

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria

Melbourne—Monday, 7 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 Marilyn Murphy, Mother.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. 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 all mobile phones should be switched off. I would also like to acknowledge the attendance of committee members. To my left is Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong; Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong; Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda; and David Southwick, MP, the Member for Caulfield.

I welcome Marilyn Murphy. 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 or other platforms, your comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Verified transcripts, any PowerPoint presentations that you may have and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible, unless it is of confidential nature and it has been requested.

Today we provide support services, so please be aware that Reiko Hipple is with us here today. Reiko is from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support. She is available to talk with you, whether it is after the hearing or during your presentation. Should you need to take a break, please let us know. Also we will put you in touch with Carfi and other services at a later date if you require that after the meeting.

The committee is very interested in hearing about your story, your experience of forced adoption and in particular the services that you have accessed and what outcomes you would like to see in this inquiry, which is really important. I know that this has been extremely difficult for you to be here and share your story, so I want at the outset, at the beginning, to thank you for being here today. We truly appreciate it. You will be given the opportunity to present a brief opening statement to the Committee members which will then be followed by questions, but at any point you can take a break. Please: we are here, we are in your hands to hear your story. Thank you, Marilyn. You can begin.

Ms MURPHY: First and foremost I acknowledge my Indigenous sisters who were incarcerated in the same facility as me in Western Australia back in 1970. They had been run out of town, pregnant to white males, where no trace of their offspring would be found or exposed or recognised. They were resigned to their plight knowing full well what their grandmothers and mothers had endured when their children had been brutally ripped from them. Also, in memory of my farming neighbour, Shirley Stirling, a part-Indigenous mother whose father's name—white father's name—was conveniently scratched off her birth certificate, Shirley was from Alice Springs, and at three years of age was sent to an orphanage when her mother died prematurely. Years later she had her own baby girl ripped from her lap the day she went to child welfare to ask for funds for baby formula.

It is now 50 years since I travelled on the Indian Pacific train to Melbourne to hide out like a criminal for the shame and entire blame—it may as well have been the Immaculate Conception—of being pregnant out of wedlock. If I come across forceful, I am not going to make an apology, okay? That is the way it is. Little did I realise back then there were other young pregnant women travelling from east to west or somewhere in between for the very same reasons. What brought about this insidious situation? I have asked myself this question many times over the years. Patriarchy—in particular religious patriarchy and misogyny, males in white collars and dresses who blame women for the downfall of mankind. Forced adoption was numbers for their church, dollars in the coffers for future generations. Secondly, males in white coats—medicos—giving subordinate females orders to do their dirty work. And of course all those attached to these hierarchies that would benefit from the spoils that were our sons and our daughters.

As one young mother-to-be was told at the Catholic incarceration centre—because that is what they were—she ought to be grateful because in biblical days she would have been stoned to death for her sin. Fortunately we have in some degree become a more humane society regarding attitudes about single parenthood. We no longer round young women up like criminals, incarcerate them and steal their sons and daughters at birth for the middleman to supply those unfortunate souls who cannot produce their own offspring—or a male or a female child, as it was in my case. I am thankful that I have lived long enough to see this barbaric practice almost stop—in Australia at least.

I fortunately was reunited with my firstborn 33 years ago and have had an ongoing relationship with her, but many tried to destroy it. Many tried to destroy it. I found her through illegal means—and I am proud of that—six months before her 18th birthday. And yes, I could have been incarcerated yet again for doing so for up to five years. This is how we treat women. This is the filthy, disgusting way we treat women.

But today I am fundamentally here for Victorian mothers to support them in their fight for justice. Many of these mothers were subjected to medical malpractice. It also happened of course across Australia. They were used and they were abused for medical experimentation during their pregnancies and the births of their sons and daughters. They were violated and exploited at the most vulnerable time of their lives with no-one to protect them. They were drugged senseless. I repeat: they were drugged senseless—some to the point of fitting—hoping they would forget the entire experience. But nature does not work that way, does it? It was a form of extermination. We were classified as faulty because we allowed—and we alone—this to happen to us. At the same time the adopters and their families—and I will say, I have been around adoption all my life; I know it well—basked in the joy of our sons and daughters. As one adult adoptee said, ‘When you ask me to be happy and celebrate my birthday, it’s like asking me to dance on my mother’s grave’. That sits very right with me.

