

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

WITNESSES

Ms Nancy Johnson, Mother, and

Ms Theresa Johnson, Support Person.

The CHAIR: Good morning. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their elders past and present and the Aboriginal elders of any other communities who may be here today.

I declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria. At this stage all mobile telephones should be turned to silent.

I would like to introduce my committee members. To my right is James Newbury, the Deputy Chair and the Member for Brighton; to my left is Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong; Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong; and Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda.

I welcome here today Nancy Johnson and her daughter Teresa. 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 and other platforms, these comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard to my right. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check when it is available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and any handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as they are available, unless they are confidential in nature.

Today we have support services available, so please be aware we have Reiko Hipple with us today. Reiko is from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support services. She is available to talk with you—whether it is after the hearing or even if it is during—should you need to take a break, so we are really in your hands. We can also put you in touch with Carfi and other services at a later point if you wish.

The Committee is interested in hearing about your experience, your story of the forced adoption, and in particular the services that you have accessed and what outcomes you would like to see from this inquiry. I now invite you to proceed with a brief opening statement to the committee, which will be followed by questions from the members. Thank you, Nancy.

Ms N JOHNSON: Where do I start?

The CHAIR: You could start by sharing your story, your evidence.

Ms N JOHNSON: My story that I have written to the—

The CHAIR: Yes, if you would like to start with your story.

Ms N JOHNSON: And then I can add on.

The CHAIR: Yes, you can.

Ms N JOHNSON: This is my story. I feel like I gave birth to a faceless baby on 13 May 1972 at the Women's Hospital in Carlton, Victoria. I was sent to a home for unmarried mothers. I was not given a choice. To me it was like a prison—a little room with a single bed, a wardrobe and a small window, a big shower and toilet, and one day room where we could sit and read, watch television or do our own things. We lined up in the dining room to be served with our meals. We were all given chores. We were made to work like slaves—really hard work. My job was working in the kitchen preparing meals and making sandwiches for the homeless people and handing them through a square hole in locked gates. This was frightening because I was not used to that and a lot of them were dirty and unshaven and were alcoholics.

We were given a ring to wear on our wedding finger to hide the shame—'Face the fear of shame'. We were told to ask for God's forgiveness for the terrible sin that we had committed. 'No man would marry a second-hand woman if they knew I had a child outside marriage'. 'I would not make a good mother'. This hurts me now.

When I gave birth to my son, I did not see him, cuddle him or hear him cry. He was taken straightaway into another room to a crib probably with 'BFA'—born for adoption. My son was intended for adoption. I faintly remember seeing something white in front of me just before he was born, and I found out later on sometimes they did put white sheets up so you would not see the baby. I learned that this happened. I was drugged up with valium—36 weeks of pregnancy—and other sedatives to block it all out. I do not remember signing adoption

papers. I did when he was 10 days old, which was illegal at that time because I was under 21 and at that time you had to be 21 or over to sign legal documents, to vote or get married without parents' permission. The adoption papers were already completed; I only had to sign them. I was just told, 'Can you just sign these?'. I never read them or anything, because I was all drugged up. The birth certificate—I had to name the baby to put on his original birth certificate. I did not fill the birth certificate out or give details. All of that was done by the doctors and the nurses and the social workers. The option of keeping him was never discussed. The decision was made before he was born. We had no say in the matter. We were told to start a new life as if nothing had happened. Feeling guilty and sedated with valium, I felt a failure. I did not share with anyone. I was living a lie, and my dark secret I kept buried. We got no support.

Now I understand that I had experienced emotional trauma and suffered a huge loss. My feelings were a normal, natural reaction to what I had experienced. It was a silent grief. Yes, forced adoption is painful. I lived my life without knowing whether my son was dead or alive, what he had done with his life and if he had a good and happy childhood. I remember his birthday every year, especially on Mother's Day because he was born the day before Mother's Day on 13 May. Now, my daughter here was born the same day as he was born. They have both got red hair, and they look alike, really. I do not know whether that is coincidence or what. So every Mother's Day I get mixed reactions and I think of Theresa and the baby I had adopted out.

