

**The Victoria Climbié
Memorial Address
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The theme of my presentation today is to talk to you about Victoria's legacies.

If I asked everyone of you in this room why the story of Victoria is so familiar to so many people in this country, I imagine you would say that it was because the circumstances which led to her death were so horrific, and have been described so graphically so many times in so many enquiries in so many newspapers, and that failings in our child protection system were found to be so gross and so indefensible, that they have left an indelible scar on the nation's conscience. You may notice I have used a lot of superlatives – so familiar, so horrific, so many, so gross, so indefensible....

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**VICTORIA**

**“Her death has become one of those major modern occasions where there seems to have been a collective sense of empathy for a stranger's fate. She has become an embodiment of the betrayal, vulnerability and public abandonment of children.”**

Peter Beresford (2003) *The Victoria Climbié Inquiry report*  
*House of Commons Health Committee*

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It is not possible to compartmentalise what has happened to Victoria into a small space – today, I simply want to tell you why I hope that her life has made a difference.

So what do we know about Victoria before she came to this country?

Victoria was born near Abidjan on the Ivory Coast on November 2nd 1991. She was the fifth of seven children, she was a happy little girl, intelligent, articulate, enthusiastic about life. Everybody loved her. In 1998, Marie Therese Kouao, who was Victoria's great aunt, but a stranger to her, came to Abidjan and offered to take a child from the family to live in France where she promised to provide a better education. Kouao was well dressed, clearly financially secure with credit cards, and appeared to be well educated. At first, a child called Anna was identified to go with Kouao but at the last moment, her mother changed her mind and Victoria's parents agreed that she should go – this is why in the early days of the coverage, Victoria was referred to as “Anna”, until Lord Laming, the chair of the inquiry into her death, reclaimed her name.

So Victoria and her great aunt travelled to France and then later on in April 1999, to England. Victoria travelled on Kouao's French passport, which had been altered to name the child "Anna" as her daughter. Ten months later on 25th February 2000, Victoria Climbié died in the intensive care unit at St Mary's Hospital Paddington. She died as a result of appalling ill treatment at the hands of those who were supposed to be caring for her. On 12th January 2001, Kouao and her partner Carl Manning were convicted of her murder – both were sentenced to life imprisonment. On 20th April 2001, Lord Herbert Laming was appointed by the Secretary of State for Health and the Secretary of State for the Home Office to conduct three statutory inquiries, together they are known as the Victoria Climbié Inquiry.

In this address, I want to consider briefly the legacies which Victoria has left – the memories and the impact on child care policy in the UK and beyond. But first the memories – Victoria's photograph is well known to us all. We must respect the private memories of Francis and Berthe Climbié. These will be unique for them and for Victoria's brothers and sisters and these memories, as all of us who have lost someone close will know, will remain etched on their hearts forever. But for the rest of us - policy makers and professionals across health, education, social work and the policy - what has been the impact? We have now seen a real commitment to the changes which may safeguard more children in the future. I intend to describe these changes very briefly and then to move on to the main focus for today, what we have learned and what we can do better to protect the children who come to our country like Victoria did "for a better life".

What I want you all to take away today is that there is hope – it is hope that the changes, which are already happening will also lead to greater understanding of the needs of children like Victoria and to greater opportunities for us all to make a difference to their lives.

So again, let us reflect on what Peter Beresford said and what was quoted at the beginning of this presentation from the House of Commons Report of the session examining Lord Laming's inquiry report.

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**"The inquiry must mark the end of child protection policy built on a hopeless process of child care tragedy, scandal, inquiry, findings, brief media interest and ad hoc political response. There is now a rare chance to take stock and rebuild."**

Peter Beresford (2003) *The Victoria Climbié Inquiry report*  
*House of Commons Health Committee*

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We all know about those other inquiries and we know there will be inquiries in the future – indeed, only last week, we read of the inquiry into the death of Toni Ann Byfield, herself a child who was sent to England, like Victoria, to live with someone who was not her parent or close relative.

But remember for a moment, Maria Colwell. Today, Maria Colwell would have been 38. She died on 7th January 1973 when she was 7. Her bruised and battered body had been pushed down the hill from her Brighton home to the local hospital by her stepfather in a pram she used to carry coal.

In life, no-one had heard of Maria Colwell, in death, she became a landmark in social care – the public enquiry which followed led to major changes in the systems designed to protect children from abuse. Yet this was only one of many attempts to tackle this issue and make authorities more responsive and more respected. In the thirty years since Maria's death, countless volumes have detailed the lives and deaths of children – children killed by adults expected to care for them and failed by agencies charged with protecting them. It is not true to say that these enquiries have made no difference – some of the systems and practices that have been tightened up have worked.

Victoria, like Maria became famous because of the terrible way in which she died.

