

# **TRANSCRIPT**

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

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

Kangaroo Flat—Tuesday, 30 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 Yvonne Stewart, and

Ms Beverley Sutherland.

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**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans and the Chair of the Committee. To my left is Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda; Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong; and Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their elders both past and present and any Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today.

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 welcome Yvonne Stewart here today. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, so whatever you say here today is protected against any action but if you go outside and say some of the same things, including on social media or other platforms, it may not be protected. So you can say anything you want here today. It is your opportunity.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, to my left. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Any handouts, presentations et cetera will be placed on the Committee's website unless confidentiality has been requested.

Today we also have Holly Donoghue with us. Holly is from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support services. She is available to talk to you throughout the hearing but also, most importantly, you can get in touch with Carfi for other services at a later date should you wish.

The Committee is very much interested in hearing about your experience in relation to forced adoption and in particular the services that you may or may not have accessed. Most importantly we want to hear what outcomes you would like from the inquiry, and that is why we are here today: to hear from you. Again I take this opportunity to thank you so much for being here. We are in your hands, so please feel free to make the opening statements, and that will be followed by some simple questions from the Committee members. So thanks, Yvonne. We are in your hands.

**Ms STEWART:** May I introduce my daughter—to my husband and me. She is my second daughter, Beverley Sutherland—my third daughter.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome, Beverley. That is fine. It is one of those days anyway.

**Ms STEWART:** It is one of those days! Yes, well, I have always counted [REDACTED] as—when she came back. [REDACTED] is my daughter that was surrendered for adoption. When she contacted me, I said, 'I will never take motherhood from your mother, because she has raised you, she has done me a favour and she has looked after you', and I never, ever did. We had a good relationship.

Now, getting back to the start, I was going with a young chap. I was 16 and he was seven years my senior. He had a Catholic name. It was back in the era when Protestants did not marry Catholics. And it was more than me affected by that—there were many. My father and mother would not have a bar of me marrying, and I was too young anyway. However, I was five months pregnant before I even told them. My elder sister and I were sitting at the table in the kitchen. The rest of the family were all in the lounge. We were sitting there, she was reading a paper and I was reading a paper, and all of a sudden she said, 'When are you going to tell us your secret?'. I can remember just crying and crying and crying. But that was a relief. She was wonderful—and her husband. They lived up at Robinvale, and they travelled down every weekend to support us.

There was never any question about me keeping the baby. Once I had the baby and I was in hospital—yes, it was different. But while I was carrying—I should go back—if we had visitors come to the house, I had to hop in a wardrobe and hide. Mum and Dad would try not to encourage the people to stay too long in case I had to go to the toilet. But it was horrible. It was dark and dingy and uncomfortable, but because I felt guilty that I had let my parents down, I did what they wanted me to do. To this day I feel still that I let them down, and that has been really hard.

I went on and had little [REDACTED] and I never ate for three days in the hospital. A nurse came in, a big lady she was, a young nurse, and she sat in the chair in the room—I had a room to myself—and she lit up a smoke. Now, that is not done nowadays. I said to her, ‘What weight was my baby?’, and she said, ‘Do you really want to know?’. I said, ‘Yes, I do. That’s my baby’. You know? That’s my baby. So she told me. Then before I knew where I was, I was signing adoption papers. I can remember my mum saying, ‘Just put ‘father unknown’’. Well, I wished I had put his name because when [REDACTED] contacted me there was no father listed. I contacted him and made sure he knew where she was, and he went and met her. I wanted to tie up all the loose ends. When she contacted me on the phone I was organising my husband’s 60th birthday—the table was just here and the phone was just on the wall there—and my young son hopped up and answered the phone, and she must have asked for Yvonne.

I hopped up and took the phone and she said, ‘Is that Yvonne Brastrup?’. I knew immediately who it was. Immediately I knew, and I took her number down. She gave me her number. She said to me, ‘Are you able to talk?’, and I said, ‘Um, no’—like that. So she gave me her phone number and I thought I wrote it down right, but I wrote it down wrong, so the next morning I thumbed right through the phone book trying to find this number and I could not find it. Bev was working at Eaglehawk community health centre, and I rang Bev and I said, ‘[REDACTED] has made contact’. I said, ‘I wrote her number down wrong’. ‘Leave it with me’, she said. ‘I’ll see what I can do’. Half an hour or so later I was talking to [REDACTED] I said to her, ‘Darling, I’ve had every birthday with you’, and she cried. I said, ‘There hasn’t been a day of my life that I haven’t thought of you in some way, even though I went on and married’. I had three daughters and two sons, but [REDACTED] was still there. She was there, tucked away.

Anyway, we met. And there was one son that I never, ever told about her because he worked closely with my husband, and I did not want to tell my husband about it because he would not have coped with it. I thought about this and I thought, ‘Well, I’m not deceiving him because I would never be untrue to him, but if he knew, he wouldn’t cope with it and he would throw it up at me all the time’. So he went to his grave never knowing, and that son does not know either, to my knowledge.

