

# **T R A N S C R I P T**

## **LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE**

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

Melbourne—Wednesday, 16 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 Isabell Collins.

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon. Before I begin 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. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans and the Chair of the committee. To my left is Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong; Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong; and Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda. And of course we have Yuki Simmonds, who is from our secretariat.

All evidence given today is recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check through. Any transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website, unless they are marked 'confidential'.

Please be aware, today we have Reiko Hipple here. Reiko is from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support services. She is available at any point that you wish while you are providing your evidence. If you need to take a break or if you need to get in touch with any provider or services at a later time, we will assist you.

The committee is very much interested in hearing about your experience of forced adoption and in particular the services you have accessed—and most importantly what outcomes you want to see from this inquiry. So thank you very much for being here today, Isabell Collins. You may begin with your evidence.

**Ms COLLINS:** Okay. All right. Well, firstly thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today, and also it is my first real outing since COVID, so I am very excited.

**Ms SETTLE:** Welcome out.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes, congratulations.

**Ms COLLINS:** I have done some Christmas shopping and taken a photo of the Parliament lamppost that is out the front. In the 1970s I actually climbed up that lamppost, in a nursing protest. So I have had a good day.

**Ms COUZENS:** So you have got history here.

**Ms COLLINS:** Yes. Regarding myself I was born in 1948. I spent my first six months at St Joseph's Broadmeadows orphanage, and I was adopted at 12 months of age. My adoptive mother already had three natural children and then found out that her husband was a bigamist and an illegal immigrant, and he was then sent back to England to his first wife and kids.

Then my mother met my father, and he had never married or had other children, and so two of us were adopted. My brother, whom I love absolutely dearly, is 18 months older than me. But my mother was already a grandmother, and I have to say she needed me like she needed a hole in the head. So while my adoptive mother had a very close relationship with my brother, mine was not the case, and she made it very clear to me on numerous occasions that she—my natural mother did not want me—she did not want me and nobody else would.

We lived on a farm until I was eight, and I remember I used to go off on my own and I would try and work it all out. I can remember thinking, 'When I grow up and have children of my own, I'll be the head of that family, because there isn't anything behind me'.

At the same time, however, there were individuals within the family on both sides who did accept my brother and I as members of the family, but on the whole most did not. They would make comments like 'You're not really related' whenever they had that opportunity.

Just to relay one sad but funny story. My mother and father went away for the weekend and we had an aunty—my mother's sister—looking after us, and she had two kids, who in my view were quite spoilt. They were playing with our toys, and they were being a bit rough. Either my brother or I said something, and they told us to buggo off, that we were nothing but bastards anyway. My brother and I looked at each other, we looked back at them, we looked at each other, and without saying a word fists were flying, and we belted the living daylights out of them.

*Members interjecting.*

**Ms COLLINS:** I am glad you laughed, because I was about 11 at the time, and we still get a warm glow in the tummy about it.

**Ms COUZENS:** That was okay in the day.

**Ms COLLINS:** Yes. My aunty came out and grabbed my brother and me by our earlobes and marched us into the laundry, where we were locked up for the rest of the day. My brother and I, all those hours we were in the laundry we did not speak, but every time we looked at each other we grinned, and to this day we still grin. It was actually the only time as children that we actually ever stuck up for ourselves. My mother had an attitude of—on my birth certificate it had that my father was unknown, and it then became a fact that my natural mother was a loose woman, and she was not. So I was seen as somebody who was going to turn out just like her mother and that I had bad blood.

We experienced being beaten up on the way home from school. There were people who were not allowed to play with us—or I certainly experienced that. For example, I had a friend called [name withheld]. In primary school I would walk past her house, pick her up. We would go to school, we would sit together, we would play together and we would walk home together. And then when we got to her home her mother would have a glass of milk and biscuits for us, and I just adored her mother. This went on for years until we were in high school, and then my mother met her mother. I showed up on the Monday morning to pick [name withheld] up, and [name withheld] mum greeted me with, '[name withheld] already left for school. You're to have nothing further to do with [name withheld]', and closed the door in my face. When I got to school I said to [name withheld], 'What's going on?' and she said, 'My mother said you're bad'. So therefore [name withheld] and I never conversed again after that.