When I came home nothing was said or talked about. My brothers and sisters knew, but they were told not to say anything. I did not know that one of my sisters got married the day he was born. No-one told me she was getting married or what. I missed the wedding. I had no feelings for the pregnancy or my son, as I knew he would be taken. My son was not welcomed into the world with love and joy like he should have been. He was part of me. Unless you relinquish a baby, you do not know what we go through. That was my submission that I handed in.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms N JOHNSON: Okay. I have got my history from the Women's Hospital, and it is surprising how many suppressed memories have come back. I went to a local GP to get my pregnancy confirmed. Nothing was discussed about what I wanted. He just gave me a note to hand to Mum and Dad. When I went home I handed the note to Mum and Dad, and the next day—I wish I had read that note—I was taken to the home, driven to the home with Mum and Dad. And I reckon—I have got a feeling—that he must have booked that room, because the room was ready for me the next morning. So nothing was discussed with Mum and Dad. They just took it as gospel, and I just did what I was told at that time. We had no say in it.

During labour I was given aspirin, valium—I was also given valium for 36 weeks before, to help—Seconal, that was the drug, Largactil and pethidine. I have always wondered why I had no milk or sore breasts. I always wondered why I did not. I do not know why, but now I have found out in my history that my milk was suppressed, and they did not even—

The only thing I could have given my son was my love, which I never had a chance to. He is always in my heart, a part of me. I am now finding this emotionally difficult. I imagine I could not go through anything worse again. The last few weeks leading to today my emotions have been really high.

We were told to keep it as a dark secret, but now I know as an adult, I know from experience, to keep this secret compels a force of strength, of self-control, that can make us feel guilty keeping it. That is how we were told we were a shame on family, a shame on the community. We were told we were not fit to be mothers. I was made to feel selfish if I did not give the baby up, and that has made me feel guilty, dishonest. It can even change your character or personality, and I think in the last few weeks it has changed mine, because my son Andrew says, 'Oh, Mum, you've changed'. Whether it is because your emotions are high and you can be a bit snappy—do you know what I mean? Yes.

Now I get hurt and angry that I have found out I have been the cover-up of forced adoptions. I was told to get on with life after the adoption. I was expected to live a life with approval in the community with denial—to forget about it, you know? That part of my life is a blur. I do not remember. I have very little memory. It is just like a blank, blank wall. I have had two reunions with him. It was a weight off my shoulders. And I always thought we got on well together—didn't we, Theresa?

Ms T JOHNSON: Yes.

Ms N JOHNSON: You have met him. I thought we got on really well. That was over 20 years ago. His adoptive mum said he cannot cope with it. He is struggling, he is an alcoholic and he has got no relationships or anything, so it must have affected him too. But I live in everlasting hope that one day we can meet again and he can meet my three girls and my husband. He knows the door is always open. I always send him Christmas cards and his mum birthday cards. His adoptive mum said she passes them on to him. So it is up to him when he is ready, and we will welcome him with open arms—won't we, Theresa? The door is open. That is my story.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Nancy, very much for sharing your story with us. I will now pass on to the Committee members for questions. Chris, thank you.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you, Nancy. We really appreciate you coming along today. I know how tough it is for you to tell us about your experience, which we have all taken on board from your submission and other submissions—

Ms N JOHNSON: Other submissions too, yes.

Ms COUZENS: So I want to acknowledge your experience of what has happened.

Ms N JOHNSON: There is one thing I wanted to say—

Ms COUZENS: Yes.

Ms N JOHNSON: I did not realise until just recently that the Women's Hospital was an adoption agency, and when that doctor wrote that note to give to Mum and Dad—I have got the letter he wrote to the Women's Hospital—he must have booked me in the room that night after I went to Mum and Dad.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, sounds like it.