Anyway, I am talking to [REDACTED] She rings me occasionally and I ring her occasionally. It is certainly not the same as the children I have raised because she has had her own mum and dad, and now they have both gone she is looking to me more. But I also said to her, when I met her mother, I said, ‘I would never take motherhood from you’. I said, ‘That’s your little girl. You’ve looked after her for me, and I’m so thankful she went to a good home’. But you know, it has been really, really hard, and I have never had counselling for it. It has had an impact on my mental health. I suffered with depression for a long time. I think my marriage would have been better, because it certainly was there in the background. I think a lot of things—things could have been so, so different if I had had counselling and brought it out, but I did not. I locked it in there and I felt the shame. I felt the shame of letting my parents down. My parents were very strong in a religion like Brethren, so I really felt that I had let them down.

Of course I was under age, and my father said, ‘Now, if you don’t have anything more to do with this guy, I won’t have him charged’. And I said, ‘All right’, so I never. But I had to go to the police station and give a statement. The policewoman there wanted to know exactly what happened—how, why, whatever—but also the church leaders. Now, there were no qualifications there. One of them sat me down and wanted to know the same, and I thought that was just so rude. Here I was just telling a man everything and how it happened, and that was embarrassing to the very core. It has just been so hard, the shame I have felt all the years. I have felt like a soiled woman. I felt like I did not deserve better than anyone could give me.

Maybe I should have taken some notes for you.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** They asked about the services that may have been helpful or not helpful.

**Ms STEWART:** The services?

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** Doctors, hospitals—whoever you have had contact with.

**Ms STEWART:** No, I have had no mental help with this whatsoever, not from the hospital, not from doctors, because I did not tell them. Right? I kept it hidden as much as I could and wore it. But it has really had its effect, even at my 60th birthday. [REDACTED] and her mum and her partner were invited to my 60th birthday, as was my second eldest daughter, and someone said, ‘Oh, who’s that over there?’. Of course I was not ready to tell people, and she piped up and she said, ‘Oh, that’s Mum’s illegitimate daughter’. And I was really hurt by that.



There are ways and there are ways. Yes. But never, never, never would I have ever done the same to my children; I would have always taken their babies and helped them look after them and nurtured them. I do not know what the difference is in being a mother like that or being a mother like me—I do not know. But I did tell my mother, when she had had a stroke and she was in the nursing home, that my little daughter had come back to me. I said, ‘Oh, it’s just wonderful’. And she said, ‘Oh, I couldn’t see why it would be’. And I said, ‘Well, Mum, that must be where you and I are different, because it’s been the most wonderful thing’. Yes, it really has. At different times through the years I would say to my mum, ‘Oh, I wish I knew where my little girl was’. And I remember one time she said, ‘Oh, she’s dead’. I said, ‘She’s what?’. ‘She died at birth’. I wore that for a few days, and then I thought, ‘If that had have happened, I wouldn’t have been signing adoption papers’. So, yes, through the years it has just been there and knocking on the door, and I am so glad she has made contact, so glad. And I think of all the ones that do not contact their parents—boys and girls—their parents must grieve for them terribly, you know. Yes, it is the natural thing. I think that is about—

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** There is so much more, isn’t there?

**Ms STEWART:** Perhaps I should have taken notes.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** No, I just mean it has had such an impact, hasn’t it, on all relationships.

**Ms STEWART:** Horrible, horrible, horrible. I am old and I am broken.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** No, you have got a comeback left in you.

**Ms STEWART:** Never mind.

**The CHAIR:** I will pass on to the questions at this point, but I will take this opportunity to thank you, Yvonne, for your evidence and sharing your experiences with us. If there is anything else at any point, please just jump in, but I will just allow some of the Committee members to put forward some questions. Christine.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you. Thanks, Yvonne, for sharing your experience with us today. Obviously it has been very challenging for you, so we do really appreciate the time and your submission. You talked about not ever having had counselling. Was there any support provided to at least offer you the opportunity of counselling?

**Ms STEWART:** No, not when she was born, no. Well, see, I kept it hidden.

**Ms COUZENS:** Okay. So you did not tell your doctors or anyone?

**Ms STEWART:** No. The church said it was never to be mentioned again, so therefore I did not.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** But how many mental health in-patient admissions did you end up having with the depression and no-one really dug it out—several times.

**Ms STEWART:** Look, I had a very interfering mother-in-law who lived not far from us. I never, ever had the children baptised and she would come down, you know, and that was really hard. She told me I was raising a bunch of heathens and, you know, that I should be getting them baptised and so forth. I just felt I never had control even of my own children, that we never had any choice. That would not happen with me; I have never ever and would never. Maybe I could say I learned a lot from my mother-in-law.

**Ms COUZENS:** Okay. That is a positive way of looking at it!

**Ms STEWART:** But I preferred that they made their own choices in life, and I do not feel wrong in that to this day. They have made their own choices.

