

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 (2).

WITNESS

Name withheld (2).

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for being here today. I will just run through some of the proceedings that I have to. 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 the Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today.

I declare now open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans. To my left is Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda. To my right are Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong, and Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong.

NAME WITHHELD: Right. I think I have seen your face, because I am originally from Ballarat.

The CHAIR: There you go. Today all evidence taken by this Committee is protected by privilege, so whatever you say here is protected, but if you say the same things outside, on social media and other platforms, that privilege may not be protected.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, who are just to my left, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript. That gives you an opportunity to just check it through as soon as it is available. Any presentations or handouts to the Committee will be placed on the Committee's website unless confidentiality has been requested.

Today we also have Holly here with us, and Holly is from Carfi—she is at the back, yes—an external provider of psychological support services. Holly is available at any point if you need to talk during the hearing, and most importantly we are more than happy for you to get in touch with Carfi after the hearing as well.

Today is an opportunity for you to tell us your experiences of forced adoption. Clearly we want to hear what you would like from this inquiry, some of the issues and some of the challenges and clearly in relation to some of the services that you may or may not have accessed. So we are really in your hands. We want to hear your experiences, and I do acknowledge that it can be challenging. As I said, we are in your hands. Take your time, and after you present, our Committee members will put forward some questions to you. Thank you again for being here. We understand how challenging it may be, but as I said, take your time.

NAME WITHHELD: Well, this is just a rough copy of what I sent to Yuki. I was not going to bring it. Well, I do not know where to start. Look, I will just start at the beginning. I think I would rather just say it rather than try to read it. I went to St Joseph's. As I just said to the ladies out there, I query 'forced adoption' because you are not forced but you have got nothing else. I could not take my baby home because no-one wanted to know about it. My family were and still are—it is a no-no. Even just recently my brother sent a message around to say that one of his sons and his girlfriend are having a baby, and then, 'Out of wedlock—how horrible'. And I thought: in 2021, 'Out of wedlock—how horrible'? So that is where it is—still there—and so I just feel immense shame. I never have been any different.

Anyway, going back to it, I went to St Joseph's. I had nowhere else to go. The nuns were fairly terrible, but they took me in when I had nowhere else to go. I was taken to a room with an iron bed, a chest of drawers and a curtain across the front—so no privacy. And then you were made to work, made to scrub stairs every day, even when you were nine months pregnant, with the nun and the rosary beads dangling there telling you you were not doing it properly, to start again. Then every morning you had to get up and go to mass, and the priest would say how bad you were, the only way you can make amends is to give that child to someone that wants it, because you did not—and how wrong that is.

Then the hospital was another horrendous thing. You would go over for your checks, and you would have whatever doctor was there, and then you would have all these other faces peering in—because you were an unmarried mother, so the doctors learned from you. So that was all horrendous. And then on the night that I had her, which was actually the Saturday before Mother's Day—she was born on Mother's Day, the first baby born on Mother's Day, but that was discarded. You were just made to feel so bad. Anyway they did not realise I was having her and I was still left in the corridor. So that was that, and she was taken straightaway. Then because

the afterbirth did not come away, before he manually took the afterbirth away, the nurse said, 'Oh, you'd better give her some painkillers', and he said, 'Oh, no, she's an unmarried mother'. So with that I had a hand up and clawing at my stomach to take it. That was horrendous. As a result of that, when I went to have my own children I miscarried about three times—I think it was four actually—and in the end they realised that I had an incompetent cervix from that doctor and I had to have a stitch each time. So the trauma just went on and on—never ending.

Then I think the only thing that got me through it all was I thought, 'I've never been away from home and stayed away from my parents', and I missed them so much. I thought, 'At least I've got a home and it will be normal and that might help', because you are told, 'Forget it; it did not happen. Go home. Forget it'. I walked in the back door and my mum was there—and she was a wonderful mum; they were wonderful parents—but she was just peeling the vegies and said, 'Oh, the fire's on in the telly room. Go in and sit down. I'll let you know when tea's ready'. No kiss or cuddle. I think from then on I lost—out there I did lose friends. I have got no warmth in me now. Even with my own two children I find it hard to kiss and cuddle them because I just feel that the only thing I have got is to step back and I will not get hurt. I know it is silly, but I just feel that—and I don't want to cry. There was so much hurt that I cannot come to—then, going back, 'Never mention it'. I went home and was told there, 'It's a fresh start'. No-one talked to me about it. I went to bed that night. My sister was in the bed beside me. We were like that. Not a word—'How are you? Are you glad to be home?' or anything. I just remember lying in the bed, crying and remembering everything. It was terrible. I will probably jump ahead.

