

# 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 (4).

**WITNESS**

Name withheld (4)

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans. To my right are Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong, and Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda. We do have Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong, but she has stepped out. Thank you very much for being here today. I will just read out the proceedings.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their elders, past and present, and any Aboriginal elders that are here today. I declare open the public hearing for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria.

All evidence taken today by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, so anything you say here is protected by the privilege, but if you go outside and say those things on social media or any other platforms, you may not be protected. Today also we have Hansard recording to our left, so you will be provided with a proof version at the end of the hearing for you to check as soon as it is available. Any presentations or handouts will be placed on the Committee's website unless they are deemed confidential in nature.

Also Holly is here from Carfi—she is just behind you, and I believe you have met—who is an external provider of psychological support services, so she can talk to you at any point, including after the hearing. We can also put you in touch with Carfi.

We are here today to hear from you and to hear your experiences and most importantly what you would like to see from the inquiry. We are in your hands, so take your time. Before you begin, if you could just state your name for the record. Thank you.

**NAME WITHHELD:** My name is [name withheld].

**The CHAIR:** Take your time.

**NAME WITHHELD:** I had my baby stolen from me in 1960. I did not even know I had had a baby. I had no birth certificate—nothing. I got a birth certificate sent to me from my daughter, and it has got 'adopted' written on it. 'Adopted'—that is the only one I got. I never got one from the hospital or from Vic BDM or anybody. I have done quite a bit of research. I have got quite a bit of paperwork. I have only got some of it here. But the lies are still coming. I sent away to New South Wales to find out a few things, and they sent me back a letter. And it said that the adoptive parents were born in Britain. I know they were not. The adoptive mother was born in Queensland and the adoptive father was born in New South Wales. I had got all of this after my daughter and I had been reunited, and I have just found out so many dreadful things. It is awful. At the moment I have not spoken to my daughter for about three or four years. I do not know what I have done. She will never be mine.

**The CHAIR:** It is okay. Just take your time.

**NAME WITHHELD:** I have got some paperwork from the hospital, a letter—I have had to transcribe it—from the nun. They kept my daughter in the hospital—the nuns—because one of the nuns there, her niece wanted a baby girl, and I have got a copy of the letter that she sent to the prospective adoptive parents. And it is not a very nice letter. My daughter did send it to me. She asked that it not be shown around. I said I would be showing it to the ladies from ARMS, the group that we were originally with. I do not know whether you want to hear what the letter said. Would you like to hear it?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, please.

**NAME WITHHELD**

St Vincent's Hospital, Fitzroy, N6, 5/1/60.

My Dear [REDACTED]

It arrived this morning—a little baby girl. Wishing you every joy and blessing for 1960 and many years to come. I have just seen it, a small baby about 6 pounds. I think will be dark, is at present. Now you just please yourself what you do. You are under no obligation to take it. Even when you see it, even then you need not sign papers until you are quite happy about it. Sister would like to keep it for about three weeks. Think about it and write and let me know what you will be doing.

Loving new year. Greetings to self, [REDACTED] and boys.

Your loving aunt,

Aunty [REDACTED]

She was the nun in the hospital. It is on the hospital stationery. It is faded and I had to transcribe it.

She was born on 5 January, she was discharged on 31 January to the adoptive parents and she was baptised apparently that day in St Patrick's Cathedral. I think it is in Melbourne near St Vincent's.

And then this doctor who did not know me has written a report on baby on 9 January 1960. I was not even in the hospital, I do not think, that day. I think they had discharged me:

Temperament of mother: placid. Worried during pregnancy: normal worrying. Any abnormal feature in mother: none detected.  
Family history: unblemished—

I think it says—

Girl's mother has been known to us for the past 12 years.

My mother had died in 1955, and I do not know him from a bar of soap, so it is a lot of lies again.

I do not know—that is about it, I think. Just the lies that were told—I thought I had had two babies because I had been admitted to hospital twice. I did not know, and they made me sign adoption papers and the birth certificate. There is a cross on the birth certificate where they made me sign it. I had not even had it, and they did that to me. I do not know. That is about it, I think.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Thank you so much. I know that was extremely difficult for you and challenging for you to revisit the past, and it is extremely difficult for everyone. Then we move to questions—okay. I might just, if I can, start with a question. I note in your submission—and if it is difficult or challenging, please, you do not need to answer it—you talked about your daughter and visiting your daughter. There is a point in relation to your daughter, and I am just trying to get some clarification. Your daughter had a child.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Do you just want to talk about when you reunited with your daughter? How was that? Was it difficult?

**NAME WITHHELD:** No, it was a lovely reunion. We just got on so well. For about 20 years everything was fine. She did—well, I helped her to—find the father's family. The father had committed suicide but not because of her or us, and she found his family with my help. From then things just went a bit skew-whiff. It is sort of hard to explain; there must have been other things as well. But we spoke on the phone for hours, didn't we? And it just all changed in a matter of 12 months or more. We went up about three or four years ago. I thought she might tell me what had happened, but she hardly spoke to me and I still do not know to this day what I have done.

**The CHAIR:** Have you accessed some of the support services?

**NAME WITHHELD:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Do you think that that could help, or—

**NAME WITHHELD:** No, I do not think so. Well, in the finish I thought it was a dream. I did not think I had had a child because I had not heard anything and had no paperwork or anything. So I just blocked everything out. Some things I remember, and other things I do not. Yes, it is just very hard.

