



## **Sir Harold Hood Memorial Lecture** **4th June 2024**

# **Supporting children & young people affected by imprisonment**

**Dame Rachel de Souza, Children's Commissioner for England**

Good evening. Thank you so much for welcoming me today. My name is Rachel de Souza, and I am the Children's Commissioner for England.

It's an honour to be here in this singular chapel, giving the Harold Hood Lecture to you. I am here to talk to you about how my faith has influenced what I want for all children and what I want for children who have a parent in prison, although this is a slightly different speech than the one that I had planned to give before the election was announced.

As I look around at this space, I would like to think that this chapel has had a profound impact on many lives over the years. My work has taken me to many prison settings over the last few years, and I have seen how important opportunities for peace and solace are for anyone in prison.

But I also hope that this chapel has had a wider impact on the institution itself because growing up in a Catholic family had such a profound impact on me and my childhood. That sense of community, of belonging, of being part of something bigger, of faith.

I want to capture the spirit of that Catholic upbringing to find the solutions to help us improve the lives of England's children. So many of whom are lacking in those fundamental tenets of happy, fulfilling, successful lives.

So many children face enormous challenges, yet when I talk to them - whether they are at school, in care homes, or in young offenders' institutions - what they have in common is they all have amazing ambitions for their futures, but they need our help to achieve them.

Let me start by telling you a little bit about my early life and some of the defining memories that have been defining and foundational.

My mother was born in 1945 to an Austrian-Hungarian mum and an East German Father whom she never met. Left in an orphanage near Passau in

the care of nuns with 50 other children. She had malnutrition, hepatitis and TB. Even now, she looks on those nuns as mothers and stayed in contact throughout her life. Those women of deep faith were her mothers for that time. What a gift to give a child whose own mother could not care for her.

She came to the UK aged seven as an unaccompanied displaced child to be reunited with her family. I am forever grateful to England for that. And it is here, that she met my Dad, a steelworker, from an Irish Catholic family, who came as workers in the late 1800s.

And that's where I arrive. I was born in Scunthorpe. A place which grew around the steelworks, and as the Catholic communities arrived, they first built the church and then the schools. Just like with my mother, no child was left behind. Families were more than just mums and dads. Families are your first community, and from families are communities born. You care about the children where you live. And most of all, those who are vulnerable, disadvantaged, whose parents can't be there.

And so this gave me my first sense of the power of the church being foundational in delivering and improving services.

The Catholic thread that came from my family and my education is still deep within me, providing guidance and purpose.

I went on to become a teacher of religious education and an academy Principal and grew a family of schools in East Anglia. And so it is, after thirty years of trying to improve children's lives, outcomes and experiences on the frontline, in schools, that I am here, as Children's Commissioner, in front of all of you this evening.

I took up the role in March 2021, just as we were emerging from the last of the strictest lockdowns. During that, and I don't say this lightly, unprecedented time, I had been in school every day, and I started to become deeply concerned about what was happening to children, particularly the most vulnerable.

An impact that we knew was happening, but the magnitude and acuity of which I think we are only truly understanding and really seeing now.

This role, which I have the honour to hold, is dedicated to promoting and protecting the rights of children, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is no coincidence that my Catholic faith brought me to such a role. I was struck once again when reading the 'Dignitas Infinita' Declaration on the deep resonances between my daily work of seeking to uphold the rights of the child and my personal belief in the infinite and inalienable dignity of every child.

The first words of the UNCRC read, "In accordance with the principles proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human

family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." Not really so very far from, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

The language of our domestic law becomes, perhaps necessarily, drier and more prosaic. In my role, I am tasked by legislation not to, "Do justice for the weak and the orphan; give justice to the poor and afflicted. Rescue the weak and the needy; set them free from the hand of the wicked". But instead to, "have particular regard to the rights of children who are living away from home or receiving social care and other groups of children who the Commissioner considers to be at particular risk of having their rights infringed." There is less beauty in the language, but again, the ideas are not really so very far apart.

So, by my faith and my job description, I am compelled to judge this country, the church, and myself by the fate of those children whose rights, whose inalienable dignity, are most at risk of violation.

Those children in prison themselves. Living in poverty. Or those who are suffering or have suffered neglect and abuse who have no parent to care for them. And today, of course, I want to think about those children who have a parent in prison. A group who are regularly overlooked, whose lives are also shaped by the lack of compassion too often shown to their parent.

I want to speak to you today about the world that children are growing up in – what is happening in their families and their communities. How can we begin to capture what it feels like to be a child today? And particularly, what does it feel like to be one of those children to whom I owe a particular duty in my statutory role and to whom we all owe a particular duty as Christians?

