

# 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 Lee Whelan.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Lee, for being here today.

**Ms WHELAN:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Before I begin I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their elders past and present and the 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 declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria. I would also like to introduce the committee members that are also online today: Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong; Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda; and Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong.

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, for example, and say the same things 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 of the transcript, and you can check that 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 has been requested.

Also Holly Donoghue is with us today, and Holly is from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support services. She is available at any point if you need to talk during the hearing or after the hearing, and we can put you in touch with Carfi or any other service that may be able to assist.

The committee is very interested in hearing from you on your experiences of forced adoption issues, particularly about some of the services but most importantly what outcomes you would like from the inquiry. I now invite you to begin with your brief opening statement, and it will be followed by some questions and remarks from committee members. Thank you so much, Lee, for being here.

**Ms WHELAN:** Well, I just want to thank everyone. I am going to be reading, so I cannot look at you. Is that okay? Yes. Okay. I just want to thank everybody for hearing how being impacted by forced adoption has been a detriment to my life. I was adopted from the Royal Women's Hospital on 14 March 1962. My adoptive family consisted of mother, father and a brother three years older than me. My family were loving for a while; however, the extended family opposed adoption and therefore did not accept me, and I was always left to feel as an outcast. I was different, and I was made to feel less of a person because I was different to all the family.

I have recently received my birth records, and they truly indicate that my birth mother was not supported or encouraged to keep me. She was described as being 'simple' and 'withered' and 'not fit to be a mother'. Her love for me was never mentioned by the hospital staff, even after staff had witnessed her visiting the nursery daily and bonding with me. She had even named me. The affection she showed was never mentioned in a loving way, and no support or encouragement was given to her. She was clearly manipulated into adopting me. Her pain is my pain, and that is why I am speaking today.

An outcome of this forced adoption is that I was not nurtured in the natural way I was created for, and that has led to diabolical consequences for me. The severity of being severed forever from my birth mother is trauma, and that is something I have to live with always, as do all others who are victims of what is one of society's worst crimes—forced adoption. As I have addressed in my submission, some of my extended family have made my life very difficult by their actions of emotional and sexual abuse towards me. The impacts of these horrific abuses have left me with feelings of confusion, low self-esteem, depression and difficulties in maintaining positive relationships. Confusion has always been a part of my life, as I did not understand why I was always being treated in such a hurtful way. This still continues, and I do not understand why people betray and deceive me. Am I not worthy of happiness?

I have mentioned that my adopted mother experienced many challenging times with her family, which opposed adoption—more to the point, me. My adopted mother did turn against me, always. When the extended family were around she was nasty, right up until she died. Loyalty to them was her preference, always. 'I wish you were more like them'—this statement she would say to me, meaning she wanted me to be more like my cousins. It was not until my adopted mother passed away that I was able to address these feelings and confront

memories that would come to the surface—recovered memory, I was informed. When she passed, I had bereavement counselling, then counselling from VANISH, and that has led me here to where I am today.

In my hospital records it mentions that my birth mother and her brother had a very close relationship, and I just imagine if she had had the opportunity to take me home with her and for me to have had a loving uncle instead of one who sexually abused me. This was never encouraged to happen. At the beginning of my birth records it was suggested that because of my birth mother's and uncle's close relationship I may have been conceived by incest. It was just one way they, at the Royal Women's Hospital, spoke so badly of my birth mother. However, later on in the records it was stated that my natural father had left my mother while she was pregnant and had moved away to another part of regional Victoria. This is just one example of how the Royal Women's Hospital judged her and assumed terrible things about her which were not justified.

An outcome from the lack of nurturing love that I have experienced has led me to very poor, abusive relationships. Confusion strikes again. These relationships have been filled with betrayal and deceit. I am divorced and estranged from my adopted family, and I have experienced very volatile relationships with males that have been physically, emotionally and sexually abusive. I am alone, longing for a loving, trusting relationship. My hope is for someone to take me on a picnic—love me for me, for being me, that is all. All these experiences have been outcomes of forced adoption, a system that made very bad decisions that have had very severe consequences. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Lee, for a sharing your experience with us. It means a lot to the committee members. Now, we might just begin with some questions and some statements.

**Ms WHELAN:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** I will begin with Heang and then move to Michaela. Thank you.

**Mr TAK:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Lee, for your submission. I know it is difficult to go back, but if I can ask, what sort of support should adoptees be provided with in terms of locating or trying to find their parents?

**Ms WHELAN:** Yes. I think organisations like VANISH—I do not know if there are many others—are vitally important for people to find their families and any past history of the family. I think that they have been amazing, but it is very slow. It just takes a long time, and people have got to be patient for it to all happen. I do not know if there is a lot of funding into those organisations and whether they are well staffed. The people I have spoken with have just been amazing, the counsellors, but are there enough? Are there enough of them for people who have been affected like me? It takes a long, long time.