I would probably be in the *Guinness Book of Records* for the shortest engagement ever. I got engaged when I was 18. We were very excited and raced home to tell [name withheld] parents, and his mother said in a very aggressive tone, 'You will not marry that. My God, you wouldn't know what you were getting'. I looked at [name withheld], and [name withheld] was silent. So I left, and we never saw each other again. I certainly did not tell my family about it until I was in my 40s, because in those days there was nobody to tell—because my mother had the same attitude. I certainly was not going to get support from her, because she was the one that would tell people. Certainly I have developed this attitude that I will tell everybody that I am adopted, because if you are going to dump me, I want you to dump me before I get attached. I know attitudes have changed for the most part, but they still exist. Often if you have a fight with somebody the word 'bastard' will always come up.

However, on a positive note, I developed meningococcal meningitis and was admitted to Fairfield hospital and was there for quite some time and made friends with the nurses, who suggested that I take up nursing. I was made to leave school when I was 15, so I did not have the education or qualification to do general nurse training, but I did my SEN training. I was lucky enough to have Vivian Bullwinkel—I do not know if you know of Vivian—who was the sole survivor of the Bangka Island massacre and was a prisoner of war of the Japanese for some years. She was my first boss and I think one of Australia's finest leaders and nurses, and she gave me a chance. She ended up sending me off to Outward Bound. I do not know if you have heard of Outward Bound.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes.

**Ms COLLINS:** Bloody hell! Sorry, this is on video. You think you are not going to survive it, but it does teach you that nothing is impossible and to serve, strive and never yield. Off I went to that course and I came back. She called me up and said, 'I think you can do your general nurse training', and supported me to go back to school, which I did. I went off and did general nurse training and never looked back. I guess from my point of view there is always positive out of negative. I certainly have a very strong sense of justice—that everybody is entitled to justice, that you should never lie about anybody, because I know what it is like to be lied about. I worked in mental health running a statewide advocacy service for 20 years, and I never wanted anybody to reach out and know that nobody was there. These are, I think, some positive things that came out of it. I am no less or more honest than anybody else, and I think I will probably spend the rest of my life trying to prove I do

not have bad blood, but these are the qualities that have come out that may not have come out had I not had those experiences.

The tragedy, though, is that my experience is a common experience of adoptees. There is a narrative out there that adoption is a good thing, and it is a false narrative; it always has been a false narrative, but it is very difficult for adopted people to come out publicly and say how they really feel about things, because we live with that notion if your mother can give you away to strangers so can others, and so you have to be the perfect child. Even though I love my brother and his kids, and another brother's kids I am close to, in the reality of the thing I think I will always be their aunty, but there is that thing that sits with you that if I did something that would upset them they could very easily say, 'We don't want anything further to do with you', and that would be the end of it. So it is a different thing with relatives. You may not have anything to do with your mother, you may not have a good relationship with your mother but at the end of the day she is always going to be your mother, whereas if you are adopted and they say, 'There's the door', that is sort of the end of it. There is only a legal thing that is left.

The thing—and I put that in the submission—that amazed me when I started to do my journey in attending VANISH is adoptees can sit in the same room and finish off each other's sentences. That is how common our feelings are, and it is really quite a strange relationship, so usually you develop friendships slowly. People find out the superficial about you and then after trust has developed you end up finding out about the secrets. With adoptees it is quite the opposite. We know nothing superficial about each other and we know the deepest things. Probably the only time I have ever felt safe is when I am in a room with other adoptees where you know that your views are not going to be rejected; they are going to be respected, and it is safe to express them.

I guess the other thing that I want you to know, and I will read this, is for many years governments espoused, or legislators espoused, that children must come first. In my view they come last. To give an example, puppies stay with their mothers until at least six weeks of age, whereas we whip these kids away—and I have done midwifery and seen it happen. We whip these babies away straightaway. A child being born is the most traumatic experience for the child. They are coming down that birth canal probably thinking, 'What the bloody hell is going on here'. The only thing they know is their mother, the smell of her and her voice—and we take it away. The research says that is an extremely traumatic thing for the child that they carry through for the rest of their lives. I do not know whether they do. I know I carry stuff, and I know a lot of adoptees do. I do not know how you research that sort of stuff, but certainly as a midwife babies do know their mums.

