

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria

East Geelong—Wednesday, 31 March 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Mr David Southwick

Ms Christine Couzens

Mr Meng Heang Tak

Ms Emma Kealy

WITNESS

Name withheld (1).

WITNESS

Name withheld (1).

The CHAIR: Good morning. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans. To my right is Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong, and to my left is Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda. I will start the proceedings.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to their elders, both past and present, and any Aboriginal elders of any 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 [name withheld] here today. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, so anything you say here today is protected by that privilege, but if you go outside and say the same things on social media or any other platform, that privilege will not cover you.

Also today your evidence is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of that transcript for you to go over and check as soon as it is available. Any transcripts or PowerPoint presentations that you hand to us will be placed on the Committee's website unless confidentiality has been requested.

We also have Holly Donoghue who is with us. Holly is from Carfi—and you have met Holly; thank you. She is an external provider of psychological support services, and I think it has been explained, but I will just reiterate, that if you need to talk to Holly at any particular point, it is within your ability to do so. We can also put you in touch with Carfi after the hearing.

The Committee thanks you from the outset for being here today and putting forward your submission. We really do want to hear about some of the experiences in relation to forced adoptions but also the services that you may or may not have accessed and most importantly what outcomes you would like to see from this inquiry. I now invite you to proceed with a brief statement, which will be then followed by some questions from the Committee members. Thanks again, [name withheld], for being here.

NAME WITHHELD: I want to thank you all for taking the time to listen. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Our pleasure.

NAME WITHHELD: I was not really sure what was expected, so I have just written my story in bits and pieces, okay. I have changed it, actually, if you have got a copy of the one on the website. My daughter helped me with that, and there were certain things I did not want her to know, so they are now in this one, not in that.

The CHAIR: Okay.

NAME WITHHELD: Sadness and guilt are the first words that come to mind when I think of the last 46 years of my life. In 1973 I was an innocent 14-year-old girl, pregnant and in hiding. I grew up in a family with three brothers, a fairly happy family and one which was always on the move, my father being in the army. I was small and petite. I was not sure if I was pregnant or not at six months until my mother asked, because she was suspicious. I denied it, and then my dad asked and I admitted it. We went to the doctor's and I was over six months pregnant. From then on I felt like the little girl over in the corner, where everyone made the decisions; I was really never sure what was going on.

My boyfriend's father was in politics at the time, and so we were bullied and threatened into silence. It was very crucial that the information was not leaked to the public. I was told that it would be front-page news for the *Truth* newspaper back then, which was a yucky paper, and it would ruin [REDACTED] career. [REDACTED] started to see our family doctor. She said to him that [REDACTED] would not have been old enough to father a baby; it must have been one of my brothers. [REDACTED] mother arranged for me to be sent to an unmarried mothers home, where I became very homesick, and much to their disgust I was brought home by my family.

I spent the remainder of my pregnancy in my bedroom. The door was locked if visitors arrived. I was lonely and scared and hidden from the world. [REDACTED] told my mother that [REDACTED] could have us transferred through politics to another place, but my father refused and also said that he would pay for my medical expenses as I was his

daughter, so he would look after me. Their position was more important than ours. My beautiful brave dad had just come back. He was a warrant officer in the army. He had just spent 12 months in Vietnam in the highest decorated unit in the Australian Army.

I only went out to go to the doctor's, and even then I had to bob down in the car. I never went into the waiting room. I had to go through a side door and straight into the doctor's room because Mum was so scared that people would see. That door is now bricked up. It is still there, and I look at it because I live across the road. I was dropped off at the hospital by myself. My family were down for my brother's wedding, and family and friends were told that I was away with friends. A few days later I was induced and sedated. I have no memory of my baby's birth. I was only ever told that it was a boy, and I was never allowed to see him. I was alone and scared. I still remember the nurse coming in. She stood against the wall and verbally abused me and told me I was a bad person. She left the room, she came back and she said, 'You've been crying'. I told her I had not. She said, 'Yes, you have'. I had just been quiet. One nurse asked the other nurse if she should get the heat lamp for my stitches. Her reply was, 'No, she can put her backside to the window and pull up her nightie'. I lay like that for about an hour. I did not dare move.

