

# **T R A N S C R I P T**

## **LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE**

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

Melbourne—Wednesday, 16 December 2020

#### **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

#### **WITNESS**

Ms Yvonne May.

**The CHAIR:** I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to the elders, past and present, and the Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today. I declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria.

At this point I would like to introduce our committee. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans and the Chair of this committee. To my left is Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong; Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong; Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda; and of course you have met our Committee Manager, Yuki.

I would like to welcome Yvonne May here today, officially 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 platforms, these comments may not be protected by privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript and an opportunity to check through your evidence. Any transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible, unless they are marked confidential.

Please be aware today we have Reiko Hipple, who is with us. Reiko, who is just to my right, is from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support services. She will be available to talk to you throughout this hearing if you may wish to do so, or if you want to take a break. We can also put you in touch with Carfi or any other services at a later time should you wish.

The Committee is very interested in hearing your view and your experience of forced adoption, in particular the services you have accessed and, most importantly, what outcome you would like from this inquiry. I now invite you to proceed with a brief opening statement, which will be followed by questions from the members. We are in your hands, Yvonne, so you may start. Please be comfortable to put forward.

**Ms MAY:** So you just want a little resumé of where I am coming from?

**The CHAIR:** Basically what you would like—your experience, what message you want back to our committee in relation to your experiences with forced adoption in the past.

**Ms MAY:** Okay. Well, let me say first of all it is a horrific experience that no woman should ever have to go through, and during my time it was more horrific because I was pretty young and naïve, and sadly I never—this is just a brief thing—I never told my mother I was pregnant until I was eight months pregnant, because I thought, 'I'll have to tell her, because the baby has to come out'.

And the saddest thing for me regarding my mother—because I lived with my mother; my parents were separated; she did not even notice. It kind of makes you think, 'What kind of a woman was she?'. Look, she was a very intelligent, professional woman—had many degrees. And that is the saddest thing. The thing is that when I told her, I was taken to the Royal Women's Hospital once. She came with me. The social workers there were appalling. Let me say my experience with them was absolutely shattering. I am there, eight months pregnant, not in maternity clothes of course. I used to wear—because it was in the 1960s—shifts; you got away with it. Plus I was still at teachers college, which was even more amazing. Now I talk to my friends, and they know. They say, 'Yes, we thought so'. One friend particularly said, 'Why didn't you tell me?'. And, God, I wish I had. Anyway, that is by the by.

The social workers were appalling, so I do appeal to you if there are going to be social workers in the future—that they are well trained and they understand where the women are coming from, because let me tell you, this social worker had no clue. They were the most horrible people I have ever met. In their statement, which I have at home, they said that I was an 'ignorant woman who didn't say boo'. Well, I did not say boo. I was petrified. My mother said that I had been raped—that was to protect her—which was not true. It was a one-night stand. I never saw the guy again unfortunately; I have no record of who he was, which is pretty amazing. I was just an innocent young woman.

So we went there. That was the only time my mother ever came with me to any situation where I needed to be involved with my pregnancy. She never came, ever again. When the time came for labour I was put in a taxi by my mother—can you believe this?—and sent to the Royal Women’s Hospital all by myself. I do not know how I did it, really. I look back now—a lot of it is blocked out, let me tell you. It turned out it was a pretty—not horrific but a bad birth. It was a forceps delivery. I cannot even remember if I was knocked out; I do not know. I do remember the verandah at the Royal Women’s Hospital where all the naughty girls were put.

No-one ever came and talked to me, ‘How are you feeling?’, you know, da-di-da-di-da. Things were happening to my body that I was totally unaware of, and my mother had decided there was no way I could keep the baby, and of course so had the social workers, so that was it. I had the baby, went home, had six weeks off from teachers college—I cannot believe it—and I went back. Six weeks! Consequently I failed that year of teachers college. I must admit that the guy who was the head of the teachers college—his name was [name withheld] and he became very big in the education department—did allow me the six weeks off. He did not understand. He had no compassion or anything, but he did allow me that time off to be able to go back again. When I was back at teachers college I saw this counsellor. She had no idea either, really. I saw her twice, I think—I do not think people really understood the ramifications of it all. Probably I did not either, I think now looking back. I did not understand either.

My mother never spoke about it again ever—never, ever. My father, who was a doctor never knew. I told my brother and sister, who are both older than me, about 20 years after it happened, and I do not think they really understood either. I thought my brother might; he is a pretty compassionate person, but it was sort of just, ‘Oh, okay’. But look, it is a terrible experience if it is not handled with compassion and, to a certain degree, love. I know the women that I come in contact with, because I go to a support group, we are all the same. Our experiences are all the same. Many of them are broken women. Thank God I had the resilience, which I look back on now. I never attributed resilience to myself, but when I look back I think, ‘God, you survived that, and you got on with your life’. Anyway, so that is basically it.