We change a baby's identity. We give them another name and another family. We give them away to complete strangers. We falsify their birth certificate and we basically deny them a biological identity and the right to know who they look like, who they take after or even get to know those people. If we consider it, society is all about who you look like, who you take after and all of those sorts of things, and we deny that to the child. Often when you go to the doctor, they will say, 'Is there a history of this in your family?', and you have got to say, 'I don't know'. While many adoptees have now met their biological relatives, you have to rely on the biological relative having enough insight and being respectful of your right to know, and certainly some do not think we have got a right to know those things.

The other thing is people now say, 'We have open adoption'. The dilemma you place the child in with open adoption is awful. The child is going to be conflicted. If they act too excited about seeing their natural mother, they are going to hurt their adoptive parents. If they hurt their adoptive parents, they could get rejected. It is a horrible thing. Just to give a practical example, I have got friends who are adoptive parents. They have got two adopted kids who are now adults and parents themselves. But when they were kids I was going around there for dinner one night, and I rang the doorbell and the two kids greeted me and mouthed, 'We're meeting our real mum tomorrow'—they were brother and sister—'yay!'. I went 'Yay!' back, and then we went off and we had dinner. The kids were then sent off to bed, and the parents said to me, 'They've got a meeting with their natural mum tomorrow and they don't want to go. Do you think we should force them?'. And I said, 'Yeah, I think you should because it's important that they develop that relationship'. That is the dilemma that we put to children. I guess the other thing is we assume that all adoptive parents are self-actualised and are comfortable about these relationships. Often the deal is done but it is does not necessarily occur. So what I am saying is the child does not come first. In reality we have rationalised a whole pile of things. Whoever makes these decisions—and hopefully Victoria will make proper decisions, unlike New South Wales is doing at the moment, and we can put the child first.

I guess the other thing is the fear of rejection. I do not want to underestimate the fear of rejection that adoptees walk around with all the time. It is not only about fear of rejection in families; it is fear of rejection everywhere. So they often hold back on relationships, or if there is a bit of a blue, they talk about how they go through much more pain because it is that reaffirming stuff that goes on, that if your mother can give you away to strangers, then no matter what the circumstances—I understand those circumstances, but the feeling inside of adoptees does not always match.

So I guess the thing that I would ask is: what are you going to do? Adoptees have always been an add-on at the end of it. The apology—we were an add-on. It was not really for us. It was for the mothers and stuff like that. The inquiries, and I guess this one too, about forced adoptions—it really is about the mothers. What we need I think if we are ever going to make things better for babies now or in the future is there needs to be an inquiry about adoption from the adoptee point of view and how adoption impacts on the adoptee. And I do not think we are ever going to get it right, and there will be people who will not like that idea, but I think there has come a time where we as adoptees have to stand up and run the risk and say, ‘This ain’t all what it’s cracked up to be’. It is difficult, but I really think that that needs to happen.

You know, I understand in New South Wales now you do not even need—I do not like it, but the lobbying of the Deborra-lee Furnesses of this world has brought adoptees out of the woodwork from the point of view of, ‘We have to stop this’. I know I was very active in the adoption community, and you get to the point where you think, ‘Oh, I’ve got to have a rest’. I was sitting at home, happy, and I saw her on television and I was up out of my lounge chair, saying, ‘I’ve got to do something’—and that is what has happened. There is an adoptee-only national group now and there are adoptee-only Facebook things; everybody is saying very similar things, and they want an inquiry about the impact of adoption on adoptees. That is probably all I have to say. Thank you for listening.

I should say, when I met my natural mother, the verbosity is genetic—I cannot help it.

**The CHAIR:** Lovely. Thank you so much, Isabell, for sharing your experiences with us. I will put forward to my committee members for questions. We will start with Christine.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks, Isabell, for coming along today. We really appreciate it. We get the written submissions, but having you come along personally to have that conversation is great for us. So we really do appreciate your evidence today. I had a couple of things I just wanted to clarify with you. You mentioned that you did not feel part of the family from pretty much the beginning of the adoption.

**Ms COLLINS:** Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** Was there any reason for that, given that those parents adopted you?

**Ms COLLINS:** Well, my mother already had three kids, and they were adults. I mean she did not need other children. It was really done for my father’s point of view. My brother had an entirely different experience. And you know, I do not want to talk about his experiences, but clearly his mother wanted him, and that is perhaps all I should say about that.

