

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

Name Withheld 1.

WITNESS

Name withheld 1.

The CHAIR: Thank you, [name withheld], for being here today. Let me introduce our committee. My name is Natalie Suleyman, I am the Member for St Albans. To my right is Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong, and to my left is Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda.

NAME WITHHELD: I know these places, but I am not sure where they are.

The CHAIR: Well, you will have to, if you have got some time in the future, do a bit of travelling to our electorates. We will welcome you. I will just do some formal proceedings to begin.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to their elders both past and present and any 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 welcome for the record [name withheld], who is here today.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, and therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today. But if you say the same things outside, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by privilege.

Also, 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. Any transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as they are available unless confidentiality has been requested.

As you know, the committee is very much interested in hearing about your experience, your views about forced adoption and in particular any services that you may or may not have accessed on your journey. Most importantly, what outcomes would you like from this inquiry? That is why we are here to hear from you, [name withheld], today. We are in your hands today, so take as much time as you need. You will start your brief and your opening statement, and then that will be followed by some questions.

NAME WITHHELD: I read all that. But I will already say before I start: if I get emotional, I know you understand.

The CHAIR: That is fine. We are all here to support you through your evidence. Do not feel that this setting—it is a bit formal, because we need to—

NAME WITHHELD: It is not so bad. If it had been in the courthouse, I would have probably been a mess.

The CHAIR: I understand.

NAME WITHHELD: But it is not so bad. When they said 'The Cube'—I have never been in here since they renovated, but—I thought, 'Where is that? Yes, I can find my way', and I presumed it would be an office somewhere. I think you have all read the submission, so I may touch on that, but I thought rather than go through all that, I will just talk as it comes, which I am far better at than if I have notes.

The CHAIR: Please do.

NAME WITHHELD: That was a suggestion. But me, from the times that I have got up and spoken, unless I am doing a production, I need to learn my lines, but in this case I thought I will just say whatever comes, however I feel, and my opinion. As long as I am not going to get carted off to jail for my opinion, I will be fine, because I have my opinion on a lot of things. You can probably tell I am never short for a word—nary a thing. I am also very outspoken when I can be, so I am glad I am able to be free. That is why I did not bring anybody—my daughter, perhaps, but I thought, 'No, I have to do this by myself'. I am not alone, though, as I can see, and God is with me. So you have read that.

I did not know what even I was going to say, because it is so long. If I had known all that back then, that I would be sitting here now in Wodonga, when I was born in Melbourne, getting to this stage, which is very hard—but it is all part of it. It has to be done, and I knew that when I put my submission in to help others as well as get some closure I think even though I thought I had it when I met her. But it just all goes on and on and on, and I think there are so many repercussions still because of the relationship. Do not get me wrong, we have a wonderful relationship, but there is still a subconscious or emotional thing that I cannot really cause any flak because she might feel unloved. But really I am realising it is about me, that I might be rejected, and I do not want to be. And that came to mind.

I realised the whole problem—I have always tried to make amends, all the time, for giving her away. But when you think about it, what choice did we really have? We did not have a choice. No-one came, not even my family. My dad said, 'Whatever you want to do', but Mum was opposed. All I got was, 'Who's going to want you?'—all that sort of stuff, pushed under the rug. Then you have to get on with your life. You are not allowed to tell a soul. So my children did not even know they had a half-sister until I actually decided to find her. I thought, 'Then I'll tell them'. In their relationship, they are good now; my son was always happy, but the daughter, there was no bonding. But there is now, thankfully. My son has passed away, but when he was dying she was there, and there was closure for that. But you feel like there has been a dysfunctional relationship for everyone.

What annoys me the most is: what about the father? You know, he did not want us. They go off on their merry way. I am not having a go at men—please do not misread that. It is just that we are the ones that cop it, and we are the bad girls, and on you go. I am not a bad girl. So it is that part of it, I suppose: the resentment, the anger, the hurt, the 'Why didn't you want us? Why weren't we wanted, and why weren't people supportive?'. You know, nobody wanted to. They did not have any solutions other than, 'This is what you've got to do'. For 18 years I did not know where she was, if she was safe. Around the time I started thinking I might try and find her, there was a lot on television about children that had been adopted—their parents had died, they were in abusive situations—and I would think, 'What if that's my child?'