Bringing it up to today—today, every time these mature women visit their GPs, it is with anxiety and trepidation. I have endeavoured to educate young doctors but to no avail, really: dismissive comments such as ‘I’ve never met anyone like you before’—oh, great!—or ‘That’s what happened way back then. It would never happen today’, great. When I suggest an apology from the AMA, it is too difficult for them to contemplate. They believe they are answerable to no-one.

How are mothers dealing with and coping with the trauma of this legacy in later life? Many not well. There are ongoing mental and physical consequences that they deal with in their daily lives. Some have been financially impacted due to the fact that sometimes they could not work for years. They were drugged senseless yet again to shut them down again.

At this late stage it is decent and ethical to look at some form of compensation, either in the form of a gold card, such as war veterans and their partners receive, or a compensation payment by the AMA and the government free of a statute of limitations and long-drawn-out procedures, as has been the case with the child sexual abuse, predominantly by the Catholic Church, hoping most of the victims will die before that can be consolidated. Many mothers—and this applies to myself—dread the thought of being institutionalised again. They should be assisted in every possible way to stay in the comfort and familiarity of their homes for as long as possible.

In a strange way I am pleased to be here today, 50 years after the event in my life. It demonstrates in some ways how far we have come from the condemnation, from the shame and from the secrecy and the lies about us. How many lies have been told about us! Disgusting lies. However, we still have a way to go. It is well and truly time to put all of the past right—transparency and accountability from the medical association of Australia. It is simple enough, actually. It is about grassroots healing, not just drugging; the integrity to say sorry. It is having the humility—they know the definition of the word—to face up to their major role of past practices of forced closed adoption and the untold heartbreak and suffering it has caused so many.

It is my duty of care to be here today for Victorian mothers, and I am proud to do so. It is time for the scales of justice to be balanced. I know, without a doubt, if it had not been for the interventions in these hospitals, I would have walked out of that hospital with my baby daughter in my arms back in June 1970. There would have been other answers. This medical malpractice, I finish with, needs finally to be addressed. They have got away with it for far, far too long.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Marilyn. I will allow the committee members to ask some questions. Christine, starting with you, thank you.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you so much, Marilyn, for sharing your experience with us.

Ms MURPHY: Pleasure.

Ms COUZENS: We do really appreciate the information. We read the submissions, but it is always really beneficial to sit across the table and hear those experiences firsthand, so thank you so much. I know it must be difficult for you. Could you explain the photo?

Ms MURPHY: Yes. Well, this was taken 30 years ago, three years after the reunion. It is myself, of course, and it is my lost-and-found daughter there, as I called her, and it is my two daughters from my marriage.

Ms COUZENS: Lovely.

Ms MURPHY: And as I said, I have been one of the fortunate ones because I found her so early in the piece, and really, just as well I did because I dread to think what might have been the outcome, because she had very low self-esteem. From her adoptive mother, I am sorry to say, she was not the nicest. But you know it is interesting, because even being here today there is this resistance in you, because you have been so dumbed down and brainwashed, to say it as it really is. I guess I have to thank you all, because actually I am saying it, more than ever before.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you for saying it. It is really important, so we do appreciate that.

Ms MURPHY: Thank you.

Ms COUZENS: And thank you for acknowledging the Indigenous community as well.

Ms MURPHY: Pleasure.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, I really appreciate that. Over the years did you get any support at all?

