

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria**

Wodonga—Tuesday, 18 May 2021

#### **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 Yvonne Hunter.

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Ms Yvonne Hunter.

**The CHAIR:** Good morning, Yvonne. Thank you so much for being here today. We are really delighted to be here to hear submissions throughout the day.

First of all 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 other communities who may be here today.

I now declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria.

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

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.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Any verified transcripts and PowerPoint presentations will be placed on the committee's website, unless it has been marked confidential.

We also have Debbie here today, and she is a counsellor. Debbie is available to talk to you if you need during the hearing or even after the hearing. So we are more than happy to get you in touch with Debbie at a later date.

The committee, as I said, is very much interested in hearing about your experience of forced adoption and in particular the services you may or may not have accessed and what outcomes, more importantly, you would like from this inquiry.

I now invite Yvonne Hunter to make a brief opening to statement to the committee, which will be followed by questions from the members. Thank you again, Yvonne, for being here.

**Ms HUNTER:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** And take your time. We are here to—

**Ms HUNTER:** Yes, I will. Sorry, I had to write it down. So in 1963 I was 16 years of age. Legally I could not vote, I could not drive a car, I could not get married, I could not get a bank loan, I could not drink alcohol, I could not smoke and I had no say in what happened to my baby, a baby I had—and never got to see—57 years, eight months and five days ago, but I could be interrogated by the police without an adult present with the hope of laying a charge of carnal knowledge against my baby's father. Getting pregnant was not part of the plan, but it happened, as it did to thousands of others.

For 55 years I kept silent, as ordered by the people that I trusted most. I believed the reasons and the lies that were told to me: I was a disgrace, I would bring shame of my family, I was the scourge of the earth and 'Do what's best for your baby. Forget him and get on with your life'. Well, it is not that easy. How do you forget their first birthday or any birthday—I missed 55 of them—every Christmas, his first day of school, his first girlfriend, graduation? And do not even ask me how Mother's Day affects me.

Well, I have come here today to try and correct some of that. I believe it is time for me to be open and honest and to stop thinking about other people's feelings and how they will judge me. Today it is all about me.

I am not a bad person, but bad things were said and done to me both at home and in the Haven. I have extreme difficulty just mentioning the name of that place of horror. This was a very painful and traumatic time in my life. The scars are all internal, but the pain I feel in my heart is very real and it never leaves me. I have been

diagnosed with PTSD, anxiety and depression. I hate the way it makes me feel, and I hate taking the drugs that help me get through every day.

My son [REDACTED] first contacted me in 1999 by mail, and my mother told me the best thing to do with that letter was to get rid of it as no good would ever come of it. I still have the letter but no mother. She died in 2016, and under her instructions I did not reply to him. He tried again 20 years later in 2019, and I responded with a great deal of trepidation. Six weeks later I finally met my baby and was able to put my arms around him—55 years after he was born. As a result of that day I have been on the greatest roller-coaster ride of my life. [REDACTED] is warm, kind, funny, compassionate and so much more. I could go on for hours. He rings or texts me almost every day. I have been blessed to have him back in my life.

To get to this point has not been an easy journey, and I still struggle with my emotions every single day. Telling my husband and our two children was the most difficult decision I had to make, but they have all been very supportive. I have since met [REDACTED] partner, so I now have a new daughter-in-law and two more lovely grandsons. I have met his adoptive parents. That was a very difficult day. They provided him with a good life and excellent education that he has used well. They adopted [REDACTED] when he was just 13 days old.

[REDACTED] flew to Darwin this year to meet one of his brothers, a meeting that I was present at. We shared a wonderful few days. His other brother is still very hesitant, and we have decided to give him all the time he needs. With the help of my GP I have found the most amazing psychologist, who I have been seeing on a regular basis. She has guided me through the last 18 months and with her assistance I was able to make this decision to come here today, and I hope it serves me well. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Yvonne, for your courage to be here today and speak and share your journey with us. We truly do appreciate it. I will open to questions at this point and move to Christine.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you so much, Yvonne. You really should be proud of the fact that you have come here today to share your experience. We do really appreciate your time and the trauma that you are telling us about, which is really important to this inquiry, so thank you so much for that. And your support lady there is doing a fantastic job.

Do you have any thoughts about a redress scheme and what that might look like?

**Ms HUNTER:** No. From what I have read, every case is so different and no amount of apologies, I think, will ever make this pain go away—not ever. It is still there even though I have seen him. He lives 1000 kilometres away now and so I do not see him very often, but he still texts me—except today—or calls me nearly every day.