About 20 years ago I tried to contact my son. I went through the Royal Women’s Hospital, and he did not want to meet me. So I tried again in 2014. I thought he might want to know the medical situation—anything medical—and he said yes. So we met, and it was very strange, but I realised then that for all those years—he was 48—I had been suffering grief, and I did not know. It is interesting, because I have two other children. My eldest daughter said to me, ‘I felt that you never loved me’. I do not know whether I had this feeling deep down, ‘They’re going to take her away’. And then I had another daughter, who I think probably felt the same thing. They both knew about it.

So I met him, and we had a relationship up until about 12 months ago. But he could not really handle me. He had a very sad life as well. So it just keeps rolling along. That was quite sad, because he actually lost his adopted mother when he was 10, and his adopted father never spoke about it—about death and losing your mum and that. So he grew up to be very closed and within himself. I do not think he could handle me, because I am a pretty open and honest sort of person. He could not handle the unconditional love. And he always said to me, when he finally decided he could not continue the relationship, that I treated him as his younger self, and I thought, ‘Yes, I did, because the last time I saw you you were a baby’.

I never even touched him, never changed his nappy—all that sort of thing. But he could not understand that. He is very narrow. Within himself he is very confined and does not express himself a lot, does not talk a lot. It is all in his head. Maybe one day he may open up. He has had counselling and all that kind of thing too, but I do not think it has helped. It is just the sort of person he is. It is a bit sad that he has not wanted to continue. But I have got to accept that and get on with my life, because life is short, and I do not want to be a bitter and twisted person like my mother. You have just got to accept it, move on. Who knows what will happen. I must admit I do hope he will one day say, ‘I’m sorry; I’m back’. I live in hope, so to speak.

There is one thing that I feel a bit guilty about. In the submission I never mentioned—and I do not know why I did not put it in—that I did have counselling kind of from the time I met him. My doctor and my psychologist were fantastic. I used to go to my doctor every couple of weeks to touch base—and she sort of went through the whole thing with me—and my psychologist. But for some reason I did not put it in there. I do not know what stopped me. It is quite strange. But I was on those health plans.

So that has really helped me. I probably would not have got through it without both of them and also my husband, who has a philosophical outlook on life and can philosophise. So it is pretty shattering all round, you know. You have got to move on, and that is what I have tried to do. The reason I thought I would come today is not so much for me—well, yes, for me—but for these other women, these broken women. The kind in my group who go to counselling, then they stop. They maybe do not have contact with their child, and they say, ‘I’m going to just go and knock on their door and say, “I’m your mother, da-di-da”’. I do not think they know where to turn to. They are lost, and there are quite a few lost souls out there in this situation. And all they want to do is just know that their child is okay, not necessarily have a relationship but just know that they are okay. I certainly did not get that at the time. I was sent back and told, ‘Now, get on with your life’.

One thing I particularly remember is—and it reflects my mother more than anything—the woman across the road from us had a baby quite young. And my mother said, ‘You could go and babysit’. My mother was very domineering, and she sent me over there. This was just after I had been through this horrible experience, and I reflect on that and think, ‘God, how did I do that?’.

Anyway, my biggest wish is that adoption could stop and that we were never in that situation, but if we do have adoption, that it is done with a caring heart, particularly for the woman. I am appalled at males. Well, like in my situation, it was difficult to follow up. But there are women who know who the males were—their boyfriends or whatever—and know their names, but none of that was ever traced. Their responsibility was kicked out the window, and it all fell on the woman. I guess as a society, sadly, as women, we are seeing this probably more and more but are rectifying it also. I would like to see that, if possible, the males have to have responsibility, although I know it is very difficult. I do not know what the answer is in that respect, but I know it is very difficult.

I just hope that it is an open situation, if it happens, between the mother and the adoptive parents and that it can be a cohesive group or family—not secretive. Although I know a lot of adopted children are told quite early on, some of them are not. Boy, I can imagine the shock at finding out. I have read a few things about it and how women feel, finding their mothers when they are 60 or 70. If they are very lucky, their mother is still alive. I would just like a really compassionate look at women of the future and men taking, if possible, some responsibility.

**The CHAIR:** Okay.

**Ms MAY:** I will have a drink now.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes. Go for it.

**The CHAIR:** You sure can.

**Ms MAY:** I have raved on enough.

**The CHAIR:** No. That is perfectly fine. We might at this point open up for questions. I will start with Christine, if I can. But thank you, Yvonne.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks, Yvonne. We really appreciate you coming in today.