This was a question I grappled with when I first took up this post, and the answer when it came was obvious – ask them. Ask as many of them as possible. And so, in 2021, I carried out the Big Ask survey, which over half a million children completed. Just two months ago, I completed my second survey of this kind – the Big Ambition – which over 360,000 engaged with. When I add together all the children I have met with, surveyed, or involved in my research, it comes to a million. The voice of one child is and should be powerful enough. The voices of a million become undeniable.

I asked them about their health, their education, their family, their community, their hopes for the future. And they had views that covered the full spectrum of political and philosophical thought. I will try my best to condense what they told me.

What I heard from children was that their experience of childhood was a disorienting combination of too little freedom and too much. They often felt excluded and left out of society, with little freedom to participate in their local communities or the wider body politic. That as a child, there was no real way to be part of a world designed for adults. But at the same time, they

were aware that they didn't just want to be thrust into that adult world. Too often, indeed, they felt an overwhelming awareness of that adult world, which strips away their ability to just enjoy their childhood. This post-pandemic generation has experienced politics and, in a broad sense, information of all kinds, in unprecedented and sometimes unwanted ways. The span of childhood itself has felt squeezed.

What children seemed to be calling out for is not a small corner of the world to be carved out for them, protected to a greater or lesser degree, but for society as a whole to be reshaped. They want to be seen as individuals of equal worth but with different needs. We must adapt to accommodate childhood rather than force children – and their parents – to choose between being fully part of society and being able to enjoy being a child.

So, what does this mean in the different domains of a child's life? Today I want to focus in particular on children's families, and their communities.

For many years, I would have placed education as the number one enabler for bettering children's lives. And my work reflected that.

However, I've come to change my view and now would unequivocally prioritise family. I hope I do not need to spend any time trying to persuade you of the joy, strength and protection that a loving family brings to a child. That it is the foundation on which all else can be built, know simply that children agree with you. But even in the sanctuary of family, children are absorbing the cares and worries of their parents and the adult world.

And family can itself be a source of worry for some children, and absence and change felt deeply. In my last big survey, a nine year old girl told me that the one thing in the world she wanted the government to do was, "Help children with mum [or] dad in prison."

Just that. Just that she wanted help for those children. I've found myself thinking about this little girl's response. Does it simply show us the compassion for those in need that I was struck by over and over again in children's responses? Or perhaps is her mum or dad in prison, maybe even in this prison? If so, does it tell us something that even in this completely private survey that, she can't ask for help for herself directly, that she finds it difficult to talk about having a parent in prison?

A clue to this reticence was an adult who said on behalf of their child who said I should consider the impacts of having a parent in prison in terms of "prejudice." Again, we get that sense of shame and stigma unfairly put on a child.

I see children affected by parental imprisonment as a symbolic group for all of us who work with children. Firstly and most simply, they're children going through a difficult time who need the love and support and care of the adults in their lives. That should be enough.

Then there is the impact of stigma that children, blameless and innocent, feel. A stigma that may prevent them from making themselves known and reaching out to receive support, or, in the worst cases, asking for help and finding themselves judged and ill-treated by adults who should know better.

Lastly, how we, as a society, fail these children reflects the ways in which we fail other children. Not listening, judging, systems that aren't designed for the children who interact with them, making children and families jump through hoops to get help. We should be working to break the assumption behind a 12 year old boy telling me that the biggest barriers for children were, "Not having a good childhood e.g. parents in prison." Every child should have a good childhood.

Yet we know that, sadly, many children have childhoods that are very far from what they deserve. Where their family, far from being protective, is the cause of harm or is absent entirely. The children who face abuse or neglect and who come into the care of the state. The unaccompanied children seeking asylum.

Too often, the inherent dignity of these children doesn't seem to be recognised by those who have the duty to provide for them – as if because of what they have been through, they are somehow less worthy than other children. We must not accept this. As one 11-year-old girl told me, "Foster children and refugees should be treated the same [as other children]... it is the government's job to make sure they are loved."

The beautiful simplicity of this thought. It is the government's job, but equally it is all of our job to make sure these children are loved.

I and my team visit children as they arrive here seeking asylum. Children who have lost everything – family, home, possessions. Who have faced incomparable pain – victims of trafficking, organ harvesting, rape. They arrive with nothing, drenched in seawater and the oil from the boats. We have the ability to choose to treat them with the dignity and compassion they deserve. To give them the love that my mother had found from the nuns all those years ago. To provide them with something that feels, as far as possible, like the family they have lost.

But children exist not just within their families, but within their wider communities too. While family may be the foundations, communities are where children should have the chance to flourish.