On my birth certificate and the information the nuns may have given my mother, when I went to the home—because I actually found my mother before the law changed; it took 15 years, but I did find her—the nun there brought out this book and said that there was a group of mothers who intended to keep their children, and [name withheld] was one of them. They got a house. Some of them were going to stay home and look after the kids and the others were going to go off and work; you know, they were going to do this as a team thing. And for some unknown reason [name withheld] came in in the middle of the night, signed the papers and took off. When I asked [name withheld] about that, she said, ‘Yes, I got offered another job with more money, and think yourself lucky you’re here, because I certainly tried to abort you’. So I wondered whether the nuns had given my mother that information, because she certainly got some information because she had given me my name—you know, she told me what my natural name was, and that was how I was able to track down [name withheld] before the law changed.

But I think that it was the time: people did have an attitude that kids born out of wedlock had bad blood and were bastards, but you know, I think it is just that attitude. The majority of adoptees will talk about the love that they get from their family, but there are always members of the family who do not accept you as true-blue

members of the family. So when my adoptive mother died, I had gone to the funeral, I had come back to work—I was a senior nurse at Western Hospital—and I was sitting there having lunch with the director of nursing. A charge nurse came up, and her mum had died. She came up and she thanked them for the flowers.

**Ms COUZENS:** That is interesting

**Ms COLLINS:** I did not get anything. I did not say anything, but I was just looking and the director of nursing said, ‘Well, she wasn’t really your mother’. When [name withheld] died—and she was a patient in that hospital—I did not get anything. And, ‘Well, she didn’t really raise you’. One of my best friends said to me, ‘I don’t understand why you’re so upset’. I said, ‘Well, apart from the fact that she was the only close, real relative I had, you know, when Mum died, it was, “Well, she wasn’t really your mother”, and now [name withheld] has gone, “Well, she didn’t really raise you”. Tell me when I can have normal grief like everybody else’, you know. That is not an uncommon experience of adoptees as well. And you cannot get rid of those attitudes with a change of legislation. There has to be a change in community attitudes and working on that. Whilst it is certainly much better than what it was, it is still there. So I think that is the reason.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes. In terms of counselling, you mentioned VANISH in your evidence. Have you accessed specific counselling, and if so, do you think there need to be improvements in the counselling and the support services that are on offer at the moment?

**Ms COLLINS:** Look, I have been into counselling, and that is about being adopted but also the experiences that I had. I found it helpful, but the thing that really frustrated the living daylights out of me, working in mental health, is saying, ‘I’m paying you all this money and I’m actually teaching you about adoption before you can help me’. That seems to me to be crazy and wrong.

I think not everybody needs counselling. I certainly think the support groups are extremely helpful and worthwhile, but you will always have some people who are going to benefit by—you know, there are some adoptees, I mean, we are all damaged, but some are really damaged. It is a really hard thing. I remember my first meeting at VANISH. I kept on getting up and walking out and walking around the block crying but not really understanding what I was crying about. I was saying to myself, ‘You’ve got to go back. You’ve got to go back’. I walked around the block about twice and then came back and there was a girl out the front. I was working in mental health as an advocate. I was working with the Office of the Public Advocate at the time, and this girl had both wrists bandaged. You did not need two pieces of brain to rub together to know what had happened, and she was undoing the bandages. I went up to her and I said, ‘You know, I used to be a nurse and I’m now an advocate for mental health at the Office of the Public Advocate just up the road. I’ll make you a deal: if you let me rebandage your wrists, we’ll go back in together and I won’t leave until you’re ready to leave’, and so we did. I ended up becoming this girl’s advocate for years, and she had some pretty horrible experiences with her father. So you are always going to have those who need specialist counselling.

There is an example where I was rung by an adoptive parent and a boy had just found out that he was the product of rape, and he had attempted suicide and all of this sort of stuff. She was wanting my assistance with him. The attitude of the psychiatrist was, ‘He had a loving home, so therefore it’s not an issue’. I have got to say in this, I was seconded into the Department of Health, Mental Health Branch, in 1989–90 when there were the 19 psychiatric institutions and there was an inquiry regarding standards of care and treatment, and my job was to go in and interview the patients about their care and treatment. It was a mind-blowing, dreadful experience. I gave up nursing and became an advocate after that. There were adoptees everywhere. I met more adoptees in that 12 months than I had ever met in life. In looking at their medical files it was just mentioned; it was not recognised that this might be an issue. I think that that is a problem.

