

# 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**

Name Withheld, Adoptee.

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon. I would like to 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.

All mobile phones should be turned silent now.

I would like to introduce the committee. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Chair and also the Member for St Albans. To my right is Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda. To my left is Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong; and Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong.

I welcome [name withheld] here today.

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, you 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 and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website unless stated confidential beforehand.

Support services—please be aware we have Reiko Hipple with us today. Reiko is from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support services. She is here and is available to talk with you, whether it is after the hearing or during or if you need a break. Please let us know. We can also put you in touch with other services at a later time, should you need.

The committee is interested in hearing your own experience of forced adoption and in particular the services that you had access to or what outcomes you would like from this inquiry. I now invite you to proceed with a brief opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by some questions by our members. Thanks again, [name withheld]. Can I pass over to you.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Thank you. Hi, I am [name withheld], and thank you for allowing me to talk to you today. I will point out that my written submission was confidential and that my name is withheld within this submission, and the document that I posted through is not to be published. It is an adjunct to what I am saying, and I will explain the reasoning for that.

I am a second-generation late-discovery adoptee. That means that my birth mother was also an adoptee and that I did not find out I was adopted until I was adult; in fact I was 27. I am also a single parent and recently a survivor of family violence—and I will explain how those things all link together. I am also active in the adoption community, and I have just actually recently resigned from the VANISH Committee of Management to spend more time with my kids and get our lives back on track.

It has been a long journey. I wrote that submission in January, I think it was, of this year, and as we know, a lot has happened since then. I have also had to go through protracted legal proceedings and finally reach a property settlement with my abusive ex-husband. In fact about half an hour ago I lost my house. That is a story for another time. On the surface all this stuff seems to be not related, but I am going to try to explain to you how over the last year I have managed to put two and two together and how adoption being about trauma and grief seeps into all aspects of your life.

I will start it off with the front page of my pack that I brought up today. You can see, even though all names are withheld, I have listed four different names. These are the four names that I have learned over the last 30 years are my names. So there is my married name, my adopted name and my original birth certificate name, which is not my ancestral name, because my birth mother was an adopted person. So I have also included my biological name, as I know it, and some Xs, which indicate that I have no legal male line at all in my family that I can access.

On the next page I have got an overview of the submission I put in in January. I did not agree to be adopted. I was adopted without my knowledge or approval, and I will remain adopted for my entire life. I was born under

the *Adoption Act 1958*, and that allowed private adoption with no relinquishment waiting period. So in fact I was signed up for adoption the day after I was born. This *Adoption Act 1958* was superseded by the *Adoption Act 1964*, and now I am governed by the *Adoption Act 1984* and its amendments, and I will remain so for my entire life.

So to summarise my submission that I wrote in January, as I said, my birth mother signed my adoption papers when I was one day old, like I did not matter. My parents paid stamp duty on my adoption, like I was a piece of property. The doctor who organised my adoption had my parents donate to a Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists fundraiser a month after I was born—and I have to ask whether that was to pay for me. My eventual birth certificate did not have my birth location, which I assume was to prevent me from looking and finding my birth mother. My birth father is a blank space on my original birth certificate, so half of me is legally missing and will remain that way.

The department coerced me to attend a group interview because, as written in my paper, I otherwise was told that I would have to wait for a long time. So I got my private information that reinforced my life story was a lie in a public setting. And in my submission I also added some other things that happened in there to other people. The department at that time also gave me the wrong marriage certificate for my birth mother, so I spent months looking for someone and eventually thought she was dead.

She had had two marriages, and they gave me the one for the first marriage. Because I am a second-generation adoptee, the *Adoption Act* prevents me from legally obtaining the names of my ancestors without my estranged mother's approval, so I am actually probably the only person in Victoria who is banned from knowing who my maternal grandparents are. The department holds that information and I am not to have it because my mother will not allow it. It might be her personal information, but it is also mine.

My adoptive parents did not undergo any psychological or suitability evaluations. They just took me home. Once I found out I was adopted it was rarely mentioned, and I was expected just to go on like nothing had ever happened. To this day, which is why I am keeping most of this confidential, I have no idea who in my family knows I am adopted and who does not. After 30 years of struggling to try and get in contact with my birth mother, who is obviously quite traumatised from her experiences, I found my birth father and my birth mother's family by DNA testing, so I have to ask: why all the secrecy?