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**“The most lasting tribute to the memory of Victoria would be if her suffering and death resulted in an improvement in the quality and the management and leadership of services which protect vulnerable children.”**

Lord Laming (2003) *The Victoria Climbié Inquiry*

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“It is the hope of the full inquiry team that the horror which happened to Victoria willbe a beacon pointing the way to securing the safety and well-being of all children in our society”

Lord Laming (2003) *The Victoria Climbié Inquiry*

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Lord Laming’s report resulted in the publication of the Government’s Green Paper “Every Child Matters”. We now have a commitment to a more coherent approach at the centre of government with a minister for children and moves to bring responsibilities for children across government into one department. The proposals outlined in “Every Child Matters” represent a fundamental re-evaluation of the importance of childhood and the priority to be given to meeting children’s developmental needs and supporting families. The two main goals outlined are to protect children and to ensure every child will have the opportunity to fulfil their potential. The key elements of the reform programme are **prevention** - addressing those aspects of a child’s life that may later cause problems and the causes of poverty; **early intervention** - reaching children before problems become a crisis, particularly in cases of child abuse and neglect; **information sharing**, requiring services to pool information about children and to introduce a structure where one person, a children’s services director, has overall responsibility for the welfare of children; a new **duty to protect** children for all services; and a new priority to **workforce reform**, - having staff in place with the qualifications, training and status they need to meet children’s needs.

The shape of some of these reforms are currently being debated on the Children Bill which was published in March 2004 – key areas currently under consideration are the role and powers of the children’s commissioner and how the identification, referral and tracking system will work on the ground. This is a challenging agenda – it is early days to say that it will be successful but the outcomes are likely to provide a lasting legacy to the memory of Victoria.

But the focus of equal importance for us today, and it is one that has had less coverage and less policy priority, is about private fostering and parents’ hopes for “a better life” for their children.

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“I have seen evidence which shows that entrusting children to relatives living in Europe who can offer financial and educational opportunities unavailable in the Ivory Coast is not uncommon in Victoria’s parents’ society”.

Lord Laming (2003) *The Victoria Climbié Inquiry*

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- ❖ What have we learned and what can we do better to protect the children who come to our country for a better life?
- ❖ Why do families in West Africa in particular, choose their children to live with virtual strangers in a far off country with minimal contact with them for some many years?

Many of you in this audience may know the answers to some of these questions better than I and I have struggled to understand them. It is important to recognise that one of the organiser’s of today’s conference, Yinka Sunmonu, has highlighted the issues far more eloquently than I could ever do in her book “Cherish”. I read “Cherish” with increasing understanding as I began to see, understand and experience why the parents of a new baby

in this fictional story were prepared to place her with total strangers about whom they knew nothing in order to give her greater opportunities in life as well as to concentrate on their own careers and a better future for the family.

Last week, I attended a conference run by the Lost African Child Project and the African Women's Welfare Association. I heard participants, both from the community, (including birth families and private foster parents) and from social work agencies discuss some of the lessons that we must learn from Victoria Climbié. I heard graphic accounts of the poverty in the countries from which so many children are sent to Britain. I learned that in those countries, many children are in domestic service, there is very patchy availability of any sort of education, and many hope that if a child has the opportunity of a Western education, they may be able to send money back to their family which would make such a difference to their lives. I have also heard about the value placed by parents on their children being a credit to them and of different attitudes to physical punishment.

But it is so easy isn't it to be critical of parents who send their children away dreaming of a "better life". I imagine that all of us here today will believe that the impact of separation, broken attachments and potential abuse, are at least comparable to the impact of poverty and lack of opportunity. Perhaps we need to examine our own record. Some time ago I participated in a Radio 4 discussion with people called "the evacuees" – adults who, as children, in the Second World War, were sent away from the city where their parents thought they were at risk of harm from bombs, to villages and rural areas. These children arrived by the trainload and were lined up in the local village hall and were picked by well meaning people in the community. As adults, some of these children said they had had marvellous opportunities, but others talked about appalling sexual abuse and exploitation, some of them were virtually domestic servants and many of them did not have the chance of any education.

What else have we done?

We convinced many young women, thirty years ago to relinquish their infants to be adopted by strangers because those babies would have a better life than the bleak future in front of them if they were illegitimate, subject to stigma, and denied the material prospects which these mothers were told were so important. Of course, most of these babies had secure childhoods but some did not - and many birth parents regret their decision.

What about "international adoption" ? A state sanctioned transfer of legal parenthood of infants and small children to strangers, not all of whom historically have been properly vetted and approved.

Was the state a better corporate parent?

We only have to look at the lessons from the Child Migration Scheme when many children from children's homes, children whose parents had not visited for some months, were sent to Canada, Australia and South Africa apparently for adoption but often to appalling treatment in institutions, and in religious communities. Nearer to home, we now know that many children in our care were abused in children's homes and even in state foster care as recently as the early nineties.

With such an unenviable track record, we can surely not begin to blame those people who genuinely believe they are giving their children a better life.

What have we learned about protecting children who live with strangers?

We have introduced the Hague Convention on Inter-country adoption – we have agreed internationally that those countries who ratify the convention will not permit money to be paid for children who are adopted, will not sanction private adoption and that common standards for approval and assessment of adopters and obtaining consent from birth parents will apply.

We now assist disadvantaged mothers to care for their own children by giving them access to benefits, accommodation and support services.

We have robust assessment criteria for local authority foster carers and for adoptive parents and we "look after" unaccompanied children – although most of us know we need to do better.