We moved down to Torquay about 11, 12 years ago, and I just got dreadful depression, just shocking. I would stand at the ocean and think, 'If I just had the guts to walk out, it would be over', because somehow the memories get worse as you get older—far, far worse. I ended up going to the doctor, and he was the first person I ever told this story to, apart from the girls in the group. So naturally he put me on antidepressants and sent me along to this counsellor that cost a fortune. But I suppose the only thing that I got out of that was she made me see it, because I have always felt inferior. I have always been told going through school I would never be as good—I am the youngest—as my sisters. I would never achieve as much; I was not good enough. It was just ongoing all the time. So I guess this counsellor helped me to see that that was embedded in me through that. And then again at the convent the nuns there just told you all the time that you were just so bad and so wrong, and it just went on and on and on. And I suppose that was the only thing—I wrote down yesterday the dreams that I have even until now. I mean, it sounds ridiculous, but because this was on, I suppose you are thinking of it. Last week I dreamed that I actually had a baby, at my age—I was my age—and I could see it being born. And then my mother took it. My mother is dead, you know. So that is how it is still in you. And I am still ashamed. The other girls are good—they say it out to people. I cannot. I cannot bring myself to say it. When people say, 'How many children have you got?' I just say, 'Two'.

And of course I had a reunion with this daughter, but she blamed me for giving her up. She had been to a clairvoyant who had told her while I was carrying her—it was through me to her—that she was not wanted. And all I wanted to do was to stay pregnant to keep her there, you know? That was all you wanted. You knew while she was there, you had her. And you knew that the minute you gave birth to her she was gone. So that did not work out. I tried hard; it just did not work out. And in the end it was wrecking me too. You would have a phone call from her before you went to pick up the children from school and she would say, 'You didn't want me. You got married later and had other children'. She did not stop and think I was not offered any financial help. I was not able to take the child home. How does someone that has lived in Ballarat—and even though it sounds ridiculous, your maturity was so low because you had been in this cosseted little house and environment for so long. I could not have gone to Melbourne and just started out; you just could not do it. And no-one offered to help me. So I think that having met her probably made it a little bit harder because now I feel that guilt that she had, you know? By saying all those things it made me feel worse—but anyway. So that is basically it.

Mother's Day every year is dreadful; it is just so dreadful. So I think that is roughly my story—my history, really; it is not a story. I mean, I can remember my wedding day, I can remember standing at the bottom of the aisle with my father and thinking, 'Everyone's looking at me. They all know. I shouldn't be doing it'. I got married on a Friday instead of a Saturday. I married in not white. I did not want to pretend I was a virgin or anything, like everyone was supposed to be. So even that, I have no happy memories of it at all. It is sad, isn't it. I mean, we just celebrated 50 years, and I think it meant nothing either. So anyway—a broken person, I think. It sounds awful, doesn't it.

Now I am just on Lexapro for the depression. I had a stroke 18 months ago, and I firmly believe that part of that was a result of all this, because it never leaves you. You go to bed at night and it is all you think of. You just go through that hospital, walking over to it. The whole thing, the whole treatment that you got there was so bad. You would never think, going back, that it would still be with you, I would not have thought.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, [name withheld]. I know it has been really difficult and challenging for you to revisit that again with us.

NAME WITHHELD: It is.

The CHAIR: But it has been absolutely important for the Committee members to hear of your experiences. I might just start with a question in relation to what support services you sought—or it may be that you did not have any support services.

NAME WITHHELD: No, I can never remember—

The CHAIR: Would you like to see that being a—

NAME WITHHELD: It should be. I cannot remember meeting a—what are they? What is the word? Someone that is supposed to guide you on what to do and everything.

The CHAIR: Counsellor.

NAME WITHHELD: The nuns just gave you papers to sign all the time. You never knew what you were signing. She was a scary nun, the head one, and I still cannot even remember signing the adoption form. I would not have a clue. But all I can say is I was like a child—and whatever was put in front of you you signed. You know, you just did not question it, and with this nun you would not have questioned it. It is only now that I have found out that, I believe—I do not know whether it is true—the convent would have got government funding for me. I do not know whether that is true or not, but I do know that my partner did pay. I did not know that until about a year ago, that he did pay the nuns for my accommodation there. He would come and visit each Sunday and obviously paid for the week ahead or whatever, which I never knew. That was not money that was given to us. If you went to get something—like I just said to the girls, I cannot even remember what clothes I wore or anything—you had to go and ask if you could have some money to go up, and they would give you a ring to put on so you would not like an unmarried mother. They would give it to you, and you would have to come back with whatever you had bought. Maybe it was knitting; I can remember I knitted a couple of babies things. You had to come back with the receipt and the change and give it back to them.