Finally we met, and the floodgates opened—because I had had years of grief, and it had just built up—and everyone was crying in the meeting. It was at the Women's. A social worker wanted the mother and me to go and talk, and I never did anything with that. I saw her, and she was just like a pea out of the pod. Her mother said on the way down, 'We're going down to meet the pygmies', because they were all 6 foot and she was the same as me. My son was really happy that he had a sister. And then I copped it from a lot of people too—the kids, their father said stuff—because I got married and he told my son, and my son said one day, 'So how many more half-bastards are floating around, Mum?'. And I said, 'Well, not with me. Talk to your father', because his dad had a child as well, and she broke up—it was the other way around. He knew where his child was adopted—he knew where she was, and I did too—but he would not allow me to find mine. He left, so I found my daughter. That was after the fact, and that was how I started looking.

She had been looking for me for two years prior to that, and finally we met. It just all happened fairly quickly, and I just wanted to know if she was safe. But then I started coming on, as I do—I am not a half person; I go full on—and for her, for a while there, it was overwhelming. I did not mean to hurt her in that way. It was never my intention. You just want to do what is right. But we are scarred and wounded. I think you cannot get back all those years. But what you have got to do is try and get on and move forward. Before I found her, it was like I was in this limbo. At the moment I feel like I am in it again; I am in this place trying to find my way out. So when it comes to light—sorry.

The CHAIR: That is all right. Take a bit of breath.

NAME WITHHELD: I do get emotional, but I did not know I was going to get this emotional. When it finally comes to light, when everything is put forward, I hope the government considers this, because I know there was a lot done that was not supposed to be the way it was. It was not right. That is from my opinion. I also know—I do not know whether I have read it or whether it is just knowing—there is money, a lot of money, to get these children, and there was a lot of stuff done so that would happen, so that adoptive parents could have these children. And my daughter asked me, 'Did you get paid, Mum?'. I said, 'Good God, no'. We gave them up, and you were told, 'You'll never see them again'.

I have just recently come to realise that I gave up all my rights when I signed those papers, and I did not know that. I did not understand. No-one helped you; you were just told, 'This is what you have to do', and that era too was a big part of why. Nowadays there is a lot of help and a lot of support, and women can have a choice. My mum wanted me to have an abortion, but I would not do that. That was brought up when I went to the doctor. I said, 'I'm not doing that; I'll run away'. I do not think that is in that submission. I probably did put it in. I knew that was not right, but that is me. I could never do that.

But there were not many choices other than to be at home for five years until she went to school. The other thing with that was, because she was going to be probably living with mum and dad, with me, she would have gone to the same school as a lot of the siblings—my brother was still at school—and she would have been called names. That came into my decision. There were a lot of reasons, not just what everyone said. It was my reasoning at the time with what I knew—'What should I do?'. Part of it—I was only 15, 16—was, 'My life's going to be over. We've got no money'. That was probably the selfish bit of me, but most of it was for what was best for the baby.

This is not in there. I was abused when I was in puberty, and I think in the back of my mind was, 'Is that going to be'—these people have passed on now, so I will not say who or what names. I do not want to mention names, but that may have influenced my decision; I am not sure. I wanted to protect—this is while I was pregnant, this is when I was making these decisions—the baby, and as there was no sort of bonding and that, I thought, 'I've got low self-esteem'—this is what I have thought over the years now—'so will my child grow up worse?'. You want them to be protected, and I presumed that would be so.

I was told she would be going in the family and I had months to change my mind. I kept thinking, 'She's with the family. If I take her out and then I can't cope, it's going to cause emotional, probably, damage', but she was in the nursery for nine weeks. They told me she was with the family. I found that out after I met her, because her parents had adopted a son and the woman changed her mind and they got her back. So they were protecting the parents, but they told me she was with the family and she was not and I could have changed my mind. But in one way it was better I did not know, because I went through a month of hell thinking, 'I'll get her; no, I won't', doing it all again. Then when finally the month had passed, I could not change my mind, or thought I could not, but it was nine months until she was—I could have, but I was told I could not. I think what I went through is probably better, but I look back and I think, 'Well, what if I had kept her?'. There are many questions with that, because I got married and he is abusive. So probably it was for the best in many ways, but it does not alter the fact that there was nobody to help you work through it or make the right decision or get help. We had to make these decisions, and we were only kids. The fact that I was pregnant, I mean—sorry, talking too much, am I?

