

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria**

Melbourne—Monday, 22 March 2021

#### **MEMBERS**

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr David Southwick

Mr Meng Heang Tak

#### **WITNESSES**

Ms Leanne Matton.

**The CHAIR:** Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to their elders past and present and any Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today. I also wish to acknowledge that yesterday, 21 March, was the eighth anniversary of the national apology for forced adoptions, delivered by the then Prime Minister, Julia Gillard.

I now declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria. I would like to introduce the committee members that are online today. First off, Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong; Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong; and Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda.

I welcome Leanne Matton to present today. Before we begin hearing your submission, just for the record, all evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version for you to check as soon as it is available. Any transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible unless confidentiality is requested.

Please be aware that we have Holly Donoghue with us today. Holly is from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support services. She is available to talk to you at any point or even after the proceedings as well.

The committee is very much interested in hearing from you in relation to your experiences and in particular the services that you may have accessed but most importantly what outcomes you would like from the inquiry. I now invite you to proceed with a brief opening statement, and the committee members will follow this up with questions. Thank you so much for being here today.

**Ms MATTON:** Can you hear me? Can you see me?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Ms MATTON:** Okay. I would like to thank you for this opportunity to speak about adoption openly. Adoptees are often excluded from conversations about adoption, because we disrupt the narrative of adoption as a good thing. The popular view of adoption is mostly formed by adoptive parents and professionals, not the people that are harmed by it. Also because I had a bad experience I often find that anything I have to say about adoption is disqualified on this basis as though I have nothing valid to say on adoption as a whole because of this. But I had a bad experience, because I was adopted via a practice that handed a child over based on two paragraphs of assessment, which was woefully inadequate. That offered no follow-up and told adoptive parents to treat the child as their own. This left dysfunctional people managing the grief of infertility and the traumatised infant without support or education.

I know you have read my submission, so just to summarise: my adoptive mother was violent and abusive. She estranged herself and most of her family from me about 30 years ago. Reunion, which I did not seek, was also mishandled and has been another source of ongoing distress for a long time. I just wanted to add too that I am now in the position of having to contest my adoptive mother's will because I have been left out of it. I have had no financial support whatsoever from my parents as an adult, and now I am having to spend thousands of dollars on lawyers, because once again I have been erased. I will further need to spend thousands of dollars on lawyers if I want to see the entirety of my hospital file, as the one I managed to obtain was almost entirely redacted. This is information non-adopted people have free access to. The federal and state governments have made formal apologies, but they have offered no compensation for costs incurred by the need for therapy and counselling, the cost of searching and all the other losses that go along with this practice, particularly for those of us whose adoptions fail. For me it is like saying, 'I'm sorry for burning your house down, but I'm not going to pay for it'.

Adoption was supposed to give me a better chance in life and a forever family. In fact my biological father has become very successful, but adoption has cut me off from any provision that he might have made for me. I have not been part of a family for a very long time. Adoption has failed me repeatedly, but as a therapist myself I know that even those who have good relationships with their adoptive family suffer emotionally because of the developmental damage done by early separation. Forced or not, I see it as a cruel practice based on inequality that rarely has the child's best interests at heart. The things that have helped me have been

specifically adoption-focused services and adoption support groups that have specific training in working with people who have faced these unique circumstances. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Leanne, for sharing that experience with us. I know that it may have been challenging, but thank you so much for doing so. Committee members, we will begin with some questions or some observations, but I might start it off. If you can tell us or expand more on the barriers you faced accessing your records and how that can be improved and what are some of the recommendations in that space that you would like the inquiry to put forward in their report.

**Ms MATTON:** Yes. So I went through an organisation called FIND. I do not know if they exist anymore, but I was given a case manager. The process took about nine months. The communication was not great, so when we did an interview over the phone before I received the file, the case manager talked about things that were in the file which were not in the file when I received it, which was a bit of a shock to me. And some of those things were letters that I had written myself during reunion.

I wanted to make sense of where I was when I was first born—was I in foster care? Was I in the hospital? I also wanted to make sense of what happened during reunion. Most of that was not in the file, and what was in the file had big black marks through it. So I really received very little. I received a lot of affidavits that my parents had signed, and when I spoke to the case manager she said, ‘We cross things out because it might reveal personal details about other parties’. But in the file there was clear information about my parents’ financial situation at the time. That was not redacted. From speaking to other people it seems to be a very subjective process of what you actually receive when you get your file. A lot of people I know have gone through the process a second time and have received different information. When I asked what I needed to do to get the rest of it I was told I would need to go to court and go through freedom of information. I have spoken to someone who has done it; it involves hiring a lawyer for something like \$10 000, and I just think that is not okay. I just think it should be a lot easier for people to obtain information that other people automatically have.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will move to Heang; Heang has a question.

**Mr TAK:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Leanne, for your submission. I heard that you state in your submission that you want to be reimbursed for expenditures such as counselling and all of that. But aside from this compensation, would you suggest any other form of redress? I also heard about access to files.