Ms MURPHY: I think I have been to six psychologists. One, she was a lady that dealt with child sexual abuse. I have always said that this runs parallel with the child sexual abuse. She was wonderful, so wonderful that the day after the session I came home—I was driving into the drive—and it was like a coat falling off me; it was that good. I mean, I had progressed along the way in my own way, with helping other mothers and being a member of an association of—I do not use the word any longer, relinquishing, because it was not. For some few it was, but for most us, no. And I have to say this—and shall I say, in professional circles it will not be liked. We had a woman in Western Australia, and she started off being very supportive to mothers, but unfortunately I think it all went to her head. She ended up being on one of the committees to do with the technology to do with—what is it—surrogacy and all that, you know, and I felt that was a slap in the face to us. The sessions I had with her were quite detached, but we were that desperate in those days, you know; you clutch at straws.

Ms COUZENS: Yes.

Ms MURPHY: Do you want me to really say how it was?

Ms COUZENS: Yes.

Ms MURPHY: Next to useless.

Ms COUZENS: Okay. And were there any other organisations that you have had any ties with?

Ms MURPHY: Look, I have had, since coming to—because I live in Victoria now, nine years—Victoria I have joined up with ARMS. That is always good, because we know—it is like the war vets, and I have nursed the war vets. It is like that, you know—the war wounded. You really connect and you help heal each other. Look, in all honesty the other organisation was an organisation called VANISH, and I am afraid I had one very brief conversation, which was fine, and then two other experiences with them, and all I can say is: not good. They do not get it. And I hear that they are actually the ones that are giving out funds and things, and I go, ‘Oh, my goodness’.

Ms COUZENS: Okay.

Ms MURPHY: So that is probably it. I think most of the healing has come, as I said, with getting with other mums. I attend a Geelong group, and we say exactly what we need to say.

Ms COUZENS: Yes; great. Thank you very much for that, Marilyn.

Mr TAK: All right. Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Marilyn. You alluded to compensation—gold card and the like. I just want to ask, but I must apologise in advance: do you think the other mothers should have anything to do with this inquiry?

Ms MURPHY: The other mothers should have?

Mr TAK: Anything we should hear? Yes, is that all right, or—

The CHAIR: The other mothers?

Ms MURPHY: I am saying all mothers—I think it should be across the board—should be given a gold card. That is for medical. Many of the mothers, as I said, are financially behind the eight ball, so they need that. To live out the rest of their lives in relative comfort they need some financial assistance to be able to do that. Most of the mothers I know struggle. Does that answer the question?

Mr TAK: Yes. Thank you.

The CHAIR: David.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Thanks. And thank you so much for appearing today, Marilyn, and telling your story. I just want to touch firstly on—you mentioned about the informal groups, the other mums: is there anything that you would suggest that we could be doing more to support those groups as opposed to formal groups that have been set up?

Ms MURPHY: Do you mean like the one I attend in Geelong?

Mr SOUTHWICK: Yes.

Ms MURPHY: Well, yes. Look, you have got to understand with all this: people are at different stages of evolving out of it. So sometimes they fall out of favour with each other—

Mr SOUTHWICK: Sure.

Ms MURPHY: and it is sad because the old one is ‘Divide and conquer’. I know the Geelong group was worried only six months ago where they were going to get the funds to keep having their meetings, because they decided to go separate to ARMS in Victoria—you know, the main thing.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Yes.

Ms MURPHY: If there was a separate body where they could put their argument forward and just say, ‘Look, there’s a group of us. We don’t want to be having to be asking for funds from this particular organisation. Can we apply?’. So it is completely an individual thing. They are my feelings on it.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Yes. Thank you. And just if I could go back in terms of the evidence you gave: you mentioned about searching out your daughter and having to do that illegally because obviously of the laws and the support was not there.

Ms MURPHY: Yes.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Had you tried in any way to find out any information and were you blocked at that point? If you could kind of tell us about that.

Ms MURPHY: Yes. Well, I went back to the family obstetrician. I think she took six months to get back to me. Now I understand all that.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Yes.

Ms MURPHY: Because they feather their own nests.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Yes.

Ms MURPHY: She set the adopted parents up. Can you say the question again, please?

Mr SOUTHWICK: The issues in terms of you trying to find information and how difficult that was—just trying to understand a little bit more about that process.