Ms N JOHNSON: I reckon it sounds like it. He must have been part of that.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. Look, thank you for everything today. My question is around: what do you see as being the best possible outcomes of this inquiry? Have you got any idea on what you would like to see happen from the inquiry?

Ms N JOHNSON: I would like closure, because it has been suppressed for so many years—48 years.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. And when you say closure, is there anything in particular? Is it really the recognition of what you have gone through that is important to you or are there other things that you would like to see happen?

Ms N JOHNSON: Probably the recognition, and to let people know what it was like—the younger generation, I suppose. A lot of people blame my mum and dad, and it was never Mum and Dad. I keep telling them, 'It's not Mum and Dad; the decision was made before I went home'.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, okay.

Ms N JOHNSON: And that hurts too, because they do not know the full story.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. Well, thank you again for coming along today and sharing your experience with us. We read the submissions, but it is really good to actually have that direct interaction with you.

Ms N JOHNSON: Can I just say—

Ms COUZENS: Yes, certainly.

Ms N JOHNSON: Theresa, did you know that? I have got three girls, and I was honest with them from the word go. Did you believe that things like that happened years ago?

Ms T JOHNSON: No. I have seen stuff on TV, but probably because we never had that sort of thing happen during our generation we would never have seen anything like that.

Ms COUZENS: Yes.

Ms N JOHNSON: So it would have been the generation before the girls, my generation. And they do not realise, do they, the pain that we were—

Ms COUZENS: So that recognition is really important to you, obviously?

Ms N JOHNSON: Yes.

Ms COUZENS: Yes; all right. Well, thanks, Nancy, and thanks, Theresa, for coming along today. I really appreciate your time.

Ms N JOHNSON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Christine. We will move on to Michaela.

Ms SETTLE: Thank you, Chair. Really, thank you very much for sharing your experience with us. We do read the submissions, but to hear it from you really drives it home.

Ms N JOHNSON: You have got to talk about it to get it out. Before, we were just drugged up; we did not even know what was going on.

Ms SETTLE: Well, that is my question for you. Have you found any organisations that are supporting you through this, that have been good to support you?

Ms N JOHNSON: I am in ARMS.

Ms SETTLE: And how has that experience been?

Ms N JOHNSON: They are really good—especially the last few months.

Ms SETTLE: And so they provide all the therapy and so forth that you need, or is it more just the group?

Ms N JOHNSON: It is just the group—you know that you are not the only one, sort of thing.

Ms SETTLE: Yes. That is good.

Mr TAK: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Heang.

Mr TAK: I have just a follow-up from Chris's question. But mostly, thank you very much for sharing your story. In terms of recognition, what sort of recognition do you see that the Committee should recommend to the Government? What do you want to see in terms of that recognition?

The CHAIR: To acknowledge—

Ms N JOHNSON: To acknowledge the pain and suffering that we went through over the years—we had to keep it a dark secret, because it does change your character and your personality too. You know, you can get upset easily. If someone says anything, you sort of snap back, but you do not mean to, because they do not realise the whole—

Mr NEWBURY: Yes. And that is why we appreciate so much you being here today. I mean, what you have said is so powerful, and we have really heard what you have said.

Ms N JOHNSON: Yes. Because I am lucky I have married a good man, and he has supported me, especially when they say, 'No-one wants a second-hand girl'. When he asked me to marry him, I said, 'I can't marry you'. And he said, 'Why?', and I told him. And he just wanted to go out and get him back, because he said he was a part of me. And I have had three—

Mr NEWBURY: Three girls.

Ms N JOHNSON: beautiful girls and two lovely sons-in-law who are really appreciative—they all know too, and we can talk about it openly now, where before we could not—and three adorable grandsons. And I have got a foster son. He was fostered from the age of two, and he came out of care. He said he wanted to stay with us, because he was abandoned as a baby himself. He said this was his home, and we were blessed to have Andrew in our lives. I just feel lucky that I have—

The CHAIR: Nancy, Christine has another question.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. I just wanted to follow up. You mentioned about counselling and support. How long ago did you start that support? Is it only recent?