**Ms MATTON:** Yes. Well, I work as a psychologist, and I support people who have been victims of sexual abuse. I have worked with a lot of them to receive financial compensation while I am not receiving financial compensation, so I just think that there should be processes in place. Even before that—I guess sexual abuse is seen as a crime. What happened to us, particularly those of us who were physically and emotionally abused, is not seen as a crime, so there is no avenue of redress. When the formal apologies were made, I would think that would be a natural accompaniment. Often that is what happens when people take responsibility, with the Catholic Church and other situations. But there has been nothing made available to us. So unless we take a class action, which most of us do not have the energy or the resources to do, it is really just up to us to find our own way. After the apology I rang Jigsaw and asked if there was any counselling available, and they told me that I could get a mental healthcare plan, which is what anybody can get, and there are still out-of-pocket expenses. So I do not know the answer, but I just think there should be something specifically for people in these situations that is not available at this point.

**Mr TAK:** Okay. Thank you, Leanne. Thank you, Chair. No further questions from me.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We move on to Michaela.

**Ms SETTLE:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Leanne, very much for sharing your experiences. Obviously there is a lot of pain and so forth, and I know it takes courage to present here, so thank you very much. I am interested because you offer a really unique perspective in that you are both a working psychologist and an adoptee yourself. We have heard from a lot of people that they feel that in the psychology services that are there for them the people do not particularly understand the issue. Do you work in any specific ways around that, and what would you recommend to us in terms of that therapeutic support that we should look at?

**Ms MATTON:** Sorry, it is a little hard to hear. I just missed the last part of that.

**Ms SETTLE:** Just in terms of therapeutic support, what would you like to see this inquiry recommend? So should there be specific training? Are there any players you can [Zoom dropout]?

**Ms MATTON:** Yes, I think the Australian Psychological Society put together a really great training package. I thought it was good. I have spoken to other adoptees who think it was terrible, so I do not know. But I guess that could always be expanded—I guess specific training around adoptee issues but also I think more support groups, more availability. Currently there is one in Brisbane. They come down to the Gold Coast where I live every second month, and that is fantastic, but if you miss a month, it is four months in between groups. You can go to another one, but you tend to feel safe in one particular group and you get to know people. I know there are online groups. I mean, I think that is fine, but it is not as good as being there in person.

I guess one issue I have with the group that I attend is that it does have adoptive parents and relinquishing parents in it, which I find quite triggering. It is sometimes good to have all members of the triad together because it has given me a different view of relinquishing parents particularly—but I think specific support for each member, because each member of the triad has different issues, different experiences, and I think they need to be addressed separately in some way.

**Ms SETTLE:** And did you ever seek services? Because you were in Victoria—is that right?

**Ms MATTON:** Sorry, I missed that completely.

**Ms SETTLE:** Did you ever seek services in Victoria?

**Ms MATTON:** Yes. I have been speaking to Charlotte at VANISH. I have actually become friends with her. She has given me some books to read. She has offered that I can come to their online group, which I have not done yet, but I might possibly do that. She also put me on to FIND when I was looking for my hospital file. So they have been really helpful—and really trauma informed. I think that is the key too. I think the staff at the adoption service in Brisbane and at VANISH in Melbourne are not just adoption focused but very trauma informed, which I think makes a huge difference.

**Ms SETTLE:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Any further questions, committee members?

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Chris.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks, Leanne. We really appreciate you talking about your experience and joining us today and giving your presentation and of course your submission. Thank you so much for that; it is very much appreciated.

**Ms MATTON:** You are welcome.

**Ms COUZENS:** You talked about the barriers you faced in accessing your records. I suppose it is more about how that might be improved, and if there are any specific views you might have on that?

**Ms MATTON:** Yes. I just found the process was not very supportive. I was left hanging for sometimes months at a time. I had to keep following up, and then, as I said, when I had the interview there was information in the file that I would like to have seen that was not in the file when I received it. And I was not really offered any follow-up support for the next part of the process either. I messaged the case manager and said, 'What do I do now?', and she said, 'Well, you can go through freedom of information', and that was it. Charlotte at VANISH actually put me in touch with somebody who had been through the process who could support me, which I have not actually followed through with.

But I think if it is going to be this difficult—which I do not think it should be, but if it is—then the support needs to continue past that process. I mean, going to court and dealing with lawyers and so on is a massive process. It is very daunting. It is very emotionally daunting as well. So I think practical support, but more emotional support would have been useful as well.

**Ms COUZENS:** You just mentioned that you had some support to pursue that, which you have not done yet. I suppose it might be a bit difficult to answer this, but did you think that support was going to be enough to get you through that process?

**Ms MATTON:** No. I think that is why I did not follow through, because that support came from another adoptee who had been through the process. It was really just her telling me what she did. It was not someone to walk alongside me and guide me and support me and, you know, give me advice—who had professional knowledge of the process. It was really just somebody—it was not her job to do that, but she was the only one who was available to give me any sort of inside insight into the process. I do not think that was her job.