I have not been active in VANISH for years, but I understand it is really disappointing that the funding has not been continued with for counselling for adoptees. That is just simply wrong. Maybe part of that is our fault because we have not come out and said, ‘This is awful’, you know. ‘It’s not all it’s cracked up to be’. But it needs to be counsellors who are familiar with the issues of adoption.

**Ms COUZENS:** Great. Thank you. I appreciate that. That was good.

**The CHAIR:** We will move on to Michaela.

**Ms SETTLE:** Thank you very much for sharing your experiences. As Christine says, it is wonderful to hear face to face, and I am delighted that you have a wonderful brother.

**Ms COLLINS:** He is gorgeous.

**Ms SETTLE:** I wanted to pick up on something you said about what New South Wales are doing at the moment. Could you explain to me a little bit about it? Are they in the process of doing recommendations?

**Ms COLLINS:** What I understand is there has been some great lobbying by Deborra-Lee Furness and that you actually do not necessarily now need the signatures of the parents for a child to be placed for adoption—that if there is an issue around possible abuse and stuff like that, the child can be taken away for adoption without their approval. Now, I would never want any child to be raised in an abusive home, but having advocated for some 25 years, I know that sometimes children need protection from child protection and they do not always get it right and incorrect assumptions are made and turned into fact and stuff like that. So I would hate us to go down the New South Wales trail. If we are enlightened, taking a child away from its mother is your absolute last resort not your first resort. I mean, I think it is sad—the grief for women who are unable to have children must be dreadful—but that does not give you the right to take another woman's child.

**Ms SETTLE:** And you mention in your submission, I think, guardianship. So do you think something like that is a much better model—rather than adoption it is a guardianship for a period?

**Ms COLLINS:** Yes. I think adoption is such a thing that alters a person's life that I think we should wait until the child is old enough to make their own decision. To me that is not a perfect scenario, because if the kid does not go along with it, it is sort of like they are going to be wondering what happens to them. But it should not be about owning children, and I think adoption is about owning children. It should be about loving children, and if people are genuine about wanting to love a child, guardianship should be sufficient. I think that will happen. I will be well dead by the time we change adoption, but I think—I have forgotten my train of thought. I am 72.

**Ms SETTLE:** That was wonderful.

**Ms COLLINS:** Adoption should be the last resort, not the first.

**Ms SETTLE:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much. Heang, do you have a question?

**Mr TAK:** Just a quick one. Thank you, Chair and Isabell. In terms of outcomes of this inquiry, having heard that you propose or would like to see a separate inquiry just on the adoptees and you also alluded to more funding and all of that, can you say a little bit more about what sort of outcome you would like to see?

**Ms COLLINS:** Well, I would certainly think—and maybe this is run out of VANISH; as I say, I have not been active in VANISH for a few years—counselling and VANISH being provided with funding so that psychologists are readily available to people, because one of the things that happens when you first become aware that you have got this stuff on your shoulders is it is really traumatic. You know, you are sobbing from your boots and you do not necessarily even understand why you are sobbing from your boots. I think having somebody to go to that you do not have to shop around for and stuff like that—having experts available—would be extremely helpful, apart from the support groups that are out there.

**Mr TAK:** Thank you and thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much. Isabell, thank you very much for your valuable contribution today to us in preparing your submission and providing your evidence. The committee appreciates the time and effort taken today and we acknowledge that of course revisiting and sharing your experience may be painful and confronting. Please be assured that your evidence will help inform us in preparing some very strong recommendations to the Victorian Government. Obviously if you have got any issues or anything else comes to mind, please feel free to reach out to any one of us, in particular to Yuki as well. At this point in time the Committee is aiming to complete and table the report before 1 July next year. We will keep you updated of that progress, and again I take this opportunity to thank you very much and wish you all the very best.

**Ms COLLINS:** Just on a light note: as a lapsed Catholic, if you make a recommendation that there be an adoptee-only inquiry, I will go back to mass on Sundays and light candles for you there every week, all right?

**The CHAIR:** Lovely. Thank you, Isabell, on that note.

**Ms COLLINS:** Thanks. See you.

**Witness withdrew.**