Yet children have told me their worries about their safety, about feeling scared walking home from school. The answer to this cannot be that we allow children to retreat ever more from the world. They want to play, to have fun, to make use of their communities. It is incumbent on all of us, therefore, to make those communities into places that genuinely welcome them.

And this matters perhaps most of all when it comes to those children who I regularly speak to who have ended up in prison, having done terrible things. As one young man said, "Instead of investing so much money into keeping guys in prison, invest that money into them before they end up in prison. It costs you 50 to 60 grand for me to be here a year. Imagine if you invested that into my education and activities, I wouldn't be here."

The way we treat those boys should be the true barometer of our country. Do we genuinely believe in the chance for children to rehabilitate? Because if we do, then it is not obvious from the way we treat them now.

What these children tell me, time after time, is that they know it's education that will save them. The sense that they are going to be able to make something of themselves and their lives. But the education they receive is so often abysmal, an afterthought in a system designed to contain them but little else.

And, of course, I want to think equally of the children who themselves are harmed by those in their communities.

I recently talked to a number of incredibly brave child victims of sexual harm, often at the hands of their peers, to understand their experiences of the justice system and support. What they told me about what they had suffered was, of course, harrowing. But equally harrowing was their treatment by systems which should have been there to help them without judgement and in the way they needed. I heard about adults who blamed them for their own abuse, exacerbating the guilt that they sadly too often already felt.

So what should be done? I am afraid you will have to understand that I am constrained a little in what I can say. As we approach an election, I am bound by certain rules on what I can call on governments to do.

But I can talk about some of the essentials and some of the things that all of us here today can do.

Raising a family is, and always has been, hard. I don't think the fundamentals of parenting are any harder than they have been in the past. But what has so often changed is the context. Parents are more isolated – often far from their own parents and families, without a ready-made network of people to step in when things inevitably at times feel impossible. So, it is down to us to build those communities to love and support them. Some of that will be delivered by the state. But I also want the church, charities, and other community groups to be there. It is these organisations that so often make communities breathe, that turn 'support' from a stigmatising thing done to a family to a joyful thing done for a family.

Education must also form part of the answer. When I speak to children, they tell me so often that it is to their trusted and beloved teachers that they want to turn in times of difficulty. Covid threw into stark relief what a lifeline schools

were for the more vulnerable children in our society, but it has always been true that to truly educate a child means caring about their whole selves. Schools need to know who the children are who are facing additional hardship, including whether they have a parent in prison, and to be able to offer practical and emotional support they need. But it goes more broadly than this as well. In my Big Ambition survey, too many children, particularly in secondary school, told me they were not happy in school. We need all schools to be places where children can not only learn, but places they can enjoy themselves, find sanctuary and build relationships. For that to happen, we need all children to be in school. Over the last two years, I have been working steadfastly to go and find the missing children who are regularly absent from school, who I have grown deeply concerned about. Last year, 1.8 million children were persistently absent which meant that they missed the equivalent of a day a fortnight in school.

I have spoken to hundreds of them, and the reasons children are not in school are complex. This is not about placing ever greater burdens on schools or about shaming parents who are doing their best. What it is about is understanding what is going on for a child – has that non-attendance coincided with a parent going to prison? Are they worried about what it will be like going back to school? And then making sure that the support in school wraps around them, and allows them to enjoy their right to an education.

Finally, we must make sure that we design systems around children and their lives. They must be meaningfully engaged in the decisions that are made about them. And to do that well we first need, of course, to know which children are being affected by decisions. We need to know, for example, at the most basic level, who the children affected by parental imprisonment are. And then we need to make sure that when decisions are being taken, children are identified, considered and engaged.

In my Big Ambition survey, only one in five children felt they were listened to by those who run the country. If children are to feel like they belong in their communities, to have a sense of personal agency, then a change must come from the very top. As we approach a general election, I want to see politicians of every party talking directly to children, setting out what their plans would mean for them, and hearing what they have to say.

If you are yet to be convinced of how important this engagement is, I want to leave you with this.

I am about to read you the words of one young girl who used the opportunity of The Big Ambition survey to confide the most piercing feelings – both of struggle and of hope.

“I’m only 12 and don’t know much about government, but maybe they can try and make surveys like this every few years to see how our lives are doing and how we’re genuinely feeling because I’ve been unwell in a way where

my heart feels almost empty. I'm glad I have someone to talk to about my life. Maybe I wrote too much, but I hope my message is seen. Thank you."

My vision is one where no child in this country feels empty.

That instead, they feel heard, and have the chance to be authors of their own destinies.

An England where we – adults and children – walk forwards together.

Side by side.

Eyes bright.

Hearts full.

Thank you.