You know, I would just love to have a photo of my mum. I have been lucky enough. I have found that she has passed. I have pictures of her grave and I have been to her hometown and things like that, but the next step, I suppose with COVID and everything, too, it is just taking a long time. But there has got to be money into these organisations to help people like me.

**Mr TAK:** Thank you, Lee. Thank you, Chair. No further questions.

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

**Ms SETTLE:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you very much for sharing your experience. For us it really helps us understand all the issues in this inquiry. I wanted to ask you about accessing records. You talk in your submission about not being able to access records that were important around your health. What do you think could be done? What did you go through getting all those records and how could we have avoided it?

**Ms WHELAN:** I am sorry. You will have to repeat it. It was all a bit fuzzy.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry. Michaela, we are finding it very difficult to hear. You are breaking up. Could you just repeat the question again, please?

**Ms SETTLE:** Okay. I will try something. Sometimes it is better with my laptop. Is that any better?

**Ms WHELAN:** Yes. That is better.

**Ms SETTLE:** Okay. Well, I will start again. Look, thank you very much, Lee, for sharing your experiences with us. In your submission, you mention that you had trouble getting your records and that had an impact on your own physical health, not having those records. Can you talk to us about what were the obstructions in getting those records and how could we improve that process?

**Ms WHELAN:** Once again, I think it is just time. These things take a lot of time, and you have got to be patient enough to wait on that time. I do not know if there is anything that can help that system out or have more people involved in supporting people like me, once again. Yes. I think that says it all. If there were more people or organisations like VANISH and more counsellors to speak to at the time, I think things could have moved a bit faster. That is all.

**Ms SETTLE:** And did you find the records that were eventually supplied from the hospital, did they have the information that you required? Did you feel that you were given all of the information?

**Ms WHELAN:** Yes. Actually, I have missed a step. I did that through department of justice. VANISH put me onto them. Sorry, I am being very nervous. There was a lady there. It was amazing. Once they finally came through, it was absolutely amazing. I do not have the internet at home, so I was doing it on my phone with a lady called Neriman at the Department of Justice. She could show me everything. It was hard. It took all morning. She just went through it, very, very slowly with me and explained all the terms that they would have used at the hospital way back then, like that 'PF' meant 'parental father' and 'almoner' was an 'A'. Everything to the finest detail was explained to me by Neriman, and then counselling later. But once again it took time, and maybe that was because of COVID, I am not sure. But it was very hard. It was awful. It was really awful to see that back in the 1960s they were just writing these awful things on these little lined cards, and that was part of the hospital records. As much as it was good, it was really hard, but Neriman made the whole experience much better.

**Ms SETTLE:** That is great to hear. Outside of organisations like VANISH, have you sought counselling just in the broader community, and did you feel that they understood the issues that forced adoption has brought into your life?

**Ms WHELAN:** I have not had any counselling about adoption, as I said. I lived in a life of confusion and never really understood things until I started bereavement counselling. But I think people like Neriman or people at VANISH would understand the concept of adoption anyway and the impact on the negative side of it, I do not think, unless you have that experience and training and have that understanding from talking to people and things. I think it takes a very special person.

**Ms SETTLE:** Thank you. No more questions from me.

**Ms WHELAN:** I hope I have been clear.

**The CHAIR:** We will move on to Chris.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you, Lee. We really appreciate you sharing your experience with us in person and through your submission. Thank you so much for your time. You mentioned that you did find your birth mum.

**Ms WHELAN:** Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** And that she has passed away.

**Ms WHELAN:** Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** How long ago was that?

**Ms WHELAN:** Just towards the end of last year.

**Ms COUZENS:** Okay. So it is very recent.

**Ms WHELAN:** Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** And were you able to do that through the records that were provided to you, or did you use other means of finding out?

**Ms WHELAN:** Well, to be quite honest, I did it through VANISH, but I did do my own search as far as I could go on the internet and found out things about what had happened to her after me. And then VANISH were doing it—and as I said, this takes a lot of time—and they confirmed everything that I had found out and more, but it led me to doing other things. But I am still waiting so I can try and get in touch with—

She married again. She had no more children but has stepchildren, so there is a family out there that I would dearly love to get in touch with. Whether they even knew about me would be another thing, so it has to be done through VANISH. You know, it has to be done through people who understand these emotional situations. I am very tempted to just ring up and say, ‘Hey. This is me’, sort of thing. But you just cannot do it. I would just love to see a photo of my mum.