What I really want to focus on today is that traumatic impact adoption has had on my family. On the next page I have written a few points about adoptee trauma as distinct from other trauma. I find the narrative of adoption overwhelmingly talks about parents who had their children taken. They do not talk about us, adoptees. We are like a bystander in the whole situation from my perspective. Adoptees have no memories of before, so there is nothing to ground us. We feel disenfranchised grief where we try to adapt to this strange environment we find ourselves in, where no-one looks or acts like we do, and blame ourselves when we do not fit in. We fear rejection from one family if we look for our ancestors, and we also fear rejection from the other if they have not told anybody about us. So one of my favourite expressions is, 'My identity is secret in one family and my existence is secret in another'. There is a vast difference between having a secret and being one. I am actually a secret in two families for different reasons.

I will make a point about this secrecy. I went through all the submissions that were put in for this inquiry. Thirty two were from or about natural parents. There were only 12 from adoptees, and there were 10 confidentials, including my own, which leads me to say that the emphasis of this narrative about adoption is overwhelmingly towards natural parents and not towards adoptees. Our stories are missing here. No-one listens to us. I even went past the *Taken Not Given* statue on the way here. It is about the mothers who lost their children. We were taken, but we are not actually part of that narrative. It is just that we are a by-product.

I have also listed on this slide—I have said adoption causes complex PTSD. I have written a few dots there. I am not going to go through them, but I have had to spend a lot of time in medical treatment. I have a child who has a complex medical condition that requires psychiatrists, psychologists and psychiatric hospitalisation that can be linked back not just to adoption but to the situation we found ourselves in. That is what I would actually like to go through next on my next slide. On slide 4 I have basically put together what is generally called a trauma tree. Most of this information is generalised but private, and I am not going to go through it all. Trauma breeds trauma, and that breeds intergenerational trauma. Adoption is part of that trauma. It brings shame, it brings guilt and it brings separation. For example, my birth mother's birth mother did not tell anybody she gave

birth to a child during World War II. She came to Melbourne from Perth, had the baby and she went home. And she never told a soul. They found out about her on the day of her funeral when they found a letter, and that was it. She lived her whole life not telling a soul. She left my birth mother here. My birth mother spent 14 months in a baby's home before she was adopted by her family, and that is just an example. There are other examples. World War II plays a large role in trauma in both my birth family and my adopted family and even my spouse's family.

When you are subjected to trauma you get attracted sometimes to abusive partners because you are used to a cycle of love and devaluing, and that is what you are conditioned to. That is what you believe is normal. So when you have two people that have been through that same cycle you can form what is called a trauma bond. It feels like love, but it is not. It does not last. We were forced to leave our home in 2019 to escape threats, silent treatment and all sorts of different versions of abuse. And for me this is the impact of adoption. I have felt neglected. I have felt traumatised. I was mismatched with my family, and I fell into this situation which ended in family violence, which caused my children to suffer.

So what I would like to see, which is on the final page: I would like a parliamentary apology specifically for adoptees. All the previous apologies have been directed to other members of adoption, but not really to us. We are like an oversight. As I have written here: we are not lost babies, which some might lead you to believe. We are adults. We have been infantilised by traumatised parents and by an *Adoption Act* that keeps us trapped as adoption children for the rest of our lives. I would like to have the *Adoption Act* updated. I would like rights for second-generation adoptees like myself to identify in family history information, which is now considered to be the personal information of others, without having to go through the County Court. I would like birth fathers' names to be easily added back onto birth certificates. I would like to prevent adoptive parents from changing their children's names to remove their genetic identity and make them into secrets.

I would like all adoptions, like state care, to be discharged at 21 to stop adults being legally treated like children. I would like to have lifelong Medicare rebates. I know that is not within the remit of the state government, but I put it out there. Having to go back to GPs regularly to relive the same thing over and over again just to get a mental health care plan, finding a GP who will actually listen to you—I have put all that in my submission, things that happened to me—is actually retraumatising; it makes things worse. And finally I would like to say: do not repeat the same mess that has happened with adoption with surrogacy and donor conception, because with my work in VANISH I realise that that is also happening.

