact that the forced adoption practices that used to exist in this country were traumatic and absolutely wrong, and should never have been allowed to exist by any Government?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes an effective point in a very effective way, and I absolutely agree with her. It is one of the

blessings of the past 30 years that attitudes towards adoption and conception have changed so much, and that the stigma that used to be attached to children who were born out of wedlock is, mercifully, no longer there. It is quite wrong to force a mother to part from her child when she is capable of providing that child with a loving home. Anxious as we are to ensure that children in need are adopted, we must be equally anxious to ensure that single parents are supported.

3.2 Early Day Motions

Early day motion 301, [FORCED CHILD ADOPTION](#), session 2014-15

That this House recognises the suffering that forced child adoptions during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s caused, which took place owing to social pressures on women who had children outside marriage; notes the unacceptable adoption and care practices of the past, such as not giving information about welfare services including housing and financial help which were available at the time, and not questioning whether women putting their children up for adoption had given informed consent; further recognises the negligence of previous governments, with regard to ensuring that the care provided for unmarried mothers was appropriate and that they and their children were not mistreated or discriminated against, resulting in many women suffering traumatising pre and post-natal experiences and children being denied contact with their birth parents; further notes that the Australian Prime Minister has in 2014 apologised to the victims of forced adoptions in Australia; and therefore calls on the Government to apologise in order to go some way towards helping the parents and children who were victims of these practices.

Early day motion 77, [FORCED CHILD ADOPTION](#), session 2013-14

That this House recognises the suffering that forced child adoptions during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s caused, which took place due to social pressures on women who had children outside of marriage; notes the unacceptable adoption and care practices of the past, such as not giving information about welfare services including housing and financial help which were available at the time and not questioning whether women putting their children up for adoption had given informed consent; further recognises the negligence of previous Governments, with regard to ensuring that the care provided for unmarried mothers was appropriate and that they and their children were not mistreated or discriminated against, resulting in many women suffering traumatising pre and post-natal experiences and children being denied contact with their birth parents; further notes that the Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard has this year apologised to the victims of forced adoptions in Australia; and therefore calls on the UK Government to apologise in order to go some way toward helping the parents and children who were victims of these practices.

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