

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

WITNESSES

Ms June Smith, Mother,

Ms Lyn Kinghorn, Mother, and

Mr John Kinghorn, Support Person.

The CHAIR: Good morning. Thank you for attending the Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria. 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 declare open the public hearing for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent. I would also like to introduce the committee members. To my right is James Newbury, MP, the Deputy Chair and the Member for Brighton. To my left is Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; and also Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong. Heang Tak will be joining us soon; also David Southwick, MP, will be joining us as well. I welcome here today June Smith, Lyn Kinghorn and John Kinghorn.

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 or other platforms, these comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, to my right. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or any handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as they are available, unless it is confidential and it has been requested.

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

The Committee is interested in hearing your experience of forced adoption, and in particular the services you have accessed and what outcomes you would like to see from this inquiry. I invite you now to proceed with a brief opening statement to the Committee which will be followed by questions from members, but today we are in your hands, so thank you. Thank you, Lyn, and thank you, June.

Ms KINGHORN: Mine is briefer than June's, so I will go first. Good morning. My sincere thanks to this committee and your staff that you are willing to study our submissions in request for action on the 2012 recommendations of the Senate report. I must emphasise that I believe the recognition of mothers in the statement of 'forced adoption' diminishes the true action of abduction. Mothers suffered abduction to facilitate forced adoption of our abducted babies. I feel our history would be more truthful if it was recognised as it truly was: abduction for adoption.

I am grateful, but also devastated for the years stolen. Dehumanisation is the ugliest act of power. The stigma mothers were forced to bear at the very start of our lives—lives, which should have been supported and under construction, suffered destruction and devastation by those who exploited and failed us. The arrogant, hostile attitude of 'We can hurt you and get away with it' condemned mothers to a lifetime of trauma, compounded by not being believed or heard. We have for many years called for truth and justice for these contrived crimes against us. For many of those years we received indifference and silence.

I believe the difference with the Indigenous stolen, abducted generation in relating to our stolen, abducted generation is, within the Indigenous communities they grieved together in support and recognition of the cruelty they suffered. Our communities, our families, Christian and medical institutions and government authorities all treated us as receiving the punishment we deserved. To this day some still hold to this belief. Where could mothers find care and compassion? It was years of suffering in lonely silence and condemnation before we dared find and support each other. Please try to imagine: brutal forced removal from our babies, then tossed out alone with no-one to console or even recognise or acknowledge our grief. We lived through the whispers and the accusations—hard, nasty, cruel, upstanding communities reminding us this was our deserved punishment. The torment of abduction became the measure against every life difficulty I faced from then on. I was a survivor, as nothing else could compare to the agony and torture it was demanded I endure. Even the full-term stillbirth of my second daughter does not come close.

I acknowledge Relationships Australia Victoria, RAV, for their willing effort to support, listen and learn and to acknowledge the abduction of our babies was wrong. I am grateful we have been able to listen and learn from

each other. I hope more mothers and their children have this opportunity and RAV do not continue to be restricted by funding. We all need continuing support for our forever weeping wounds.

I read this statement today on behalf of not only June and myself, but also for those who just could not survive the lies and cover-ups—mothers who suffered abduction only to learn their children had died or were institutionalised, mothers who never knew there was an inquiry or apologies, mothers who could not keep up the fight. I believe many are still held silent by the perceived shame, or the perceived shame still held over them by others. Please support us, we who have lived this perceived shame, by saturating Victoria and beyond with the truth.

The importance of maintaining our courage while facing persistent disappointment, treachery, lies, inexperience, isolation, indifference and ignorance is because evil prevails when good people do nothing. We beg, grovel, implore, scream, cry, demand and ask quietly and persistently for your attention to the Senate recommendations that the criminal abduction of our babies be widely acknowledged and documented and the statutes of limitations removed. Our children need the truth. Society needs to understand the truth of the great adoption era. Shame is often transmitted by the shameless acts of others. Their avoidance of their shame demanded mothers live it. This is not our shame. Please let yours be the committee that remedies the suffering consequences of this insanity. My very sincere thanks. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Lyn.

Ms SMITH: Mine is a bit longer, but I apologise. This is my last stand, because I will not be doing it again. I am only speaking on behalf of mothers because we have not had any focus at all, especially since the inquiry. So I hope you bear with me.