**Ms COUZENS:** So you have had no contact with her side of the family at all?

**Ms WHELAN:** No. I had a sister contact me about 20 years ago, and now I think Neriman at department of justice is trying to search for her but is not having much luck. So that is really sad. In my hospital records it said that my mum when she adopted me that she would have dearly loved—they called her actually a repeat offender, because she was second time round having a child up for adoption—and had asked for me to try and be adopted with my sister. That was very, very important to her. So 20 years ago my sister tried to get in touch with me, and we did. We did it through I think it was DHS at the time. But I just was not in the situation that I am now, until my parents passed—my adopted parents passed. I was not ready in this time of life, and then I am ready and I have not heard anything from Neriman, and I think maybe she is over it now. So contacting her has been unsuccessful so far.

But my mum, she married five years after me and moved to Barham, which is just on the Murray River. She was born in Werribee, but then they moved to Glengarry, which is near Traralgon. A friend and I, we went over there one day. I did not ask anyone, because it is a very small country town. I just wanted to get a feel. She was a farm girl, and I just felt so good for going there, just to get a feel, because it was actually 59 years ago probably today she was going back there not pregnant and not with a baby. You could imagine the shame she felt, and that would have happened, as I said, probably around about this time 59 years ago. But then she married again. She married and moved away, had no children. But there are stepchildren that would probably be my age or older now, I am not sure. That is the connection VANISH are trying to make, but as I said, it is extremely slow. But from what I have looked up, they are a big transport company up there on the Murray River. It would be so easy to call them and say—but I cannot. That is not the proper thing to do. But I would just love a photo of my mum.

**Ms COUZENS:** And do you feel supported going through this process? Obviously you have got strong connections with VANISH.

**Ms WHELAN:** Yeah, and Yuki has been wonderful.

**Ms COUZENS:** Good.

**Ms WHELAN:** It was only through the newsletter I get from VANISH—I saw two women in an article—that I found out about the inquiry. I think Liz Tomlinson at VANISH gave me Yuki’s number, and I rang her and it had closed. So that was about this time last year. But Yuki gave me a week—or I said I would like a week to write it, and so I did. It was just so good. So she has been very supportive. I have had a lot of support, but I have reached out. Through Neriman at the department of justice and Yuki and VANISH it has been wonderful, actually.

**Ms COUZENS:** And is there anything in particular you would like to see as an outcome, so a recommendation by this committee, that you think is really important to be part of this report?

**Ms WHELAN:** I have given a lot of thought to this, and it is like back in those days it would have been men who made these decisions—very much patriarchal control. All my life has been controlled by men in very negative ways. It has been a pattern through my life. So an outcome, I think—and I am sorry for any men that are there; I am not a nasty feminist or anything—is that there have got to be more women in leadership to make really important decisions when it comes to family, because what is done is done, and I just think that more women in leadership would be a great outcome. Do you think?

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes. Look, I agree with you there, but that is just me. Do you think financial compensation or more funding poured into counselling services for families—

**Ms WHELAN:** Definitely. Places like VANISH—I do not know if there are any more adoption agencies, but places like that, they have just helped me so much. Yes, probably that would be a really good outcome. There is nothing that can be done for me especially, but through all of this I am healing; I am beginning to have a voice. There has already been an apology for the treatment of women back in those days, of young girls and also older girls—my mum was 33, you know. And then for my adopted mother to go through what she had been through—it is too late for them, but there has got to be more thought that goes into unwanted babies. For girls who need to keep their babies now, who are young and society looks upon them, I am not sure if the help is out there, the emotional help, all that sort of thing. There has got to be support where women, girls, are encouraged and supported to keep their babies, and if they have been abused or whatever in their lives and have gone out and got pregnant because they are looking for love, they have got to be supported.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes. Great. Thank you, Lee.

**Ms WHELAN:** That is all right.

**Ms COUZENS:** I really appreciate you being on today and wish you every success in locating your family. Thank you.

**Ms WHELAN:** Yes, me too. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, committee members. I believe that concludes the questions. Again, Lee, thank you so much on behalf of the committee for your valuable contribution today, and your submission. We truly appreciate you taking the time.

**Ms WHELAN:** I hope I was helpful.

**The CHAIR:** Absolutely. Certainly you were, and we truly appreciate the time and effort. We know that preparing your evidence, and we acknowledge that telling your experience, may be painful and confronting. So thank you so much for sharing that with us and making the effort.

**Ms WHELAN:** Thank you for the opportunity.

**The CHAIR:** No, thank you. The next steps will be that the committee will continue to hear from other stakeholders and take evidence and then deliberate and put forward a report with some very strong recommendations to the Victorian government. I know that you are in contact with Yuki, our secretariat, and it is fantastic to hear how she has been able to support you during this process as well. We can continue to keep you updated on the progress of the committee, but most importantly on the outcome and response from the Victorian government. Again, thank you so much, and we wish you all the very best in your endeavours. Hopefully we get to see you again in the coming months.

**Ms WHELAN:** Yes, that would be great. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Lee. Thank you again.

**Ms WHELAN:** Bye everyone. Thanks for the opportunity and for listening to me.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**