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Apology for historical adoption practices: First Minister's speech - 22 March 2023

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Presiding Officer,

The issuing of a formal apology is an action that governments reserve as a response to the worst injustices in our history.

Without doubt, the adoption practices that prevailed in this country – for decades, during the twentieth century – fit that description.

And for the people affected by those practices – I appreciate that an apology has been a very long time coming.

One of the most ardent campaigners for it has been Marion McMillan.

In the mid-1960s, Marion was a teenager living in Stranraer. When she became pregnant, she was sent to a mother and baby home in the north of England. Marion has described the horror of having her son taken away from her.

"I remember crying and telling them, "but I'm his mummy", and begging them not to take my son. I was told not to be silly. I'd get over it - and I could always have other babies when I was married."

Elspeth Ross faced her own ordeal. In 1962, she gave birth to her son in a mother and baby home in Glasgow.

"After I had my son, I was in the nursery for six weeks looking after him but nobody told me they were taking him away

"I was upstairs the very last day and told to pack my bags and go, not knowing that I was never seeing my son again."

In 1979, Jeannot Farmer gave birth, at the age of 22. She has recounted the moment - in the hospital – when she was told that her baby was being adopted.

"I was treated in quite humiliating ways from the outset.....I didn't understand at that time that I had lost the decision - that the decision had been made for me. I didn't understand that until the social worker appeared after the birth."

The horror of what happened to these women is almost impossible to comprehend. It is the stuff of nightmares. Yet these were not isolated cases, far from it.

Until the late 1970s, forced adoption was a relatively common practice in Scotland.

Many thousands of children were subject to it.

In most cases, their mothers were young or unmarried. They were stigmatised as a result. And they were forced, or coerced, into the adoption process – by charities, churches, health professionals, or social services.

Some mothers suffered physical mistreatment or abuse. Some were denied appropriate healthcare. Up until the early 1970s, mothers in some cases were given Stilbestrol – a drug that dried up their breast milk, and which is potentially carcinogenic.

Virtually all of the mothers were made to feel worthless.

Among many falsehoods, they were told that they had nothing to offer their child except state benefits. They were told that without adoption, their child would grow up a delinquent. And that they were selfish for wanting to keep their baby – because they would be denying them a so-called better life.

Consistently, mothers were lied to about the adoption process. They were given no information about what was happening. When they did object, they were bullied or ignored.

Some women were never even allowed to hold their babies. Most never got the chance to say a proper goodbye. And many were threatened with terrible consequences if they ever tried to make contact with their child.

For these mothers it was a living nightmare - a nightmare from which they've never truly been able to wake.

The grief, heartbreak and shame of what happened, has been a constant, throughout their lives.

And many have had to bear this trauma in silence – for fear of other people's judgement or pity.

It has affected their relationships - relationships with subsequent children; with partners; and with family and friends.

And for many, it has created serious mental health impacts, that persist to this day.

For the sons and daughters who were taken, of course, the impacts have also been profound.

Now it is important to say – and to say very clearly – that many of them went to loving homes.

Acknowledging these injustices should never be seen as a rejection of the deep bonds that people share with their adopted families.

Nothing can ever invalidate the love that these families have for one another.

But it's also clear that many of those affected – far too many – had a very, very different experience.

We know some will always have lacked a sense of belonging. Some may even have suffered mistreatment or abuse.

And all will have grown up believing that their mothers chose to put them up for adoption, of their own free will. Understandably, that has affected them. Yet it was never true.

As adults, the practical difficulties of accessing adoption records have been a further torment.

Even when families have been able to reconnect, that in itself has brought huge emotional challenges.

And sometimes the search has ended in further heartache - when the person being looked for is already deceased.

For the fathers affected, there has also been great suffering.

They too lost a child. They too had their rights denied – by a system that ignored and dehumanised them.

There's good reason to believe that some mothers weren't even allowed to put the father's names on the birth certificate – a permanent obstacle to reuniting with their son or daughter.

And of course, the impact of what happened has been felt more widely, by the loved ones of everyone involved. The legacy of these practices continues to affect generations of families, in this country and beyond.

It is a level of injustice which is hard now for us to comprehend.

So today, how do we begin to explain how such appalling acts could take place?

Obviously, they were the product of a society where women were regarded as second class citizens; where unmarried mothers were stigmatized; and where people in authority had too much power. We also know that similar practices happened in other countries.

But that does not for a moment excuse the appalling mistreatment people suffered - nor absolve the individuals and institutions involved.

After all, it's not just in hindsight that these practices are wrong. Mistreating women and forcing them to part with their babies, was never right. It was always cruel, unjust and profoundly wrong.

Now, there's a line of argument which says that because the government of the time did not support these practices, there's nothing to apologise for.

And that anyway, these events took place long ago – before this Parliament reconvened, and anyone in this Chamber held public office.

But these are not reasons to stay silent.

Ultimately, it is the state that is morally responsible for setting standards and protecting people.

So as modern representatives of the state, I believe we – amongst others – have a special responsibility to the people affected.

First, we have a responsibility to do whatever we can to support them, in dealing with the legacy of what happened.

That's why last year the Scottish Government established specialist support and counselling services for those affected by historical adoption practices.

At the same time, we launched a consultation, asking people affected to share their experiences. I want to take this opportunity today to thank everyone who responded.

We have since commissioned a study – which will report later this summer – on how we can improve the support that people can access - from psychological support, to help in reuniting with family members.

And we will continue to explore with those affected, the key challenges that they face with regard to adoption records – and the lasting health impacts faced by mothers who were given Stilbestrol. On that final point, I want to emphasise again today the importance of women attending their routine breast and cervical screening appointments.

Another responsibility we have to them, of course, is to provide an assurance, that the lessons of this period have been learned.

There's no doubt that adoption practices - and our society in general – have come a long way in the decades since. But we can never ever allow ourselves to be complacent.

At all times, we must ensure that the services which are meant to protect families fulfil that role as effectively and compassionately as possible. That's why this government is so focussed on delivering the conclusions of the independent care review, the Promise – which emphasised the importance, where possible, of keeping families together.

And more generally, we need to continue to build a society where women and girls are treated equally, and where everyone's human rights are respected. That has always been a central mission of this government – and it is how we ensure such injustices never happen again.

The final way in which we can keep faith with those affected is more symbolic – but no less meaningful for that.

It's something that has been campaigned for tirelessly, over many years, by many of the people seated in the gallery today. And it's a cause which I know has been championed by members across the Chamber.

As a government, and a parliament, we can set the record straight; we can acknowledge the terrible wrongs that were done; and we can say – with one voice – that we are sorry.

So today, as First Minister on behalf of the Scottish Government, I say directly:

To the mothers who had their babies taken away from them;

To the sons and the daughters, who were separated from their parents;

To the fathers who were denied their rights;

And to the families who have lived with the legacy;

For the decades of pain that you have suffered, I offer today a sincere, heartfelt, and unreserved apology. We are sorry

No words can ever make up for what has happened to you.

But I hope this apology will bring you some measure of solace.

It is the very least that you deserve – and it is long overdue.

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