**Ms MAY:** Thanks for the opportunity.

**Ms COUZENS:** We get to read your submission but having you here and a face-to-face discussion about your experiences is really valuable for us. So we really appreciate you coming in today.

**Ms MAY:** I appreciate you guys being here.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you. You talked about the group of women. Can you just expand a little bit on that. Is that within ARMS, for example?

**Ms MAY:** Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** So it is part of ARMS?

**Ms MAY:** Yes, ARMS is the support group that I go to. It is interesting because I went early on when I contacted my son, and it was my elder daughter who suggested I find it. She said, 'Find some support group so you can help, because identifying with other people is pretty important'. And so she actually took me to my first meeting with ARMS. There are women in similar situations, very different stories of course, and I have just found that it is a place where you can talk to them if you want to. If you do not want to, you do not have to. They are very compassionate and quite often say, 'Oh, yes, I was on the verandah at the women's hospital too'.

Like anything it is nice to have people that you can identify with, but I must say that I do find a lot of broken women there. I do not know what it is—my sort of age, my era. For these women who had children during the 60s there no support. A lot of them had partners or husbands, but I do not know how supportive they are. And their kids, but I do not know whether their kids—they probably support them now that the women are older; I am not sure about when they were younger.

Like, my kids were little when I told them, and you cannot expect them to support you then, and I think it is in the back of their mind. With me particularly it is a bit of a sad story because one of my daughters embraced it; the other daughter rejected it. And it is quite interesting because she always said when I told her, you know, early on, 'It would be nice to have a big brother', and when it actually happened, she rejected him. She kind of had the view that he was using me. She is a psychologist. Whether she could see other things happening I do not know, but it was sort of from day one she rejected him. She never met him. She had one phone conversation with him and summed up that he was a bit of—I want to say this politely—he did not have a lot of brains. He is not a worldly person, whereas my kids are. We all talked about everything, but obviously when his adopted mum died the father just did not speak about it, so very closed. So that was interesting, and I think now that it has happened and we do not have contact, she is a bit different, this younger daughter.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes?

**Ms MAY:** Yes. We have not really talked about it because I find it a pretty touchy subject for some reason, like she has got all the answers and I have not. I think my answers come from the heart and hers come from her knowledge. So that can be difficult. But I just find the women within the group—and I have been going now since it happened, so it is nearly over six years—just are very supportive and you can speak up if you want to and people support you. It is usually support that they give, not criticism—there is no criticism at all—or you know, what they would do to help. And many women still cry about it. It is quite heartbreaking.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes. So, you did mention some counselling earlier on. Do think there is enough counselling and is that adequate counselling—should there be a very specific focus on training counsellors around these issues?

**Ms MAY:** Well, the person I saw was a psychologist. She had never dealt with me and my situation before, and the thing was—this is how I see it—adoption is horrific and what we women went through is just unbelievable, but so many other factors come into it as you do the journey. Okay, he was adopted—and that was the end of it, but I still had all these feelings within me.

And she helped me through that, but as time went on all this other stuff came into it. So I do not think necessarily they need to be specifically trained, but I think that they need to take the journey with the woman at her pace and where she wants to go. I think unless you have been in the shoes of women like me, it is very difficult. You can be very compassionate and understanding and all that, but you have got to go through it—it is like a lot of things in life, isn't it—to really appreciate where they are coming from.

So that is how I see counselling. There were so many other factors involved, because I have a feeling of rejection within me. My father rejected me—he left when I was three—and all that comes into it. There are lots of things. But I certainly think that if counselling is provided all the women that I come in contact with, it should be ongoing, not just, 'Start here, stop'. And of course you have got to find the right counsellor. People chop and change, don't they, until they find the one. I think it would be really beneficial. I think the support group is as well, but it is not as deep. There are some women in the group that—my mind boggles—have had two or three children adopted. I think that is so sad. What they went through—they were sent to homes; I just could not imagine it. And they survived, but I tell you what, some of them are pretty screwed up, badly. The forced adoption had a part, but I think there are lots of other factors. I think as well the fact that my family—

okay, I was the one where the child was taken, but my family were also affected. My kids, my husband—I do not think a lot of people realise that either. It sort of spreads its fingers everywhere. It is a bit like a cancer.

I do not think you will ever get a solution. I do not think there is a solution, but there is a way of getting on with your life and moving on. Otherwise you are just destroyed. I did not want that, because life is short.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Michaela?

**Ms SETTLE:** Just a quick question for you: when you wanted to find your son and you talked about going to the Royal Women's Hospital, were they helpful at that point in trying to get those records? How was that experience, in wanting to connect?