I read on my paperwork years later that the nurse had said that I was very uncommunicative. Looking back, I was scared, as the paperwork showed, and drugged. I spent Christmas alone. [REDACTED] was born on 23 December. It was awful. I was scared, alone and felt like I had ruined other people's lives. I never saw a social worker until the time I went to sign the adoption papers. I remember sitting with my head down and the social worker telling me to sign, and I did not want to. I would not answer her. So she said to me if I did not sign the form I would go to a girls home and the baby would go to a home anyway. I signed the paper. This is the biggest question I want answered: how is this possibly legal?

I got home, and my mother said to me, 'We will just go on with life as if it never happened'. We never spoke of it again. My mother died suddenly when I was 27; she took the secret to her grave. I did not go back to school for fear of questioning and worrying about what everyone would say. I knew that they knew, and I was not allowed to talk about it. I decided to get a job—I was not a little girl anymore—so I got the first job that came along to me. I took a job in a deli. Then one day I came home from that job, after being there for three months, and [REDACTED] had been in touch with my mother and told her that she had arranged for me to have another job. She had arranged for me a job in town, which I went and got. My boss later told me that I only got the job because of her. Really, she only got me the job because [REDACTED] could call in on the way home from school to see me, where this way was in the opposite direction. So it was really clearing.

For the first year after [REDACTED] was born, every day I got home from work, I had tea, I went to bed and I just cried myself to sleep. I always dreamed of seeing a baby. I could never see the baby's face. The dreams stopped after I met [REDACTED]. At 16 I started socialising with a family relative and went on to meet my now husband. We have three children, and after each child I became more depressed. I have anxiety and panic attacks. I went to the doctor and he said I needed to deal with the baby that I had given away and diagnosed me with PTSD, depression, anxiety, panic attacks and social anxiety, and I was put on a lot of medication. He sent me to a psychiatrist, who unfortunately treated me with more medication. I slept all day and had to set the alarm to pick up my children from school. When my doctor found out about this, the treatment was immediately ceased. The doctor then went on to counsel me himself. He put me in touch with [REDACTED] [REDACTED] who was running the Geelong Adoption Program here in Geelong. Dr [REDACTED] told me I needed to apply for my medical records so I could get some information on what was going on, and I did. And they told me they were no longer available; they had gone. His words were, 'Like hell they have', and he rang them and I now have a book of every bottle my baby had.

[REDACTED] [REDACTED] said that I should get in touch and tell [REDACTED] that I was going to search for the baby so he could tell his wife, if he had not already. It was the right thing to do. I think because the adoption was closed they thought that I had no hope, and so they were not concerned; they did not think I would find him. I started my search with my non-identifying information, his date of birth. His adoptive parents named him [REDACTED]. He went to a small country town. His mother was a nurse and his father was a bus driver. I found him from that information. Never underestimate the determination of a mum looking for her baby.

I gave all the information to [REDACTED] as I believed [REDACTED] had a right to know who his father was, and all the paperwork at the time, as on all my paperwork it has 'Father unknown', which was very degrading. The only thing I asked of [REDACTED] was that he not have [REDACTED] meet his mother. She was a huge part of getting rid of [REDACTED]. The last time [REDACTED] sat down with me, he mentioned he had met [REDACTED]. I felt like I had been stabbed in the heart. I

had played my part in this cruel game, and I felt betrayed. Unfortunately my relationship with [REDACTED] is now very strained through no fault of [REDACTED]

I cannot explain how it has affected me. I am so hurt, I have shut down and could say it has opened the wound back up. I am now back in counselling. I texted [REDACTED] about this, and of course I was dismissed. That is how the [REDACTED] deal with things. I could not go to the supermarket on my own. I could not go out to dinner. My children missed out on so much. I just was not well enough to do to go anywhere for a very long time. Of a day, I would drop my kids off at the school and I would go and sit outside my doctor's in the car in case anything happened so I could be close. I had no friends. I never joined any social groups. I was so anxious all the time. Now, looking back, I have no idea how I functioned. I have been on antidepressants for longer than 40 years and will be on them for the rest of my life. A huge amount of guilt I feel because of the cost of doctors' bills, counselling, medications and being unable to hold down a job. To this day and for the rest of my life no amount of medication and counselling could fix what is broken. I just get through each day.