**Ms COUZENS:** So do you think, looking at the recommendations of this inquiry, for example, that there should be something around support being provided to walk through that?

**Ms MATTON:** Yes. Well, I mean ideally I think my recommendation would be: make it so that that does not have to happen. Make people's files available to them. But if they are going to be redacted, I mean, sure, redact things that are about people's personal financial situation or whatever—but 80 per cent of my file is redacted, and I do not understand why. So I think, really, support to go to court and get the rest of the file would be great, practical and emotional support—I definitely think that is necessary—but I just think that it should not get to that stage in the first place. And I do not think it should take nine months to get my file. I am just left hanging. My recommendation would be to have a clear process—this is what happens, this is the time frame, this is what you do, this is what the case manager does and here is what the outcome will be—so that we know what is happening and it is as easy as possible.

**Ms COUZENS:** And do you have any views about what any form of redress scheme should include?

**Ms MATTON:** Look, I have lots of different thoughts about this. I mean, for me, the main cost financially has been the cost of counselling and therapy, but there are so many costs that cannot be quantified. There is loss of quality of life, there is loss of opportunity, there is impact on relationships—I do not know whether there needs to be a lump sum payout or whether there need to be specific costs assigned to therapy and the cost of searching, and a lot of people incur a lot of costs doing that. Just anything would be welcome. I do not know what that looks like. I mean, you probably have to do some sort of needs analysis, which I guess is what this is. Yes, anything would be better than what we have at the moment. And it is not just because of the cost to us; it is the acknowledgement—you know, it is easy to say sorry—and to actually provide support and education and also to possibly change the whole practice of adoption. I know it has changed since the era of forced adoption, but I think it should be a very last resort because I do not think it is done in the interests of the child. So yes, definitely some sort of compensation, whatever that looks like, and maybe it needs to be individual to each person.

**Ms COUZENS:** And in terms of the counselling and therapy, which we have heard a lot about during this inquiry, do you think there need to be specifically trained counsellors or therapists to support families affected by forced adoption?

**Ms MATTON:** Yes, totally. I mean, I have seen counsellors who have never even asked about the impact of adoption. I, as a psychologist, did not realise until about maybe five years ago the importance of looking at that. It was only that I went to a workshop at Jigsaw. I went there for a different reason—it was about creative writing. I just cried the whole time, and I came home and thought, 'Wow, I've never looked at this. I've never thought adoption had a big impact on my life'. I sat down and wrote out everything in my life that adoption had impacted, and I did not even finish it, it was too long. So I think people who understand trauma, people who understand adoption—and I do not think they need lived experience; I think sometimes that can maybe even make it harder. I think to not even be asked about it shows how much we do not understand the impact of it—you know, 'That was a long time ago. You were a baby. Let's move on'. I think the wider community needs to understand, because we get dismissed at every turn, so to then come into counselling and have it dismissed as well, it is a kind of a little like gaslighting. It is like, 'Is this real?'. So I think people who really understand the importance of it as well as the specific impacts of it; whether they have lived experience or not, I do not think is important.

**Ms COUZENS:** And just in terms of the report and the recommendations we will table in the Victorian Parliament, is there anything in particular in terms of recommendations that you feel must be included?

**Ms MATTON:** Well, I would like to see adoption abolished, but I do not know that I can recommend that. Going from my experience, I think the assessment should be thorough. I know it is a lot more thorough now. I have a friend who does those assessments; she says it is very thorough. I just do not think it can be thorough enough. I think it should be a last resort. I think it should be acknowledged that this is going to have a detrimental impact on all parties. I think there needs to be a lot more education in the general community about the impacts of adoption. I think people have an understanding of adoption as a wonderful thing and a celebration, and we see it in the movies, so if I ever mention I am adopted, people say, 'Oh, how wonderful'. Even that, even more education, maybe TV ads, I do not know—just an understanding that it is not all rainbows and unicorns. So I think the recommendations I have suggested around accessing our information, about having some form of redress that is not a whole lot of hoops to jump through, trauma-informed support but also I think just wider education generally.

**Ms COUZENS:** Great, thank you very much.

**Ms MATTON:** Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Chris. I think that concludes the questions. At this point can I take the opportunity again to thank you, Leanne, for being here today.

**Ms MATTON:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** The committee is extremely honoured to hear your valuable contributions as part of your submission. We acknowledge that revisiting some of the past can be extremely challenging, so we truly do appreciate the time that you have taken to inform us and really express your experience. Please be assured that your evidence will help inform committee members in understanding the important issues in making recommendations to the Victorian government. We are on track to table the report by 1 July this year, and we will endeavour to make sure that you are kept up to date. You may keep up to date by visiting the website, but most importantly we do have our secretariat or any committee members that you can reach out to at any point. Again, on behalf of the committee, thank you so much for your submission today, and we wish you all the very best.

**Ms MATTON:** Thank you for your time.

**Witness withdrew.**