Ms N JOHNSON: I had been in ARMS for years, but then I dropped out of it because I could not talk about it. I have just gone back into ARMS probably in the last 12 months because I can talk about it more now, whereas before I felt guilty or felt ashamed and felt I could not talk about it.

Ms COUZENS: But having had that bit of counselling has made you able to talk more about it now?

Ms N JOHNSON: Yes.

Ms COUZENS: Because you mentioned the last couple of weeks has been a bit difficult for you—

Ms N JOHNSON: Yes, it has.

Ms COUZENS: leading up to today. Yes, okay.

Ms N JOHNSON: Yes, it has been difficult. But I have got a lovely GP, and he went through my medical history with me and he explained it all.

Ms COUZENS: And when did you get that medical history? Is that a recent thing?

Ms N JOHNSON: Yes.

Ms COUZENS: Oh, okay. In the last 12 months?

Ms N JOHNSON: Yes, only this year, probably about six months ago.

Ms COUZENS: Oh, okay.

Ms N JOHNSON: Because I was wanting to know exactly, and that is when I found out that that doctor had written the note to Mum and Dad, and that is when I found out that they took it as gospel, and he must have booked the room by phone that night. He must have been involved. Little things like that are coming to an end. That was the Women's.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. And were they helpful when you asked for the records?

Ms N JOHNSON: Yes, they were. They said they were getting a lot of—but we had to pay money for it, but I did not mind that because it was helping me get through it.

Ms COUZENS: Thanks, Nancy.

Ms N JOHNSON: That is all right. And another thing: I have got to live with that for the rest of my life, you know. When you relinquish a child or have—he was taken. And I think, a faceless baby—I never saw him. You know, I did not even hear him cry or—nothing. And then when I was pregnant with Theresa I was haemorrhaging the whole nine months, and she was born the same day.

Ms COUZENS: That is pretty amazing.

Ms N JOHNSON: It is amazing. It is. So every Mother's Day and birthdays are sort of mixed feelings.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. And do you do anything for that day now?

Ms N JOHNSON: No, not really, just celebrate it with my family. But I always think of him and that too. I wish we had had more contact, but he is struggling too, apparently. His adoptive mum said she has tried; she wishes he had more contact with us. He has three sisters and three nephews, who are my daughters and grandsons. I feel maybe when his adoptive parents pass away, he might come back. He might think I'm trying to take him off his parents, which isn't true. Do you know what I mean?

Ms COUZENS: Thank you.

Ms N JOHNSON: That is all right.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Nancy, very much on behalf of the Committee for sharing your story with us today and also for your submission. The Committee appreciates very much the time that you have taken. I know it has been extremely difficult for you to prepare this evidence, so I acknowledge that the past has been very painful and confronting.

Ms N JOHNSON: It is more painful now.

The CHAIR: It is.

Ms N JOHNSON: It is, yes.

The CHAIR: Today we do offer support services—

Ms N JOHNSON: Yes, and it does give—talking about it.

The CHAIR: Let me assure you that your evidence and your story—we have heard your story and we will make very strong recommendations within the report to the Victorian government. The committee will table its report 1 July next year. We will make sure to keep you updated of the progress, but at any point if you feel that you would like to add or share other bits, please reach out to Yuki, our secretariat or any one of us. But let me again reassure you that your story will take part in the consideration of a response to this very important inquiry to the Victorian government. And again I truly say this, on behalf of all my committee members, thank you so much. I know it has been extremely difficult for you, but hearing you today will help us. And what an honour and a pleasure it has been to meet you and Theresa. Thank you so much for being here today.

Ms N JOHNSON: Thank you for that. I appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.