**Ms MAY:** Well, it had been taken over by DHS, because it closed and all our records were sent to DHS. I was given a social worker, who got me the records, because I had not seen the records up until five or six years ago. That is where I saw another social worker. Look, she was helpful, but she did not say, 'Look, how are you, emotionally?'. I do not know whether that was her job. She seemed to have a cut-and-dried job. She got me the records. She found my son on the electoral roll and then she let me know that he wanted to see me, and it kind of ended there. She met with him also to hand over the records. Is that their job? I do think, social workers, if people in the future contact them, they should have a much broader role.

**Ms COUZENS:** I would have thought so.

**Ms MAY:** You know, to catch those people who may say, 'Yeah, that'd be great. I'd love to have some sort of counselling'.

**Ms COUZENS:** But even that emotional support, I would have thought that was the role of a social worker.

**Ms MAY:** Yes. But no, it was not, and it was pretty cold, I suppose you would say. I mean, she did her job. I got the records, and that was the end of it. I would have liked a bit of a follow-up—just maybe a quick email, 'How are you going?', you know, just something simple. I know it is difficult working in departments and you have got to do this. But I just thought it would have been beneficial if there was a follow-up.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Heang, a final question?

**Mr TAK:** Thank you, Chair. Just a quick one. You said that you have also sort of come to know quite a number of mothers that are lost souls and all of that, moving on and getting on with life and all of that. What do you think that this committee should be making as a recommendation to the Government? What should we do?

**Ms MAY:** Yes, from my point of view, well, we have had the apology, which was fantastic. We have also had the statue built—I forget what it is called now—just around the corner, which I think is fantastic, because my group, ARMS, we meet each year at the statue and have a reflection, and then we go on to have dinner or whatever. And I think that is very worthwhile.

I think for the mothers now it would be great for them to be offered counselling even at this late stage, because I know some women had children in the 1970s. I do not know about the 80s. So they are not old like me; they are younger than me. I think unconditional counselling and help, if that is what they want, or offer them, 'There's this support group, or would you just like to talk to another person that's been through your situation?'.

When I first went to ARMS I met with Jo. I do not know if you know Jo. First of all, before I even went, she heard my story. And then the first time I went to the meeting I told the group my story. I think that is cathartic. When I wrote my submission, that was cathartic, and this is cathartic, because it all helps in the accepting, because you cannot go back and change it, sadly. But for the future I certainly think that even getting us as women who would be willing to go and talk to a younger woman who is pregnant and has to give up her baby. I think even that could be worthwhile. Look, I think anything you can throw at it is going to be worthwhile, and also the recognition for these women, even though we have said we are sorry—and that is lovely and it is really nice—to have some personal opportunity for them to help them I think would be fantastic.

I really like the idea of the adoption birth certificate just having the mother's name and the father's, if that is the case, and also the adoptive parents, and that they all meet, that it is open, if that is the way they want it, because I do know of one particular case where it was very difficult, although it was supposed to be like that, for the mother to have contact with her child. And these parents put up a barrier. And I guess that happens, but therefore then I think that she needed the support, because she was told initially, 'This will be open. You'll be able to'—and it just did not work out that way. So I guess whatever you say you carry through. I was a teacher, right? And that is one thing I learned: do not say anything that you cannot carry through.

**Ms COUZENS:** So you obviously went back to teachers college and passed.

**Ms MAY:** Yes, I went back to teachers college, and I finished. And I became a teacher for many, many, many years.

**Ms COUZENS:** So you are not teaching now?

**Ms MAY:** No, I have retired, and I am not sorry about that, because it gets harder and harder each year. Teaching is not an easy job.

**The CHAIR:** No, not at all. I think that concludes the questions. Thank you very much for being here, Yvonne, and sharing your experiences and your valuable contribution today in your submission.

On behalf of the Committee, again we thank you for your time and effort in preparing for the evidence. We acknowledge that revisiting the past can be painful and confronting. The next steps will be we will begin deliberating at the end of our public hearing process and make some very strong recommendations, so please be assured that your evidence will take part in our deliberations. The Committee will table its report next year by 1 July, and we will make sure to keep you updated in relation to that, but most importantly with the Victorian Government's response as well to our report.

If there is anything that you would like to add or anything comes to mind, please feel free to contact any one of us on the committee and in particular Yuki Simmonds, from our secretariat. But again, thank you for taking the time—

**Ms MAY:** Thank you for listening.

**The CHAIR:** and sharing your experience—and all the very best.

**Ms MAY:** Thank you. Thank you very much. It has been good, and I do hope that some positives come out of it.

**Witness withdrew.**