The CHAIR: We might just pause for some questions. Christine will start with a question, thank you.

Ms COUZENS: Thanks so much, [name withheld], for sharing your experience with us. It is so valuable to hear these stories, and I know how challenging that is.

NAME WITHHELD: You are amazing, you people. There is so much for you to digest, and you have got to make a decision. I have been praying for you all. I hope I am not in trouble, but I wanted to pray for this and I honestly have. Sorry, you go.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you. What do you believe the committee should recommend to the Victorian government—

NAME WITHHELD: Compensation. Sorry.

Ms COUZENS: to address the harms caused by the—

NAME WITHHELD: Straight up, compensation; I mean, it is not going to fix it all, but it is more than just an acknowledgement. I found out they did say sorry, the government. But something has to happen. I have read some of them—they are too painful. I cannot read many of them. I could not watch that *Love Child* for the same reason. I started and it was too painful. But I think, yes, something.

Ms COUZENS: So financial?

NAME WITHHELD: Whatever. Well, I do not know. Would that help? Sorry, but if they can do that for the Aboriginals, why can't they do it for us? It is terrible to say that, isn't it?

Ms COUZENS: No. I mean, really we need to make recommendations as part of this inquiry, and we are all keen to make really strong recommendations.

NAME WITHHELD: Yes. Well, definitely a public acknowledgement of what we have been through—what we have all been through, not just the mums. I am aware that there are a lot of children that it has not worked out so well for. There are a lot of men that were part of it and that were lied to and stuff or stopped. For them as well, but for us mums, we are the ones who have worn it on our hearts. That is the most part of it for me, anyway.

Ms COUZENS: And that is the important part of you telling your story, along with everybody else, because the report at the end of this puts it in the spotlight, really.

NAME WITHHELD: Well, that is the reason I put it forward. I was sort of dubious because, I mean, I have talked about this over the years, but I knew I had to do it because it is one more voice.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, and we really appreciate that. Do you think covering the cost of counselling, for example, would be a factor?

NAME WITHHELD: Yes. I get a pension, so I can go and see somebody and it is covered by the government anyway. But whatever is put forward, I think it just needs to make amends of some sort, and often that is the way they do it. You know, for what the pain was, you cannot put a value on it monetarily, but it helps. You know, it helps if you have got some form of—

Ms COUZENS: Yes. We recognise we are never going to address the issues that so many women have experienced.

NAME WITHHELD: No. But that is what they do. If it is a monetary thing, at least it looks like there is somebody. You know, that is what they do these days. I had a fall in a supermarket and I put in a claim. Obviously I had huge damage and still have. You cannot see it, because it is internal. However, that was the only way to have some sort of a voice. I got some compensation, and it did make me feel better. It felt like somebody was listening to me, and it makes them aware that they should take care of customers better. It did not fix the problem, although I had better care because of it. Anyway, that is another story.

Ms COUZENS: And that is important to us.

NAME WITHHELD: That is why I am thinking that. That is the way I think.

Ms COUZENS: That you have a voice.

NAME WITHHELD: Yes. Yes, probably compensation in whatever way they see fit. With the \$22 billion they have got in debt, is it going to really matter having that much more? I am sorry, that is a joke. Sorry.

Ms COUZENS: That is all right.

NAME WITHHELD: I do not know. I just see what is on the news.

Ms COUZENS: Thanks, [name withheld]. I really appreciate that.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Chris. Heang, do you have any questions?

Mr TAK: No. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I think it has been thorough evidence.

Mr TAK: Very thorough.

The CHAIR: We have covered a broad range. Thank you. Just on a final question, were you ever able to make contact with the father?