**Ms COUZENS:** Okay. So do you think things like counselling being supported or provided or funded as part of a redress scheme would be something that you would consider as being important?

**Ms HUNTER:** It has been important to me. I never thought about it until he contacted me, because I was never, never to talk about it—ever. And when he did write to me the 20 years earlier, as I said, my mother said, ‘Get rid of it. No good will ever come of that’, and I can hear those words every day in my head.

**Ms COUZENS:** So do you pay for your own counselling?

**Ms HUNTER:** Yes, I have. I did not know what to do.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes, okay.

**Ms HUNTER:** I did not know any counsellors.

**Ms COUZENS:** So have you been involved in other support organisations?

**Ms HUNTER:** No.

**Ms COUZENS:** So you initiated the counselling yourself and you pay for it yourself?

**Ms HUNTER:** My doctor—with my doctor.

**Ms COUZENS:** Okay. So do you think a redress scheme could cover the cost of counselling, for example?

**Ms HUNTER:** Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** Okay. And what other outcomes do you think would be important for you in this inquiry in terms of our recommendations to the government?

**Ms HUNTER:** Look, I just do not know. I mean, talking about it is very difficult, and I have a select few friends that I have discussed this with. I have not been open and honest with everybody. It is very personal, and it was something that I was told never to talk about—‘Don’t mention it. Get on with your life and forget about it. He’s gone to a good place’.

**Ms COUZENS:** So do you think bringing it out in the public—not specifically your situation but the overall historical forced adoptions—would make a difference for you, that it is acknowledged?

**Ms HUNTER:** Probably for me now, but two years ago, anything that I saw, I just shut the book on it. I was not interested—I was not allowed to be interested; that is more the point. I have spent a lot of time talking about my parents’ attitude and what happened. You know, if you have had that in your brain for 50 years, it is very hard to get rid of overnight. So that part is difficult.

**Ms COUZENS:** And are you finding the counselling valuable for you?

**Ms HUNTER:** It has been, yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** And is that a counsellor who has a specific focus on historical forced adoptions?

**Ms HUNTER:** No, I was the first, but she was pregnant when she was going to get married and her husband had to legally adopt their child after she got married. She is a lady in her 60s and she has been very good. She has done a lot of research since talking to me.

**Ms COUZENS:** So her understanding has really helped, do you think?

**Ms HUNTER:** Yes. When the article was in the paper two weeks ago the first thing I knew was I had to go and see Therese. I needed to talk to her.

**Ms COUZENS:** Great. Thanks so much, Yvonne, and thanks for being so brave to step up today. We really do appreciate it. Thank you.

**Ms HUNTER:** It is huge.

**Ms COUZENS:** It is.

**The CHAIR:** We move to Heang.

**Mr TAK:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Yvonne. We have heard █████ sent a letter to you 20 years ago. Have you asked him how he came to find you at the time?

**Ms HUNTER:** He found me when the records became open. I am not quite sure. He just wrote to me. He lived in a post-office box in those days. But my mother said, ‘No good will ever come of that. Get rid of it’—end of story—and we never spoke about it again. I think the shame was hers, not mine—now. But I was made to feel that I was the bad person. And then for some reason he wrote again 20 years later. I had to ask him, ‘What did you think in that time?’. He said, ‘Well, I was told that maybe it wasn’t the right time for you’. And I said, ‘Oh, okay’. And then he said, ‘Well, why did you reply?’. I said, ‘Well, you wrote to all my relatives—all my husband’s relatives—so I had to stop telling lies’. And I said, ‘And my mother was dead, so I didn’t have to obey her anymore’, or I did not feel I did, but she is still there in my bloody head—excuse me, but she gets to me every now and again.

**Mr TAK:** All right, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Just on the records, did you ever try to access your records from the hospital?

**Ms HUNTER:** I have since in the last 12 months, yes, because this has only been two years. I did. And then of course COVID hit, and it put a little stop to it. Last week I sent a message to the girl that was doing it, and she sent back that she had not been able to find anything more. I got the details of his birth, found out I was in labour from 1 in the morning until 7.20 at night or 7.40 at night. And it is interesting, because I do not recall a lot of that. I recall the place where I was. I recall scrubbing floors, doing menial tasks. I saw a cutting from a *Women's Weekly* that said how these girls were well looked after and treated well, and I was thinking, 'Where were you? It wasn't the same place I was at!'. But I cannot remember a lot of it, and I do not know why. I do not know why. But I do remember that.