For a very long time I have suffered from the severe secrecy that the family had to endure because the paternal grandfather was a politician, and because of the adoption it was about keeping the secret safe. We were threatened and we were bullied because of the stake of his job. Even to this day when I see [REDACTED] in town I hide. It is still affecting me on a daily basis. I scan the shopping centre when I walk in, not wanting to see her. One day [REDACTED] saw me and called out my name. I walked faster and faster away from her and ended up hiding behind a Christmas tree. You would think with them being in politics they would have been able to help, being in touch with the legalities of the process. The unmarried mother's pension was then brought in. To this day I feel so much guilt about the cost of the medication and doctors' visits because of the depression and the lack of education, and I was unable to help support my family financially.

I was asked what the government apology meant to me. They were all hollow words. It means nothing. I feel like we are the minority because we are still in hiding. We are not heard. We can never, ever get back the time and the love which I feel I have lost during the years with my children. I can never remove the guilt. I can never replace what they have missed out on because of the multiple medications that I had to take that made me unable to function as the parent I could have been. I do not want to keep the secret anymore. It has been years of misery for me and for my family. I believe we deserve compensation—the equivalent of a gold card. Then maybe more mums may come forward for some help they truly deserve. Thank you. This is a picture of [REDACTED]

The CHAIR: Thank you, [name withheld], very much for your courageous submission to us. We truly appreciate it; we really do. I might begin just by asking you: you have spoken about a number of treatments and how important your doctor has been in providing you support. Are there any other support services that you have received or were not able to receive? Could you just elaborate a bit more about some of the support groups? Were they helpful or not?

NAME WITHHELD: At the time when we had GAP, the Geelong Adoption Program, my doctor, Dr [REDACTED] was a very good friend of [REDACTED] [REDACTED] so he got her to contact me, and that is how the process started. I did not even go the first time. It was held at a place called Pregnancy Health, and I thought, 'Oh, my God, they're going to think I'm pregnant, walking into there'. Anyway, I finally got there, and they then started the process, because I would get into my doctor's and it would get to here and it could not come out. So we then decided to do the search. That was huge; that was a huge support group. Unfortunately it is no longer, and when [REDACTED] left they decided not to continue it. I think someone at the upside-down building was organising something. So we went out on our own, and Dr [REDACTED] got us a little old house next to Geelong hospital which we would run the meetings from and he paid for the telephone.

We ran it from there for a couple of years, but that has now gone. So we got in touch with ARMS in Melbourne. They were looking for someone to run some groups—outsource some groups, so I said that I would. We have a shop, so we had the first meeting in our shop, and then I got some room space at the Belmont community centre there. They have allowed us to use that room, which is wonderful. We have a little room there which we can use on the first Saturday of every month. We have approximately nine of us that come along, and that is it. We provide our own tea and coffee and our morning tea, yes, but other than that there is not any real counselling. My girls say, 'I don't want to go to them. How would they understand if they haven't given up a baby?'. So we sort of support each other; if one of us has an issue, we sort of support each other. And of course it is the secret. You have a doctor and you build up that rapport, so that takes a long time anyway, yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Heang.

Mr TAK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you. It must be very difficult to talk. But in terms of support, what do you think is the role of specialised trauma—in forced adoptions, an informed counselling service?

NAME WITHHELD: What is the role of it?

Mr TAK: Yes. Would that help, do you think?

NAME WITHHELD: I do not think so. I truly do not think so. I have been to counselling for years and years and years, and I am now going to counselling again with a lady who seems to understand and has read my story. She is wonderful. Unfortunately, because of the secret, it is stuck, so if you are stuck, then you have to go through all this and jump through hoops to get—I was so lucky I had a doctor who was high up in Geelong and was able to make a phone call and get me my information. All the other ladies are like, ‘I can’t get mine’. So they cannot get theirs, because we do not remember what happened. I have got a medical sheet, and it states that I was drugged for three days. I never knew that. I just remember going to sleep pregnant and waking up with no baby. If we cannot get that, we cannot put the story together anyway. So it is more about our paperwork. We support each other, I suppose. The secret is still there, and the ladies are getting older and older and older, and if they have never told their husbands or their children, they are not about to now.

Mr TAK: So the peer-to-peer support has also helped, from your experience.

NAME WITHHELD: Yes, we help each other.

Mr TAK: Okay. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Christine.

Ms COUZENS: Thanks, [name withheld], for coming along today. We really appreciate your submission and your presentation today and understand how challenging it is for you. We do really appreciate having your submission on record, so thank you. Can I just clarify the difficulty you had in getting the records? Can you just build on that a little bit?

