

Former Child Migrants

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN
FORMER CHILD MIGRANTS
FAMILY & COMMUNITY SERVICES

The message that needs to be brought home in this policy field is that we are not just dealing with problems of the past. We are dealing with problems of the present and of the future; problems that are very costly to the individuals affected, to society and to the economy.

“The Democrat initiated 2001 Senate Community Affairs child migrant inquiry revealed a dark and hidden chapter of Australian history. It also showed how much there is to learn from past policies to help create a better and safer world for our children and families.”

**Senator Andrew Murray
who initiated the child
migrant inquiry**

Democrats Action Plan

- Urge future governments to again extend the annual funding for the Child Migrants Trust to continue and expand its vital work of tracing and reconnecting former child migrants with their families of origin.
- Continue to support the activities of those other not-for-profit organisations working on behalf of former child migrants.
- Continue to intervene on behalf of those former child migrants facing problems relating to them not being Australian citizens.
- Examine ways to implement measures to meet the aged care needs of former child migrants.
- With unaccompanied child migration and child trafficking an active issue in the 21st century, the Australian Democrats will continue to urge all governments to give effect to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

A Hidden History Revealed

For Australia's former child migrant population, 2001 was a landmark year. On August 30 of that year, the Senate Community Affairs References Committee tabled its unanimous child migrant inquiry report, *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record*. This report uncovered the tragic realities of those who as children were shipped to Australia from the United Kingdom, Ireland and Malta in the 20th century. Initiated by Democrats' Senator Andrew Murray (himself a former child migrant), this inquiry provided a much-needed forum for damaged people to tell their stories. It was a relief for them to find that they were finally to be believed.

The unanimous recommendations of the child migrant report were comprehensive in their coverage. They showed how the Senate can be used effectively and in a non-partisan way to help tackle injustices that have been ignored for decades.

Although the Federal Government's response signalled some commitment to 'right the record', there were some disappointments.



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On the positive side, the Government agreed to contribute:

- \$125,000 per year for three years to the Child Migrants Trust (CMT) to fund family tracing and counselling services for former child migrants.
- \$1million annually for three years in travel funding to assist former child migrants return to their country of origin to reunite with family members; and
- \$100,000 to State initiated memorials to commemorate former child migrants.

On the negative side:

- unfair restrictions applied to the eligibility criteria for the travel fund as it did not allow for a 'reduced level of assistance' for two follow-up visits as recommended by the Committee. One-off visits were just not sufficient and there remains a deep sense of frustration and injustice amongst former child migrants who are unable to undertake further visits;
- the refusal of the Government to agree to the recommendation to strip former West Australian Christian Brother, Francis Keaney of his Order of the British Empire awarded in the 1950s. He was repeatedly cited as a perpetrator of violence against vulnerable children and to allow this monster to defile the list of deserved recipients is a grave mistake; and
- the rejection of the committee's recommendation that child migrants be offered automatic Australian citizenship. This was a key need for those who came here as young children, who have since paid their taxes and many of whom have joined the forces and fought for Australia.

Six Years On

With more former child migrants coming forward to access the specialist services offered by the CMT, in 2005, the Government agreed to continue funding the Trust until 30 June 2008 at an increased rate of \$150,000 annually.

Sadly, the Australian Travel Fund established to assist former child migrants to return to their country of origin has now ceased. During its three years of operation, this Fund provided reunion visits for 694 former child migrants, of which 199 had accompanying carers.

Memorials to commemorate former child migrants are now in place in Western Australia, New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. In 2007, a memorial to honour Maltese former child migrants is expected to be unveiled on the Valletta Waterfront in Malta.