The CHAIR: What would you like from this inquiry to be one of the outcomes? Is there something—or a couple of things or a few things—that you think must be in this inquiry?

NAME WITHHELD: Well, what we went through would not happen now. I think even people that are not married that have babies would not be treated the way we were if they were keeping their babies. But I think the hospital was the biggest thing with me—the way I was treated at the hospital. But it is not like that now, so that cannot be changed. Even when they did an apology, it was so ridiculous and unfeeling, and even when I tried to get my papers I was just sent around in circles all the time. I just wanted to actually read my papers from the hospital, but no, that was not happening.

The CHAIR: So were you able to access—no?

NAME WITHHELD: No. I did pay, and after a while I heard nothing and rang back. No, that was not enough; that was only to pay for the initial form and you had to pay again to get the papers. And then I got told that because the hospital had changed they did not have those papers anymore. They were somewhere, but they did not know where they were. I do not know why—the doctor would be dead now—but I just wanted to have a name for that person that said what has stayed in my brain all these years: ‘She’s only an unmarried mother; don’t worry about her’, because I think that is the thing that hurt me the most. But what can be done, I do not know. A few of them say they want a gold card or they want this, but nothing would change. It is done; it has happened. Yes, I pay a lot of money now for medicines and that, but who is to say I would not have been paying it and had these problems anyway? I sort of feel that being reimbursed now is only saying you are getting paid to give your child away, so I do not feel comfortable with that. I know that I did find out that the people that adopted her paid the church and then the church also paid the nuns, and I just think that is so

horrible. They have got this beautiful baby. Why should they have to pay for it? So there is just nothing you can do that can change all of that.

Ms COUZENS: Thanks, [name withheld], for coming along today. We really appreciate you telling us your experience and how challenging that is for you, so thank you so much for your time today.

NAME WITHHELD: It is okay.

Ms COUZENS: When you talk about the girls, are you talking about the support group that is in Geelong?

NAME WITHHELD: The support group, yes. We are just so close and have the best friendships I have ever had. I have got friends from school from way, way back, but [REDACTED] was at St Joseph's just before me—the year before, I think it was—and [REDACTED] out there married the partner, the father of the child, like I did. It is like we were meant to meet. It has just helped in so many ways. They are closer than my sisters, who I love dearly, and if anything happened to them I would miss them so much. But they do not relate, they do not know, they do not want to know: 'Keep it away from Ballarat. Don't let anyone'—you know. I just find that really hard in this day and age. The stigma is still there.

Ms COUZENS: I take on board your point that compensation is not going to change anything that has happened.

NAME WITHHELD: No.

Ms COUZENS: But we have heard a lot of evidence from women around some sort of compensation, some sort of redress for what happened to them. In saying that, some of it was criminal activity. We need to make recommendations from this inquiry to the Government—obviously we cannot fix anything but—to at least have something in place, things like specialised counselling, for example. I know you have said that you have had very little counselling; is that right?

NAME WITHHELD: Yes.

Ms COUZENS: Whether that would make a difference going forward for many other women, including you, for example, and whether that compensation would assist in covering the costs of that mental health support that a lot of women require now—I am interested to get your views on that.

NAME WITHHELD: Well, it is very expensive. I went to a counsellor and I cannot think of the—oh, [REDACTED] on [REDACTED] My doctor gave me a Medicare thing to get it, but it was still \$98 a visit out of my pocket, and I felt bad because it is out of our joint money, and we are retired. Money is not pouring out. So for anyone that is wanting that, yes, I firmly believe, because we just did not get any help. We did not get anything. We were just, 'Home you go. Forget about it'. Probably if I had had counselling then, if I had had even maybe just the family talk to me about it—I can remember writing to the Catholic welfare place to see if she had been adopted. I got a letter back that I have since found out was a lie. Mum took that and burnt it because she did not want me to have the memory, evidently. But she did not tell me that; she told my older sister. You know, just things like that, whereas if they had spoken, then it would have—yes. So for people that are in my position it is a help. I suppose it helped; I do not know. Maybe that would help me with the Lexapro. I did not think I would have a tear in here, because I do not cry. I do not know. I am lost, and I have been lost, and I think it will go to the grave with me.

Ms COUZENS: I think the important thing is to be assured that the supports are there, and the specialist-type counselling is really important from my perspective and from listening to the many women that have given evidence.

NAME WITHHELD: Well, they are probably all similar stories, aren't they, really.