We are acting too, following Victoria's death, on addressing some of the issues of child trafficking which we have heard about earlier in this conference. A photograph of Victoria Climbié was in the Evening Standard on Monday night. The headline was "Alarm at scale of children trafficking into the UK" and it describes an initiative which was set up following the death of Victoria and the discovery of the torso in the Thames. Operation Paladin Child resulted in a major police operation at Heathrow airport over three months last year – the study found that of 1,904 unaccompanied children arriving in Britain between August and November, only 9% claiming asylum on arrival, half of the remaining 1,738 arrived without guardians and were of African origin. Most were aged 6 to 16 and 1/3 under the age of 11. About 30% were considered to be at risk and their details were passed onto social services for investigation. The result of this operation will be 26 recommendations to government and already the Metropolitan Police have announced the creation of child protection port safeguarding teams to support officials at Heathrow and other ports of entry.

Victoria's parents have asked for donations to set up a school in the Ivory Coast in memory of Victoria which would allow access to education for children in their own families. Investment and work by those countries with access to wealth and resources to support countries to promote the development of safe and effective child care, to raise awareness about risks and to provide educational opportunities.

These are legacies to Victoria.

There was another report written after the death of Victoria Climbié, commissioned by BAAF and written by Terry Philpot "A very Private Practice: An investigation into private fostering".

This report identified that Victoria was a privately fostered child and, while greater regulation of private fostering by government may not have saved Victoria's life, her case had highlighted the risks to children fostered by virtual strangers. The foreword to Terry's study was written by Sir William Utting, author of "People like us: The review of safeguards for children living away from home" (1997) which was commissioned by the Prime Minister. Sir William said that this review concluded that:-

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"Private fostering was among the least controlled and most open to induce of all the environments in which children lived away from home" The report consequently recommended that private foster carers should be "required to seek approval and registration from their local authority, and that non compliance should become a criminal offence..... surely now at last is the time to bring private fostering into the ring of acknowledged, regulated, and supportive services for children, and to provide a group of largely forgotten children with the protection given to all the others who live away from home".

Sir William Utting, (1997) *People like us: The review of safeguards for children living away from home*

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Victoria was not only privately fostered but was a child in a strange country where she did not understand the language, she must have struggled to understand why she could not see her parents, brothers and sisters, and where she knew nobody to whom she could go for help. Of course, Victoria's parents, like other parents, did not have the understanding, the resources or the access to make the necessary checks on virtual strangers looking after their children. Indeed they would not even have begun to understand the dangers that might beset the children.

Again, there has been real progress. In "Keeping children safe", the Government's response to the Victoria Climbié inquiry report, plans were announced to introduce national minimum standards for private fostering. The standards would require local authorities to be more proactive in identifying private fostering arrangements, would ensure consistency across local authorities and also provide information and monitoring about the numbers of notifications received of private fostering arrangements. The new duties are now included within the Children Bill and each local authority will be required to appoint an individual officer with

responsibility for monitoring the effectiveness of private fostering activities and the general duty of co-operation, referred to earlier and outlined in “Every child matters”, will include co-operation in relation to private fostering. New funding to support the new measures has been included in the new “Safeguarding children’s” grant. This is progress indeed and we welcome these changes.

What about a registration and approval scheme?

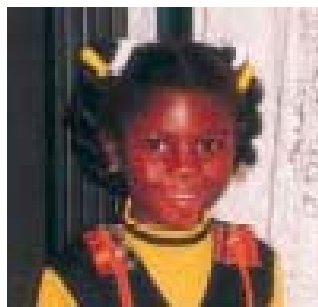
This too has been given consideration and at the present time, the provision in the Bill will give the government power to establish a registration scheme if it is considered within four years that the strength and notification system does not safeguard children. This is not enough and we are campaigning for an amendment to allow immediate implementation. I hope everybody here will take time to read BAAF’s position statement on the registration of private foster care.

**To conclude**, let us remember again the experience of Victoria – Victoria did not have a voice, and was never given the opportunity to talk about what happened to her. This was further compounded by the lack of an interpreter.

We must give privately fostered children a voice. Bob Holman related in his study of private fostering “The unknown fostering” interviews with former private foster children. These were the children who were notified to local authorities and who had social work contact. As adults, many of them related tragic tales of abuse and neglect, and complained about the lack of contact with their social workers – “we were given strict instructions not to speak unless they (social workers) spoke to us”. Another young woman said that “a social worker used to come not very often... I knew mum wasn’t my real mum but I didn’t understand why the social worker came. I never saw her alone.” Another said she was desperate to reveal she was being abused yet “never once did we get to talk to the social worker without our foster parents there. Before he came, we were told you’d better not say anything or you will go back to Africa. It was the time of the Biafran war with terrible pictures on TV so of course I was scared”.

Let us hope that one of the lessons we have learned from the life and death of Victoria Climbié is the critical importance of listening to children. Every professional who meets a child in their working life must take the time to understand the stories that children tell them and gain a meaningful picture of what is happening in their lives.

If I had to choose just one more legacy to Victoria, this would be it.



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