I would like to finish by saying: I did not agree to be adopted. And on the last page I have to say: I did a Google search on 'adopt' last night when I was putting the last of this together, and this is what I came up with. There are two entries for dogs, followed by 'Adopt a child' from the Victorian Government. That says something to me—children come after dogs. But children become adults as well. You cannot adopt a child; you are adopting a person who becomes an adult. And I liked the dog stamps. I thought they were cute. That is it.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, [name withheld], for sharing that experience with us today. I will pass on to the Committee members for questioning, and we will start with Christine. Thank you.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you. Thanks, [name withheld]. I really appreciate you coming along today. We understand how difficult it is to share your experience, but it is really valuable for us to hear it firsthand and not just read it on a bit of paper.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** I would be really interested to know what support services, if at all, you have been able to access over the years—obviously since you found out you were adopted at 27—for that counselling support. Have you been able to access or find any—

**NAME WITHHELD:** This is just by going through the internet. I had some major stress-related health issues, and I realised that adoption had something to do that. So I found a counsellor on the internet. I do not know if she is still there, but she was in East Melbourne, just down the road here. She was brilliant because she was a specialist adoption psychologist. As I said, she was really good. But the problem I had with it was getting the GPs to continually refer me. I had to go doctor shopping, which I wrote in my submission. That was really hard. I had all sorts of terrible things said to me just because I wanted to see this one psychologist. I have found, though, over time GPs seem to have less—the barriers to having mental health care plans created have

lessened. It has got less stigma and they do not feel like they are going to get audited by Medicare, which is what my GP originally thought.

I think I have just been lucky. With the family violence part, for example, which is relevant in here, I just lucked out when I went to the local—it was Wavecare in Glen Waverley, the local council-based psychological support service. I lucked into getting a trauma counsellor. That was brilliant, and I did a lot of trauma therapy, rapid eye movement therapy. It was fantastic. I regressed back to watching my mother walk away when I was in hospital, which was very traumatic, but it helps you get through some of those things that you subconsciously are holding onto. They are the types of services that I have privately taken access to.

I also had some counselling through VANISH, when VANISH had counselling. This was before I joined the Committee of Management. That was really good too, because they actually understand what it is like and to talk to people; it is really important to talk to people who understand adoption, because if you do not—and I have done this as well—you can actually end up in a worse situation. You will get really poor advice, and I have had really poor advice. One counsellor told me, oh, just ring up my birth mother's cousin and have a chat to him. 'It can't hurt!'. Well, yes, it was not great, because he did not know about me. So things like that people do not understand usually, unless they have had that experience.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes, we have heard from others today about the need for specialised counselling and for there to be some sort of course, possibly, around adoption. Do you think that that is a good idea or a necessary thing?

**NAME WITHHELD:** I think it is very necessary. In fact VANISH did run a course a couple of years ago to train medical professionals. I do not know if they have been in—I have not spoken to anybody from VANISH for a couple of months now. But that is necessary, because if you do not understand the issues, you cannot provide advice. It is not something you learn in medical school at all. It seems to be a thing that no-one thinks about. Most GPs do not link your mental health symptoms with the fact that you could be adopted, and that is the core problem. You have got to look at that core problem. If you do not, you are not going to solve anything. You are going to skirt around the edges. And that is why you see people in various stages of, I suppose, adoption awareness. Most adoptees are not aware that they have problems, because they do not link it back to there. It is when you become aware that you work through it. It takes years.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks. And obviously you have got a great list of suggestions there for the Committee to take on board, so thank you for that.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes. They are a bit controversial, but never mind. Put it out there.

**Ms COUZENS:** That is all right. Yes, put it out there. Thank you. I really appreciate your time today.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Thank you, Christine.

**The CHAIR:** Michaela.

**Ms SETTLE:** Thank you.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Just call me [name withheld].

**Ms SETTLE:** Okay. Thank you very much for sharing your experience with us. My heart felt for what you are going through as well, because I have been there, and it is not much fun. Look, I was really interested in something you were talking about—and somebody else had earlier spoken about it—around the capacity these days with DNA testing and so forth for people to find their parents and that perhaps the agencies are behind and that then the agencies are not able to provide the support you need because you are theoretically doing something you should not by tracking them through DNA. Do you think that the agencies need to be caught up on, or is it the law that needs—

**NAME WITHHELD:** I think it is both.

**Ms SETTLE:** Yes.

**NAME WITHHELD:** As I said, I do not legally know who my father is, even though I am having dinner with him on Friday, and I found that through DNA. But DNA brings a number of different things. I did it as a last resort. The agencies—I do not think they can do it. They cannot, obviously, provide and do it for you, but they should be able to help you with the outcome. Ringing up someone and saying, ‘Hi, did you know person X in 1963?’.