Ms COUZENS: Some are worse than others, but there are some horrific stories. For me personally it is not their fault. This is something that has happened to them that is horrific, and we need to put whatever we can in place to—obviously not make it right, because it is never going to be right. But at least the support is there to help them cope with the trauma that they have experienced.

NAME WITHHELD: Yes, well, I suppose I just look at it and think: how do you ever take the trauma away? That is what I cannot—

Ms COUZENS: Well, I do not think you can—

NAME WITHHELD: No.

Ms COUZENS: but I think you can help through specialised counselling services—services that understand what you are going through and what you have experienced.

NAME WITHHELD: Yes. I mean, even coming here and talking I feel shame.

Ms COUZENS: But you should not.

NAME WITHHELD: But I do.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, I know, I know.

NAME WITHHELD: It is just here, and I just never feel good enough anywhere I go. I am—yes, yes—just lost.

Ms COUZENS: It is great you have got that support group to be involved in. That is fantastic.

NAME WITHHELD: Yes, yes, it has been a lifesaver.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, yes. I did have another question, but it has gone out of my head now. I did not write it down. Maybe we will move on.

The CHAIR: We can move on to Michaela.

Ms COUZENS: Sorry; thank you for that.

Ms SETTLE: Again I want to say thanks very much for sharing your experiences. They are obviously very painful. If there is any way that we can make you feel comfortable, please know that we support you and hear you. In terms of trying to change it, perhaps, for women that are still going through trying to find their children and so forth, how did you find your daughter? Did you use a service, and should there be more supports around that reunification? Do you think it would have helped if there had been—

NAME WITHHELD: I think some of them have found their children and are in a good place with them, but they still have not got that baby they gave up. I think that is the thing: you meet someone—I know I did; I met her. She looked like my husband's sister, so I knew she was ours, but she never gelled with me. She gelled with my husband, and I used to say, 'But he didn't offer to marry me'. So probably in that area after-counselling would have been good, but I had nothing there. But I also realised that at the time her husband sought me out. It was not really her, and I feel that maybe they were having troubles and he thought, 'If I find her natural mother'—and I would not have gone looking for her because in my opinion I gave her up and her parents had done the hard yards and I had no right to suddenly come in and say, 'I gave birth to her; I want her back now'. So unless she had found me I would not have done that, because that was sort of the deal that I made way back then, that I was not going to disrupt her life at all, that she might be perfectly happy and not even worry. Some of them do not want to know their birth mothers. They think, like █████ did with me, that they just discarded them, and they do not want to know what you went through and how it happened or anything. They just do not want to know it.

Ms SETTLE: Did they use something like VANISH or FIND—the different services that—

NAME WITHHELD: I think he went straight into the births, deaths and whatever. And because I filled it out because I was never told—I was not told anything of what to do. And I just filled it out with my proper name and my partner's proper name, and so it was probably easy to find. You know, the other thing was she never really wanted to be with me on her own; she wanted to get to know the whole family. And if she was with them, she was not with me. And then she had a child at that time, and he asked us to go to his—I cannot remember if it was his communion or confirmation. We went down, and we were met and she said, 'Sit at the back of the church. My mum's at the front', and then when we went to the house, 'Don't come inside. My mum's in there'. So you are naturally made to feel second rate. So they were all the things that happened.

The CHAIR: Thank you, [name withheld]. Heang, do you have a question?

Mr TAK: Yes, thank you, Chair. It is not a question. I just would like to say thank you very much. We have heard through other submitters about feeling the guilt and being broken, but I just want to say that you are not broken. The fact that you provided a submission to us here today is very important.

NAME WITHHELD: Thank you. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Heang, for that. Thank you very much on behalf of the Committee. We truly do want to thank you for being here. I know it has been challenging. You are courageous.

NAME WITHHELD: Not really.

The CHAIR: You have really been able to be here with us and share your experiences. If at any point you require support, reach out to any one of us here—or our secretariat. We are here for you. Holly is available as well. The next steps for the Committee will be that we want you to know that your submission and what you have said today will be part of our deliberations for the final report, a report that will be tabled in the Victorian Parliament before 1 July this year.

NAME WITHHELD: Right.

The CHAIR: There will be strong recommendations to the Government, and as I said, at any point you can reach out to Committee members or our secretariat. But be assured, before we table the report there will be communication to you, advising you when this will happen.

NAME WITHHELD: Right. Okay.

The CHAIR: On behalf of the Committee once again, thank you for being here.

NAME WITHHELD: Thank you for listening.

The CHAIR: No, it has been an absolute pleasure to hear from you. I echo the sentiments that Heang made, and I hope that we get an opportunity to see you again. We wish you all the very best.

NAME WITHHELD: Okay. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Take care.

Witness withdrew.