Ms MURPHY: Sure. Yes, I get it now. Sorry. Yes, look, and then I got in the dragnet of the Catholic system. When I approached St Anne's, now known as the Mercy hospital, it was very protracted. Finally I got the information. I will bring my partner in crime along here with me—we travelled the lobbying road in Western Australia. They could not find her records until such time as she said, 'I'll go to the media'. They quickly found those records, didn't they? Anyway, getting back to my own one, it took months, and then finally when it did come it was this pathetic thing like, 'She's alive'. 'Oh, thank God'. Because this is what we have lived with: is my daughter or my son alive or dead? I mean, we have all these things about this kidnapping. We go into frenzies over that. Thousands of women globally have lived with that for 50 or 60 years, and I think of those mothers that never knew. It is just wicked. So do you get what I am saying?

Mr SOUTHWICK: Yes, I do. Yes.

Ms MURPHY: It is like crumbs. Because that is the mentality still: you are the faulty one, you are the immoral one. And I will bring up a point here, and I am proud to say this: when it came to morality, if we are going to get into morality, the family that my daughter went into was far less moral than me. I mean, what a bloody joke that is. And these are the things you find out as you go along. But, see, they have had the upper hand, so they just have one finger pointed at you all the time, and it is very subtle, very covert: 'You remember where you belong, Marilyn'—or whoever it is—'You just remember, we saved you'.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Yes.

Ms MURPHY: I have come off the track a bit there.

Mr SOUTHWICK: No, no. I think it is important.

Ms MURPHY: But you get what I am saying.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Yes. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I just have one question. We had a couple of mothers previously just talk about a memorial acknowledging the past. I would like your view on (a) acknowledgement and (b) establishing a memorial—another memorial.

Ms MURPHY: Another one, yes.

The CHAIR: Another one; that is what I meant.

Ms MURPHY: Yes, right. Well, naturally the one in Western Australia I am very proud of—

The CHAIR: Yes, that is the one that we saw.

Ms MURPHY: Right, did you?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Ms MURPHY: because it is the truth. I went to the unveiling of the one here, wherever it is. I was shocked. What is it? This pseudo-artistic whatever it is. I mean, what an insult. That has been the theme, hasn't it? That has been the theme all along—minimise it, make light of it. Yes, well, I do think you should have another one. I do think you should. Look, one thing I have learnt: very cleverly they put them in positions where they cannot be seen by a lot of people, and I am against that. It is yet again another way that we keep this whole issue down. I think of my great granddaughter eventually saying, 'Well, gee, how horrendous that this is what they did to women'. So, yes, I think you should, and I think it should be up to the Victorian mothers to say exactly what they want on the outside here.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you. Any further comments? Marilyn, can I thank you very, very much for your attendance today and your valuable contribution and your submission. The committee truly appreciates the time—and I know it is extremely difficult—

Ms MURPHY: Can I just interrupt you?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Ms MURPHY: Actually it has been good.

The CHAIR: Has it? Okay.

Ms MURPHY: Thank you all.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That is good. And I just want you to know that we truly do appreciate you being here. Your submission will absolutely help us all in being informed and understanding and being able to put forward strong recommendations to the Victorian Government. We hear you; we have heard you today. Thank you so, so much for sharing the story with each and every one of us. On behalf of the Committee, again I thank you. Hopefully we are going to be able to present this report by 1 July next year, and you will be able to keep up to date with the progress of our inquiry.

Ms MURPHY: Lovely.

The CHAIR: And if there is anything else you want to add, by all means speak to Yuki, pass that on to any of us, but you do have Yuki's details. But again, thank you so much for being here with us today and sharing your story.

Ms MURPHY: Thank you all very much. It has been lovely. You have had compassion.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Thank you, Marilyn. It is a lovely photo too.

Ms MURPHY: Yes, because I think some people think, 'Are they real people? Are they real?'. There is that—what would you call it—obscurity. It works well.

Witness withdrew.