**Ms COUZENS:** I agree with you, by the way. My children are same.

**Ms STEWART:** Yes, yes. But it did impact on me and I took an overdose, and I was mentally ill for—oh, a long time. I was in the psychiatric hospital back there, and I do not think they really did much good for me.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** You were in there two or three times, weren’t you?

**Ms STEWART:** No, only the once.

**Ms COUZENS:** Was that in Bendigo?

**Ms STEWART:** That was in Bendigo, when the old psych hospital was way up the back—Stella Anderson.

**Ms COUZENS:** So you never mentioned the trauma of—

**Ms STEWART:** No—because probably, maybe, I did not really realise at the time that it was impacting.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** But for a long time you struggled with the religious hold too.

**Ms STEWART:** Yes, the religious—it took me years to be able to shake that, because they had brainwashed us, you know, from little. And that is where the guilt came in, I think. And I think once [REDACTED] came back and made the contact I saw things differently. I probably felt I was blessed rather than feeling otherwise.

**Ms COUZENS:** So do you think that helped your mental state?

**Ms STEWART:** Yes.

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

**Ms STEWART:** When Dad was 60. What would that have been—1993.

**Ms COUZENS:** Okay. So it is a while back.

**Ms STEWART:** Yes. It is nearly 20 years. Well, it is more than 20 years, because Dad has been gone 22 years.

**Ms COUZENS:** And do you think having specialised counselling services—I know you have not used any, but if the offer was there, do you think that would make a difference for women like yourself? I know it is a bit challenging when you have not gone down that path, but I am just curious what your thoughts are.

**Ms STEWART:** It is hard to know. I always felt it was just something I had to deal with.

**Ms COUZENS:** And do you still have that view?

**Ms STEWART:** No. In actual fact my health has given out lately, because there has been so much stress over the years. The last 3½ years I have not been well at all, and apparently the stress has got to my body, my physical health as well. So I am starting on 7 April to have counselling—but not for this, for the rest of it.

**Ms COUZENS:** Okay. And do you think you will talk about this then?

**Ms STEWART:** Well, I will. I kind of did not include this in it, because I did not see how that long ago could have impacted me. But I know it was terrible. It was just terrible, yes. And when I was out of hospital and going—if there was a pram anywhere, I would have a look to see if it was anything like me.

**Ms COUZENS:** And is there anything else you think is really important in terms of the recommendations from this inquiry? Is there anything else of note, from your experience, that you would like included in the recommendations?

**Ms STEWART:** I would like no more forced adoptions. If someone cannot afford to keep their baby, or a young girl is not able to for some reason—you have got to think at 16 we were not allowed to have any contraceptives; we were not allowed to have any pension or anything like that. You had to go ahead and have the baby, and there was nothing, nothing to help you. So I was living with Mum and Dad on a little property at Marong at the time, and I was reliant on them for an income. How could I bring a baby into that and expect them to look after it? They just did not want to do that anyway. There was a lot of guilt—a lot of guilt. And I have never felt good enough for anybody.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks for that, Yvonne. I really appreciate you sharing your experiences.

**The CHAIR:** I think that concludes the questions.

**Ms STEWART:** That is it?

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Thank you so much, Yvonne, for being here—

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

**The CHAIR:** and for sharing your experience.

**Ms STEWART:** I am sure this will help me.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, absolutely.

**Ms STEWART:** I am sure this will help me—and that is why even though I have not been well I put my name in, because I thought this could be what I need.

**The CHAIR:** Absolutely. We truly do appreciate you being here and presenting to us today. The next steps will be that the Committee members have got a few more public hearings to conclude, and then we will deliberate and put forward some strong recommendations to the Victorian Government. We are hoping to table the report before 1 July, so Yuki will be reaching out and keeping you up to date with the progress of that. And you will receive a copy of the report as well. But again, I do on behalf of the Committee thank you so much for being here today. Also, Beverley, thank you.

**Ms STEWART:** Thank you. I hope it was as much a help to you.

**The CHAIR:** It certainly has been.

**Ms STEWART:** Yuki, you can use my name as Yvonne, because I have got to learn to own it.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** They played quite a strong role, didn't they, the religions back in those days.

**Ms STEWART:** Oh, yes, strong.

**Ms COUZENS:** They have got a lot to answer for.

**Ms STEWART:** All under the carpet, yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** That is right.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** A lot of people's reputations get protected.

**Ms STEWART:** We found out afterwards that my mum had had two babies. They had five big properties at Balranald. Grandad always had a lot of men on the farm helping him, and Grandma had women in the house working. And they would go away and buy sheep and leave the little girls all in the care of the workmen and the housemaids. And at 13 Mum had got pregnant, and Grandma broke the broom handle over her back because she had got pregnant. As soon as my mum told me that, my love for Grandma just went out the door. Well, then she had another one at 17 or 18, and she breastfed him for six weeks before having to give him up for adoption. And that was Bendigo railway station; she had to walk across the bridge there and pass him to the parents. I know; there has been too much of it, you know. And it is time it stopped. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you again. All the very best.

**Witnesses withdrew.**