NAME WITHHELD: Yes. As I said, I am one of the lucky ones. I think Dr [REDACTED] ended up being the head of the doctors association in Geelong, and what Dr [REDACTED] said—when he asked, they jumped. So I was very lucky. He delivered my baby. He just rang. I have got the freedom of information paperwork here, and it tells me that it is not available. The other girls just get to that stage, and it is like, ‘What do we do now?’.

Ms COUZENS: Do you believe you have got all the records that were kept during that time?

NAME WITHHELD: I think I am very lucky. I think I have got the majority. I have got every bottle my baby had, every nappy that was changed. I have got all the information that they have put about me. The only thing that was very distressing to me—like, if we could have our babies’ fathers’ names on the record. We were not allowed to. It was like, ‘What’s your baby’s father’s name?’—‘No—I don’t know’. That is not a really good look. I know there are a lot of girls—there are always different situations for some, but that was one of my big issues. I would look at it and just cry and think, ‘That’s so untrue’. Then when [REDACTED] and I got all my other records I was reading through them and I saw [REDACTED] name, and I thought, ‘I never did that. I never put his name on my information’, and the pages do not add up. I spoke to [REDACTED] and she said that she went with [REDACTED] years later and they put it down, just in case there was anything needed. Things like that, that are just—why make me keep the secret?

Ms COUZENS: And in terms of this inquiry and the recommendations this committee is going to make, is there anything in particular that you feel really must be a recommendation from this inquiry?

NAME WITHHELD: I am thinking something like the gold card. My medication and my doctors bills and my psychologist—even though we have 10 free a year, that is still above \$50 extra for the one I go to. My doctors visits are not bulk-billed. The medication—I always comment that it costs me more at the chemist than it does at the supermarket—has just been ongoing for all these years, and you feel guilty. You start to feel like, ‘I’m taking the family’s money, my children’s’—and I needed to take this medication to function. So I think that is probably one of the biggest things.

Ms COUZENS: So a form of compensation?

NAME WITHHELD: Yes, absolutely.

Ms COUZENS: Whether it is a gold card or whether it is expenses?

NAME WITHHELD: Yes.

Ms COUZENS: That is what you would see as being significant?

NAME WITHHELD: Yes, because that is all they can do. They cannot give us our babies back. They cannot make things—I am meaning the situations; nobody can make them right. They are all very different. We cannot get that back. I was told one day by one of the other ladies, ‘You realise when you meet your son, he is not going to be a baby’, and I thought, ‘Oh’. He was 30, so I was not getting a baby. It had not registered in here.

Ms COUZENS: Do you think recommendations around direct access to records, those sorts of things, are important as well? I mean, obviously you have got most of yours, but there are a lot of women that do not.

NAME WITHHELD: Yes. I think it is just that they just make it so hard that you give up. And when you are already trying to do it incognito, it is just so hard. They tell you it is gone, it is just gone, and it is not gone; it is there. Someone does not want to look, or someone does not want to let it go. I do not know. I sort of think I am proof that it is there. And the drugging—my sheet is three pages long, of all the medications, the hospital medications, that they gave for the labour. That is how I found out why I could not remember my baby’s birth. Yes, some of the girls would probably—it is sort of like I think we have held on for so long and so long, and there are just not enough of us. Like, you have got your demonstrations in the street. Those people will stand up there. We are not going to stand on the steps of Parliament. There is no way. We would have to have bags on our heads, because ‘Aunty [REDACTED] might see me’. So that is why there are not many birth mums out there. I think I am now one of the youngest of the closed adoptions.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you so much for that.

NAME WITHHELD: No problem. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Christine. Thank you so much, [name withheld]. Again, on behalf of the Committee, we truly do appreciate you sharing your courageous experience with us. The next step is that the Committee will deliberate on all the evidence that we have received, and we will put forward a report to Parliament before 1 July. It will be a report with some very strong recommendations. Again, we thank you because your submission will take part in our final report. At any point you can stay in touch with any one of us, including our secretariat—Yuki—to keep up to date, but we will be in touch nearer to the time that we are going to be tabling the report.

NAME WITHHELD: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, and all the very best.

Ms COUZENS: Thanks, [name withheld].

NAME WITHHELD: Thank you all for the opportunity.

The CHAIR: It is a pleasure.

Witness withdrew.