NAME WITHHELD: I still know where he is. Well, I have not lately. It is in the submission. My sister married his brother, which made it more complicated. That was part of the issue when I was reckoning with all of this to try to work it out. They have years ago split. They have divorced, and she has remarried. However, I used to keep in contact with the brother. I know where he is, but no, we have never sat down and talked. When I thought I might find her once and I knew it was possible I went and saw the parents of the father. He said he wanted to meet her, via her, and then when I met her he changed his mind. So no, I have not been able to talk with him since the day that he said, 'I don't want to be with you'.

The CHAIR: That is sad.

NAME WITHHELD: I did see him a couple of times in [REDACTED] I used to live in [REDACTED] and I just went out and he was in a car with people. He came up for a baseball thing, and I went, 'That's [REDACTED] Then that weekend I went to the pub with my mum, who was visiting, and he was sitting over there in a chair. Mum said, 'Don't you dare go over'. I was going to go over. He was with a whole crowd of people. So I saw him but did not communicate. He saw me, but we did not—no. He does not want to know her, it's not easy for her. She has brought it up that she would have—not now, but she did at one point. But I said, 'Well, I'll support you'. I said, 'But bear in mind your father doesn't want to know you, so you have got to be prepared in case'. It is sad, because it is his loss. She is a beautiful woman. She is gorgeous.

The CHAIR: Yes, we will not put that into the Hansard transcript.

NAME WITHHELD: I do not want to. I do not think, you know—

The CHAIR: No, that is totally appropriate.

NAME WITHHELD: It is just from where I am coming from as her mother.

The CHAIR: Lovely. Thank you so much, [name withheld]. We really appreciate, truly, your being here today and your valuable contribution and the strength and courage that you have shown to be here.

NAME WITHHELD: Thank you—I do not know.

The CHAIR: You have. Our next steps will be: of course we are going to deliberate on all the evidence and put forward some strong recommendations to government. We are hoping to do that by tabling the report in August. We will be keeping you updated through Yuki, of course, and when we get to the final report we will send you a copy. I hope to see you again. We certainly would like to do that.

NAME WITHHELD: I also would like—can I just say this too—closure. We need proper closure and healing, and that is what needs to happen, not just for me but for so many people. There is so much. Every time you talk—and I love to talk, you have probably worked that out—and you need to air, but there comes a point that you talk about it and all it does is it brings up all that pain so that for a lot of people it is not easy. I am a chatter so it comes easy to talk about my feelings, but a lot of people cannot. So, healing, and I think this is going to do that. But at the time we are going through it, we have got to go through it to get to the other side, and this is what is the hard thing.

The CHAIR: Absolutely, and we acknowledge that this has been extremely challenging and difficult.

NAME WITHHELD: I did not know it was going to be so hard until I was on that bus this morning and I thought, 'Ah, I don't want to do this'.

The CHAIR: But just know that your evidence and many other evidences will be part of a very strong report.

NAME WITHHELD: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: We genuinely believe it will be a step forward in the healing process, so thank you so much again. We wish you all the very best.

NAME WITHHELD: Thank you. I am trying to get on. I actually am doing movies. Yuki knows all this stuff. You can tell her what I tell you. I have just done a short film about a woman terminal—true story—down

the Mornington Peninsula. I went down and drove; I had to get there. It was not paid, but I knew I had to do it, and it is going to be put out in time. Also I did *The BBQ*—I am in the background of that—and I did a promotion for Carols by Candlelight in 2019. They asked for people so I went down to Melbourne for the day, and that is on social. You can look up on Facebook ‘Vision Australia 2019 carols’ and you will see me. And I am just in the process now—and I told them I wanted to make sure it was okay—I want to have my story put into a movie. So I am allowed to do that, am I?

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely.

NAME WITHHELD: Because I know it is a Parliament privilege, but it is my story.

The CHAIR: Yes, it is your story.

NAME WITHHELD: And I think down the track that is my aim—to tell the story—and it will help others. I have even got a title. I am meeting people to do it so it could be a possibility.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, [name withheld]. Just do not forget to invite us when this goes to air.

NAME WITHHELD: If you come and see me doing a play or something, please come up and speak to me because I will not remember your names but I will remember your faces.

The CHAIR: Lovely. Thanks, [name withheld]. Thanks again.

NAME WITHHELD: I am going to probably still ring occasionally to see how this beautiful lady is doing. She is gorgeous.

Witness withdrew.