**The CHAIR:** Christine, did you want—

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you so much for coming along today. We really appreciate your time and your presentation, which is really important for us in determining what goes into our report, so we are very grateful to you for coming along today. I know how challenging and stressful it is for you to do that, so thank you so much. I just want to ask you a bit about the information you have been able to gather over the years and what your experience has been. Has it been difficult to get information about the adoption when you have wanted it? Have you been able to get—

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes. They have told me lies there, but my daughter did send me down her adoption papers. I have got all of those. They are a little bit different to what the New South Wales Government gave me.

**Ms COUZENS:** Right. And what about the hospital?

**NAME WITHHELD:** The hospital—with a bit of difficulty I did get hospital records. I have not got them with me. St Vincent's did give me some records. That one where my daughter was discharged from hospital is part of the records that they gave me. But they did not believe that my daughter was kept at the hospital. They said, 'No, no, no, no, she would have gone to Broadmeadows'. 'No, no, no, she did not', I said 'She was kept in that hospital'. And that was eventually when they sort of gave me quite a bit of information, but not medication information, which I wanted.

**Ms COUZENS:** Did you get the birth records?

**NAME WITHHELD:** From the hospital?

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes. This is part of the actual birth records. I think she was born at 6.45 in the morning.

**Ms COUZENS:** And were you given drugs during that process?

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes. Well, I do not remember having her. I was in a ward, in a dark room, and a man kept coming in every now and then, and he gave me needles up and down my spine. I think that is why I am frightened of needles now, because—I do not know what they were. Yes, I just do not remember being in labour. I do not remember having her. I remember being in a ward. I was in a double ward, and at St Vincent's at that time it was across the road, the maternity section, near—I think there is a fire station or something over the other side of the road. I can remember being in a room with another lady. There was no door. There was just a curtain, and the other lady kept asking me where my husband was and where my baby was. And I did tell them. I think that was why they discharged me from the hospital. But other than that I do not remember anything else.

**Ms COUZENS:** And I could be wrong, but I thought in your submission you said your daughter had four birth certificates.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes. I did not bring them with me.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes, that is okay. I was just—

**NAME WITHHELD:** Each one is slightly different. Now, she sent me the one that has got 'adopted' on it. I pleaded with the Vic BMDs to have one without 'adoption' written on it. I did eventually get one. I have put it in a safe place, but I do not know where the safe place is.

**Ms COUZENS:** That is all right. I do that too.

**NAME WITHHELD:** I have got one that [REDACTED] sent me from the New South Wales BMDs. I have got one that they sent me—how many is that? I do not know if I have got three from New South Wales, and I have got my one—the actual birth certificate without 'adopted' written on it, and that one. But, see, they put a cross there for me to sign, and I think everything else has been filled in after I had left the hospital, because the man said to me, 'And what are you going to call your baby?', and I just looked at him, with my belly sticking out. I could not think of anything and I just said [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]—my name—and that is what has been put there.

**Ms COUZENS:** So, just thinking about the work that we are doing here with this inquiry and the development of recommendations as a result of your evidence and many other women's evidence, do you think access to the records should be a critical part of the recommendations—

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** in ensuring that women have access to that information?

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** And would you agree that specialist counselling should be part of a recommendation or not?

**NAME WITHHELD:** I think so, but not for myself. I have lived with this for that long. I am near the end of my life. What good is it going to do me? It is not going to do me any good. It is not going to do me any good.

**Ms COUZENS:** But if there are specialists, like a counsellor that has a focus on forced adoption, for example, would you see that as being valuable?

**NAME WITHHELD:** For other people; I really do not think it is any good for me, because I have lived with it for 60 years. It is not going to do me any good. Yes, for other people.

**Ms COUZENS:** So did you say you have had no counselling during that—

**NAME WITHHELD:** I have had no counselling. I had nobody. What did they have? A social worker. I never had a social worker. I did not know what they were. There was nobody at all.

**Ms COUZENS:** So you are part of the support group here; is that right?

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes, yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** So do you find that helpful?

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes, I feel uplifted. I am sorry.

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

**The CHAIR:** That is all right.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you. I appreciate it.

**NAME WITHHELD:** If there are no further questions—thank you so much. I know, and we totally understand, it has been extremely challenging revisiting, explaining and telling your experiences to us, but we truly appreciate you being here. You are courageous. Thank you very much for really—I know again I am going to say this, but we all sense your pain.

The next steps for us as a Committee will be to deliberate, and your submission and what you have said today will be part of our report that will be handed to Parliament, to the Victorian Government, before 1 July of this year. There will be strong recommendations as part of that report, and our secretariat—Yuki—will be in contact with you beforehand. There will be correspondence sent out to inform you of the report, when it will be tabled and further details. But again, today, thank you so much for being here. It has absolutely been an honour for us to meet you and hear your experiences. We truly do wish you all the very best and again, if you do need Holly, Holly is here to assist and for you to talk to at any point even after the hearing.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Can I just please say something about the hospital?

**The CHAIR:** Please.

**NAME WITHHELD:** I think they need to apologise to me. I have never been apologised to. I think they need to look after me medically, pay medical bills and I think they need to pay for my funeral. I think I need to be compensated for that.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Thank you so much. We are wishing you all the best.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**