



DESOLATE The former Marianvale mother and baby home in Newry

An apology can never be enough for victims of mother and baby homes

SOMETIMES an apology is never enough. So it should never be allowed to be enough.

Hand-wringing statements, released to the media after they've been drafted and redrafted and couched in the very cautious we-have-to-be-seen-to-say-something language which box-tickingly carefully acknowledges pain, asks for forgiveness and promises to cooperate with ongoing investigations, are never enough, either. And they're never enough, because they're usually accompanied by an unwritten, unspoken desire to have the problem kicked down the road so that everything can simply be buried in another report.

I was adopted when I was six, after two years in an orphanage. Those first six years of my life are a blank. I have no memories whatsoever. But I do know that I was rebuilt by my adoptive parents and given the love, confidence, support and sense of security that put me on the path to where I am today. But since I was six I have been shadowed by depression – the Mr D I wrote about in a column last May.

Nightmares are frequent – even after 60 years. I still wake up now and again, and for a few seconds – which seem like forever while it's happening – don't know where I am. I'm enveloped in fear and seeing life through the mind of that mute, terrified, pre-adoption, six-year-old. Even though I've managed to lock down the trauma of my early years, and even though I've learned to keep the depression under control most of the time, a deep-rooted fear has never left me.

This is from an Irish News editorial (Victims must be heard) on January 27, about the report on Mother and Baby Homes:

"This is a landmark report that has dragged into the light the largely hidden and little known world that existed behind the forbidding walls of these institutions. It found that 10,500 women

Alex KANE



went through the mother and baby homes and 3000 were sent to Magdalene laundries between 1922 and 1990. The youngest was aged just 12 while a number of those admitted were victims of sexual crime, including rape and incest.

"Many babies were put up for adoption with some sent first to mother and baby homes in the Republic before ending up in Britain and the United States. The report is full of distressing details about the trauma experienced by so many women. It's hard to imagine in this day and age that such places existed or that such callous, unkind and judgmental behaviour prevailed throughout decades."

I wasn't in one of these homes, but two figures in particular stand out: 10,500 and 1990. While many of the women may have since died, it still leaves an awful lot of

them carrying an enormous burden of daily grief. And that sort of grief never goes away. There's rarely a week goes by when I don't think about my birth mother, so I can't even begin to imagine what it was like for mothers to have their baby taken from them.

1990 still strikes me as part of 'this day and age.' It's only 30 years ago: which means some of these homes were still open eight years before my eldest daughter was born. That's extraordinary: extraordinary that the scale and nature of the abuse and cruelty outlined in this report was happening for half of my lifetime.

The story of these Mother and Baby Homes isn't just the story of abuse. It isn't just the story of how the state, in its social services, charitable and Church manifestations, betrayed people when they most needed to be helped and loved. It isn't just the story of how all of this was allowed to continue against what sometimes sounds like a conspiracy of silence. It isn't in fact just a handful of stories.

It is tens of thousands of stories. Of each woman and girl who was betrayed on so many levels and made to feel – as is nearly always the case with those who have been sexually abused – that they were at fault. Not decent. Not good. Not fit to be a mother. Not recognised as someone who needed consolation rather than condemnation.

It's also the individual stories of the children who were taken from them: some who never got the chance to meet them and now carry their own grief about the misery their mothers endured. Imagine how those children feel right now? Just try and put yourself in the shoes of the mother and the children.

And that's why an apology is never enough – why it can never be enough. Why it should never be allowed to be enough. Because this is also the individual stories of the people who inflicted the misery and betrayed the trust.

There's rarely a week goes by when I don't think about my birth mother, so I can't even begin to imagine what it was like for mothers to have their baby taken from them.

ON THIS DAY

FEBRUARY 5 1921

Carson on Tolerance

THERE was a large attendance of delegates at the annual meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council in the Assembly Hall, Belfast yesterday afternoon when Sir Edward Carson presided for the last time over that body in his capacity as Unionist leader.

Sir Edward said that the reason he had to refuse [the premiership] was a question of age and energy. He had gone through a long and difficult life. Day by day what was happening in Ireland demonstrated to him how right they had been in the past. They had their own parliament but, having got it, they must keep it. They had many enemies, many who would still try to drag them down in Great Britain at the heels of political parties. One is the great advantage of getting their own Parliament was that they hoped no longer to be a pawn in the [Westminster] political game.

Sir Edward continued: 'You will be a Parliament for the whole community. We used to say we could not trust an Irish Parliament to do justice to the Protestant minority. Let us take care that that reproach can no longer be made against your Parliament and, from the outset, let them see that the Catholic minority have nothing to fear from a Protestant majority. I have often said to those who differed from us in the South and West, "If you want to take Ulster, you must either fight her or win her". Let us take care that we win all that is best amongst those who have been opposed to us in the past in this community. ... Let us show them ... that they have a right to expect all that is sacred to them and their religion will receive the same toleration. What has driven us asunder is not the religion itself, but the fact that the majority of those who differ from us in religion would not accept loyalty to the King and Constitution (applause) and if they had, I believe there never need have been the acute differences between us at all. And so I say from the start, be tolerant of all religions ...

'We hear a great deal about bringing about a united Ireland. What have the South and West – I am talking of the majority – ever done to bring about that result?

(In his last political speech as Unionist leader, Carson appealed to Unionism to treat the Catholic minority fairly. Ironically, during the Westminster debates on the 1920 Act, he had rejected every demand for nationalist safeguards from PR to a protective Senate while ensuring strong safeguards for the Southern Unionists.)

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com