The CHAIR: That is fine. Thank you.

Ms SMITH: I thank all the members of this committee for this chance to speak on behalf of mothers. Since October 2018 I have written in excess of 30 letters to the Victorian Premier, including the Attorney-General and other ministers, requesting that the statute of limitations be lifted for us mothers to seek litigation against our perpetrators. I have received one letter only, on 19 December 2019, when the Victorian Attorney General wrote and informed me that she had assumed the responsibility for the administration of the 1984 *Adoption Act*, and the government was now considering 88 recommendations put forward by the Law Reform Committee to modernise this Act. I believe this response from the Attorney-General was a tactless and measured reply. She went on to write that the Victorian Government was aware of the profound harm caused to us and that the Government had been working hard to implement the recommendations tabled by the Senate inquiry in 2012.

To date, no recommendations from that inquiry have been implemented by this government. In 2012 Daniel Andrews, then in opposition, apologised to us mothers. We wept and wept as he spoke of the agony and torment that we suffered and how governments had manifestly failed us. At last, acknowledgement—hopeful of so much more to come. From that day to this day—nothing. I believe the Victorian Government in their treatment of us mothers over the past six years have breached their own charter of human rights due to their cruel ostracism of us already-traumatised mothers. This government have consistently done everything in their power to silence us, to deny us, and their treatment of us has left us mothers in a place of such a magnitude of despair and isolation as to be rendered exterminated.

The words ‘forced adoption’ are a misnomer. Many of our children were never adopted. Some of our babies ended up in orphanages. One notorious Catholic social worker is on record stating that they placed our babies, in vast numbers, often the wrong people or to unsuitable people, and they would not know how this affected our children for a possible 20 years. Our children were issued false birth certificates stating that the adoptive parents had actually given birth to them. In whose best interest was this? This was not about the best interests of our children—it never was. This was never about adoption. This was about punishment.

In July this year I watched on TV the reunion of Timorese families—families whose children had been abducted during a time of conflict between Indonesia and Timor. I watched the emotion of these sobbing families as they hugged and clung to each other for the first time in decades. Their story made world news. Our Indigenous mothers and their children are, worldwide and vocally, recognised as being cruelly separated from each other. Yet we mothers are seen and spoken of and treated by Australian society as different mothers—almost an obscenity—not like real mothers. Why is no-one outraged at the brutality, the abject cruelty and evil

we as mothers suffered? Why is our abuse dismissed as the mores of the time? Wasn't it wrong then to abuse, drug and lie to mothers in order to steal their children, as it would be today? Why does this evil not register on any emotional scale of Victorian society? Why are we mothers only accepted as deserving of the punishment we suffered?

Removing our newborn babies without our consent can be seen as an act of genocide—the taking of one group of people and giving them to another group. Tens of thousands of our newborn babies given to other women, who in all probability had also had sex outside of marriage. We mothers are still stigmatised as relinquishing mothers—that we abandoned our newborn babies—when it was the whole of Victorian society who abandoned us. Mothers share a past history that is the shame of the whole of Victorian society, who knowing the plight of us mothers stood by in silence, condoning our illegal treatment and condoning the illegal abduction of our newly born babies. The shattering aspect of this heinous history is that it was mostly women who carried out our abuse and abducted our babies—nuns, nurses, social workers, grandmothers—all showing no sorrow for the evil they inflicted on us as young mothers when we most needed these women's support. None has ever apologised for their actions.

The Royal Women's Hospital has publicly and falsely declared in their supposed apology to mothers that their research had found no evidence of differential treatment towards never-married mothers in their hospital. Yet their researcher discovered many archival hospital records, including minutes from board of management meetings, annual reports, social work reports, medical directives et cetera, establishing categorically this hospital's discriminatory intention to inflict punishment on never-married mothers. The hierarchy of the Royal Women's Hospital must never be exonerated for their brutal treatment of young mothers. The Royal Women's Hospital cemented forever their shameful part into Victorian history by their own written admission to the Senate inquiry in 2012 that they removed our babies at birth.

