

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 10 March 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

Hannah Spanswick

WITNESS

Hannah Spanswick

The CHAIR: Okay. Well, good morning. Before I begin, I'd 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 declare open the public hearings for Legal and Social Issues Committee's inquiry into responses to historical forced adoptions in Victoria.

My name is Natalie Suleyman, I'm the Chair of the Committee and the Member for St Albans. To my right is Michaela Settle MP, the Member for Buninyong. To my left is Christine Cousins MP, the Member for Geelong, and Meng Heang Tak MP, the Member for Clarinda. At this stage mobile phones should be turned to silent, I take this opportunity for the record to welcome Hannah Spanswick, who's here today to present to us.

As you know, all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore, you're protected against any action for which you say here today. But if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You'll be provided with a proofed version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it's available.

Any transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible, unless confidentiality has been requested. Please be aware that we have Holly Donoghue with us today. Holly's from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support. She's available to talk to you throughout the hearing, but also after. You can also take a break. And we can also put you in touch with Carfi or other services at a later time.

So, today the Committee is interested in hearing about your experience of forced adoption, and in particular the services that you have accessed and what outcomes you would like from the inquiry, and I think that's really important to state. What outcomes you would like from the inquiry. I now invite you to proceed with a brief opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee members.

Ms SPANSWICK: Okay.

The CHAIR: Thank you, and welcome, Hannah, again.

Ms SPANSWICK: Thank you. I welcome the opportunity to speak before this committee and inquiry into past forced adoptions and to share a snippet of my personal experience. In 1964 - - -

The CHAIR: That's fine. Take your time, Hannah.

Ms SPANSWICK: It's 57 years ago. It's as if it was yesterday. In 1964, as a young, unsophisticated 18 year old, finding myself with an unplanned and unexpected pregnancy, I soon became a cog in the wheel of the adoption industry, whereby the aim was to find babies for infertile couples who were respectfully married and financially secure, of which I was neither.

To this day I can still hear the words of the social worker, the Crown Street Women's Hospital, who said, 'If you really love your baby, you'll give him up for adoption'. And on another occasion, 'You know you can't possibly look after this child, and one day, when you get married, you'll have children of your own'. It was as if the physical, emotional, and psychological changes that were taking place within me were somehow just a figment of my imagination.

During the months the almoner spent undermining my abilities to mother my own child. She omitted to inform me of the existence of a Commonwealth subsidy that would have offered me some financial assistance. The end simply justified the means. The legal age back then was 21. So, at 18 I was unable to open up a bank account in my own name, prevented from obtaining a driver's licence and forbidden to marry without parental consent.

But according to those who had taken charge of my situation, deemed that I was sufficiently mature and adult enough to sign what was ostensibly a legally binding document giving away the rights to the child that I had carried and borne. The adoption papers were presented to me within three days of my child's birth, instead of

the legislative requirement of five days, and within 45 minutes of receiving a narcotic injection, which makes a complete mockery of any notion of informed consent.

In my written submission, I compare the loss of my first-born child to adoption, to the death of one of my subsequent children, who died from cancer. With his death, I at least have a grave to visit, and memories of the twenty years we spent together. And with family and friends I can celebrate his love and share my grief. And after several years of therapy, I am finally able to integrate his passing into my life. Unfortunately, the same can't be said for the loss of my child, who was removed from me by the adoption marketeers.

My grief continues, despite the passage of time, and despite knowing that he is alive and well and with a family of his own. But for reasons of his own is unable or unwilling to have an ongoing relationship with me, or his half siblings. Compounding his absence is the loss of a daughter-in-law and three grandchildren. One author has described the separation of mother and child resulting from adoption as the primal wound.

With tens of thousands of closed adoptions having occurred in Victoria, there are many mothers and their adult children who still experience the effects of this primal wound, all of which occurred with the imprimatur of governments of all political persuasions, their publicly funded agencies, as well as their judicial appointments. The need for specialised counselling has never been greater and I can only hope that this committee of inquiry will reflect on these overt breaches of human rights and make every effort to make proper restitution for these past abhorrent practices.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Hannah. We might just start with a couple of questions, but thank you, again, for your evidence and I know it's been extremely challenging and difficult today, so, we genuinely thank you. I just want to, if I can, Hannah, ask you, how do you feel in your experience, have you been able to access counselling and supportive services, or has it been difficult?

Ms SPANSWICK: Whilst I was working and able to afford it, I saw a private—I sought, psychotherapy. I have also been a member of VANISH for many years. Whilst I haven't actually sought counselling through VANISH, I know that it's available, although not extensive. It's very minimal.