That is where you start. It is tricky because anytime when you find a member of a family you have not seen—or have never seen, in my case—all those years are lost. You have got nothing. That bit is not there anymore. And it is different to getting a piece of paper like a birth certificate that says, you know, names and things, which is traumatic in itself. But you find through DNA—you do not find the person; you find second or third cousins and you have got to try and put it all together, and that can take years.

So what the agencies would be good at is actually helping people put that together, because if you start—like, adoptees, you have got nothing. Most people who do DNA know who their parents and grandparents are at least, so they can start building out a family tree. When you are—it is like doing a reverse family tree. You are starting out with fourth cousins or great-great-grandparents, and you are trying to narrow it down to you. I managed to do that with my birth father through some cousins, and that is how I worked out who he was, even before he did actually appear on myDNA. I still do not know why he did that, but anyway. It is that support to try and work it out and then what to do when you think you know. You might think you know. Like, I think I know who my maternal grandfather is, but I do not know and I would never contact anybody. And as you were saying, with social media it is so easy to think you know and then go over there and say something that is inappropriate. I think that is the sort of thing—and even warning about those things that can go wrong.

**Ms SETTLE:** There was a suggestion from somebody else that the agencies almost have to keep away from it, so there is not that support in the warnings about what might come. Was that your experience with VANISH?

**NAME WITHHELD:** No. Well, I actually disagree with that, because it is no different from doing a search. You are just using a different tool. Like, with VANISH the searches were done as paper-trail searches. This can circumvent the paper trail to a point, because as I said, you have found second cousin Flossie, but how is second cousin Flossie possibly related to you? What you cannot find from DNA and what people hide is anybody who is alive. So if you do a DNA thing, you will find all your dead ancestors, but you do not find anybody who is alive, because that is all private. You cannot see it. So you have to track through that, and that is where the paper trail comes in—so you can actually do that tracking. I think that is really important—to help people to do that, because it is not simple. I managed to do it, but then I have to say I am a well-educated person. I have got a science background. I can sift through evidence. Not everybody has been that fortunate to have that. And it is—it is daunting. And, yes, you could end up ringing up someone or, as I said, going on social media and getting it all wrong. I have got things wrong myself in the past, thinking somebody was related to me when they were not. So I would suggest that would be very important.

**Ms SETTLE:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. You made mention in your submission that you have several birth certificates with clearly different information, including your father’s details being missing. Could you share your thoughts on the integrated birth certificates? We have heard a number of views today, but it would be really important to hear your views on this.

**NAME WITHHELD:** I think they should be optional, and I will tell you why. If you have got an integrated birth certificate and you use it for normal day-to-day activities, every time you use it you are going to be asked, ‘What’s this about? This doesn’t look like a normal birth certificate. What do you mean?’. And then you have to explain your whole life story to some stranger just so that they will rubberstamp something like a passport at the post office, which is where I came up with a problem because, as I wrote in my submission, I did not have where I was born on my birth certificate, and Mum had to write a stat dec for me to say I was born in this particular hospital on this particular day. I do not want to go through that every single time I do something routine in my life. However, it would be good to have a piece of paper that says I have two sets of parents. And I am actually lucky; I have got 10 grandparents too. But having two sets of parents, both sets of parents are important, so actually having them on one sheet of paper and not diverse sheets of paper I think would be really

good, but I would not want to use it every day. But then I would have four different birth certificates—one, two—yes, then I would have four different ones.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Does that answer?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, it does. Is there anything further?

**NAME WITHHELD:** No.

**The CHAIR:** [Name withheld], thank you again for being here today and sharing your valuable contribution and your submission. The committee appreciates absolutely the time and effort that you have taken to prepare the evidence and also the handouts, and I know that you have working since January this year. We acknowledge that revisiting this and some of the past can be painful and confronting, so please be assured that we, the Committee Members, will take your evidence, and it will assist in us understanding the relevant issues and making very strong recommendations to the Victorian Government.

The next steps will be that the report will be tabled on 1 July next year, and we will make sure that you are updated on the progress, but again if there is anything after today that you feel you need to add or anything that has come to mind, please reach out to any one of us, including Yuki. And I am sure you have got Yuki's details at well.

But again I thank you for taking this opportunity to share your experience with us, and we wish you all the very best.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Name Withheld.

**Witness withdrew.**