**Ms COUZENS:** So how long were you there overall? So during the pregnancy—

**Ms HUNTER:** I do not know.

**Ms COUZENS:** You do not know.

**Ms HUNTER:** It would have been latish in the pregnancy, because I do not think I told my mother for a long while. And that is the part that is—there are so many blanks there. And I know when I was at the place, at the haven, that it was not a nice place. It was cold; I remember it being cold. It is just quite traumatic that you do not remember.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes. So the documents that you did get, they were really limited in the information. Is that what you are saying?

**Ms HUNTER:** Oh, yes. Yes. It does not even tell me how much he weighed.

**Ms COUZENS:** Oh, really?

**Ms HUNTER:** Yes. And I never saw him. He was taken away. I never saw him, I just knew it was a boy. My mother gave him a name after my doctor, which—I was glad he got a new name.

**The CHAIR:** Just on that, do you believe that there was any information missing?

**Ms HUNTER:** It is hard to say. It was very basic. I mean, his condition at birth was 'satisfactory'.

**Ms COUZENS:** But there was no birth weight or any of those—

**Ms HUNTER:** No birth weight. There was a time—

**Ms COUZENS:** Or drugs used?

**Ms HUNTER:** No. And that had to have happened, because I do not have memory of a lot of that and that time. And from there I was taken to a friend of my grandmother's in Melbourne and stayed—I am not quite sure how long. And then I was sent to this college to learn about cooking and domestic science. Then I had a visit from the police, and of course they wanted to lay charges of carnal knowledge against my then boyfriend. His name was not anywhere on the birth certificate; it said, 'Not known', I think. And for some reason—I do not know why—I did not tell them. But it was quite harrowing, you know. You have got these two police there. And I remember that with great detail, yet I do not remember being in the haven—or I remember bits of it but certainly not the long time. These police asking me personal questions and nobody there with me at 16 years of age; I mean, it just is—and you have probably heard all this before, but I think every story is a bit different.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes. Shocking, horrific stories actually. So have you had any contact from the father at all?

**Ms HUNTER:** He is dead.

**Ms COUZENS:** Okay.

**Ms HUNTER:** And I did not have any contact, because I was taken from school, of course, to Melbourne, and there I stayed till after Christmas. He was going on about his studies. He went off to Sydney, and we did not really get in touch, because once I came back I got a job and moved on and he went off to college and stayed in Sydney. And I have only in recent times found out when he died. It was back in 2010. And his mother, his father, his brother and his sister are all dead. The only person I sort of half had contact with was a

cousin. I just wanted to know—I mean, for my son, because he was looking at illnesses and family history because he had a prostate problem and was looking for that, and I thought, ‘Well, what do we do?’ but then found out that he had not been well, the father had not been well. So my only source was this cousin, and I sort of made up a whole heap of lies.

She told me that the last time she had seen him he was not well, and then when we did a track we found out that he had passed away. So that is gone, but my son is quite happy to move forward. He is very practical, and I think it was his upbringing. His father was horrible the day I met him. He just wanted to keep telling me what a wonderful place this was that he got this baby from, and I knew what was on the other side of the door—it was not wonderful and it was not nice, but he must have thought it was all right, because he went back and got three more. They got four children from the haven, and one died from suicide. ■■■■■ was the eldest, the second one died at 40-something from suicide and the two girls both have mental problems. I have read that 25 per cent is the success rate, and I am thinking, ‘Well, maybe that’s true’. But he seems to be well adjusted. He is not an affectionate person, but I am breaking him in.

**Ms COUZENS:** Good on you.

**Ms HUNTER:** The second time, I think it was, that I met him we were walking to this restaurant and I put my arm through his. He sort of tensed up, and I said, ‘Get used to it, darling’. He said, ‘What?’, and I said, ‘I’m not going away’. He is better now, but he still struggles with it a little bit.

**The CHAIR:** Any further questions? I take it there are not. Can I on behalf of the committee just thank you so much for being here today and sharing your journey with us. We truly do appreciate it. I know it has been challenging. Thank you to your friend Margaret too for her support here today. We, as I said, genuinely appreciate the time that you have taken and the courage that you have shown to be here and to revisit painful and confronting experiences, but can I assure you on behalf of the committee that we will be putting forward a very strong report to government.

The next steps will be that we are hoping to table the report in August, and your submission will be part of the deliberations of the committee. But again I do take this opportunity to thank you and wish you all the very, very best, and I hope that we will be able to see you again and you will be able to also keep up to date with the progress before August of when we are tabling and what is included in the report. You will receive a copy. Again, thank you so much, and as I said, we all wish you the very best.

**Ms HUNTER:** Thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**