I think that it needs to be expanded to a point where anyone who's been touched by adoption or has a lived experience needs to be able to access counselling through people who have some specialty in the area. Because I know of people who have—with an adoption experience who have sought counselling, and depending on the counsellor, the adoption experience doesn't seem to have entered their radar, in terms of acknowledging that many of their issues stem back to that adoption, or the loss of their child. So it does need to be specialised by people who understand the issues.

The CHAIR: Yes, and we've heard that throughout the proceedings in relation to specialised support services. I might pass over to my Committee members. Thank you.

Ms COUZENS: Thanks, Hannah, for coming along today, we really appreciate you sharing your experience with us and also, I appreciate you giving evidence today. So, thank you so much for your time. Is there anything in particular you think should be recommended by this committee?

Ms SPANSWICK: I think there needs to be public education. The majority of people who haven't had a lived experience of adoption really don't understand the issues. And in part, it relates to the donor conceived population, and surrogacy. At the end of the day, you are—with the best of intentions, you are removing a child from the woman who has given birth to it.

It doesn't matter whether it's genetic material that's being used of the commissioning parents, it's the woman's emotional state, it's the woman's blood, it's the woman's nutrients, it's the woman's emotions, all of that. The embryo has either in its own body, or is accustomed to, and that's what it knows. To take it away from its mother and put it into the hands of somebody else, the somebody else is the surrogate, in reality.

The person who gave birth is that child's mother, and you can use whatever linguistic acrobatics you like, it doesn't alter that basic fact.

Ms COUZENS: And when you talk about education, is there something in particular you'd like to see happen? So, you know, there's the statue - - -

Ms SPANSWICK: Yes.

Ms COUZENS: That was done a couple of years ago. A lot of people would say that they're not aware of that.

Ms SPANSWICK: That's right.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, so, is there anything in particular around the education that you would like to see happen?

Ms SPANSWICK: Well, it's part of the country's history. So, - how you introduce that, whether it's in the education system or whether it's simply some other form of, you know, a broader education. I really don't know the specifics but there needs to be some efforts to educate the community.

And whether, I mean—even just having pamphlets available in the library, in places like libraries, that specify that counselling is available for anybody with an adoption experience would at least make the community more aware that it's an issue. Because right now they don't understand that it's an issue.

Ms COUZENS: And we saw the exhibition too, obviously. Do you believe that that should continue?

Ms SPANSWICK: Yes, I do.

Ms COUZENS: - - - to be shown?

Ms SPANSWICK: Yes, I do. Absolutely, to be ongoing. Yep.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you very much.

Ms SPANSWICK: Okay.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Hannah.

Mr TAK: Thank you Chair, thank you Hannah. Talking about the public education, thank you for your presentation, because I learned so much I didn't know about these forced adoptions before coming to this committee, so I have that benefit. So, I totally support your suggestion. My question is what did the apology made by the Victorian Parliament in 2012 and then the apology by the former Prime Minister in 2013, what did it mean to you back then, and perhaps now, are there any changes?

Ms SPANSWICK: Well, clearly it was an extremely important event to take place because it was the first time, I believe, that a public acknowledgement occurred that highlighted the issues and brought it to the attention—well, in the first instance, the media, and subsequently, the broader community. But like most issues, you know, the 24-hour news cycle, it disappears into the ether once it's been announced, and primarily forgotten about. Which is why I think it's important for there to be some process of ongoing education, so that it doesn't actually get forgotten about.

Mr TAK: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you Heang. Just before I go to Michaela, I just wanted to introduce David Southwick, MP, the Member for Caulfield. Michaela, thank you.

Ms SETTLE: Thank you, and thank you, Hannah, for sharing your experience. It's really helps us understand what you've been through and what's gone on in the past. One question I wanted to ask you—we've heard from other people around—through the journey in trying to find your son, were you supported? Were the hospital services helpful with their records, how was that process?

Ms SPANSWICK: I didn't have any problems accessing the records. I simply wrote to the hospital and asked specifically to be provided with them. I'm unaware if there's anything missing. What I've been provided with gave me the information that I needed, which is why I was able to identify the exact date on which I signed the adoption papers, and also the fact that I was given a narcotic only less than an hour before that signature was obtained. Otherwise I would not have known.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Hannah, again, for being here today. I know it was challenging, but your contribution to the Committee is extremely valuable and again, we appreciate the time and effort that you have taken to prepare your evidence today. On behalf of the Committee, I want to stress to you how important your evidence is, and how we will be able to deliberate and be informed, and have an understanding of the relevant issues before we prepare the report. And it will be a very strong report back to the Victorian Government. And we hope that it will bring justice for you all. So, thank you very much for being here today.

Ms SPANSWICK: And thank you for inviting me.

The CHAIR: And if you would like to keep up to date with the progress of the Committee, at any point, you can contact Yuki or myself or any member of the Committee. But again, I do want to thank you, truly, for being here today.

Ms SPANSWICK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Wishing you all the very best.

Mr TAK: Thank you.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.