I would like to refer to some submissions to this inquiry, like the submission on behalf of the CatholicCare advisory board and the Archdiocese of Melbourne. They wrote of their organisation as being a credible and caring adoption agency. They obviously could care less as to the reasons for this inquiry. Historian Dr Madeleine Hamilton wrote of the Catholic sisters of St Joseph's Babies Home in Broadmeadows, a place with a past non-Christian and shameful history of cruelly separating mothers and their babies. She wrote:

Those involved in the separation of babies and mothers were also haunted by their role. One elderly nun I interviewed ten years ago was stricken by the trauma she had inflicted at the home ...

I corresponded in the early 2000s with a nun who had been at St Joseph's Broadmeadows, and in one of her letters to me she wrote:

I am genuinely and deeply saddened that you suffered in the way that you described while you were a young mother needing care and support from the Sisters of St Joseph's. I am sorry. I cannot hide behind the words 'I didn't do it'. Your letter has caused me sleepless nights, and I remember you and your son in my prayers.

CEO Netty Horton and signee of the submission on behalf of the CatholicCare advisory board and the Archdiocese of Melbourne, I condemn you all for your tactless submission, your lack of remorse and especially your lack of honesty. As a mother, it hurts that you have deliberately failed to acknowledge your past abject actions towards never-married mothers when the hierarchy of this church enacted a major role in a system that removed babies from their young mothers without their consent.

I refer to some of those organisations whose submissions are attached to this inquiry's website seeking funding. They have written pages expounding their ability to assist those of so-called forced adoption and how they need more money to continue their own self-perceived valuable work without one word of acknowledgement or recognition of the abuse that these mothers were subjected to. Like the Australian Psychological Society, APS, for never publicly acknowledging this abuse to which we mothers were subjected—yet they have praised themselves for their valuable forced adoption training of clinicians and medical professionals while mothers are denied specialist counselling for their complex trauma—or any other form of counselling, for that matter. Their training of others has never benefited any mother at all.

On behalf of mothers I also condemn the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, RANZCP, for their failure to acknowledge the decades of destructive mental trauma suffered by these past young mothers. Even though a group of us personally reached out to this organisation a few years ago seeking their help for a diagnosis and treatment of our complex trauma, they chose to ignore us.

I refer to the Association of Relinquishing Mothers in Victoria, ARMS. As a mother I believe that ARMS has been detrimental for us mothers who did not relinquish our children. In the early 2000s I wrote an article for a mothers' newsletter informing them that they deserved compensation for their abuse and the theft of their children as victims of crime. ARMS then wrote to their members, condemning them—that wanting compensation could be seen as receiving 30 pieces of silver. They wrote:

... many adoptees see compensation as the equivalent of 30 pieces of silver. There is a perception by adoptees that natural mothers who seek compensation are only protesting their grief to get money.

Insult was added to injury for ARMS mothers by asking them in the same document if they wanted compensation. Again this year ARMS asked their members if they wanted compensation then wrote five reasons for mothers to want compensation but added five reasons for them not to want compensation. It is not about wanting compensation; these mothers deserve compensation. This year a solicitor of a respected and well-known Australia-wide lawyers office offered to attend an ARMS meeting and answer any questions—legal questions—mothers may have about our issue. ARMS management dismissed this offer, and this information was never printed in their newsletter. ARMS have displayed a subservient role to the Victorian Government over decades, ever hopeful of receiving funding. In turn, the Victorian government ignores all other mothers outside of the Association of Relinquishing Mothers for their own agenda.

I refer to another Victorian Government-funded organisation, VANISH. In 2017, five years after the Senate inquiry validated mothers' illegal abuse, not one word appeared on the VANISH website about this inquiry's findings. Yet this organisation provides information to our abducted children about us their mothers. I see VANISH as an adversary who have blatantly and deliberately suppressed the findings of the Senate inquiry, and I believe they have actually caused extensive harm for mothers whilst promoting their own agenda of post-adoption. Past manager of VANISH Gary Coles has over years spread hurtful and untrue propaganda in speech and the written word about mothers, deriding us as mothers who denied our children the right to know of their fathers. He has been detrimental and damaging to the facts surrounding the traumatic treatment of us mothers. Gary Coles demanded a federal apology for fathers, which was actioned, thereby forcibly restricting our inhumane abuse to being at the same level as that of a father. The damage this man has done to our validated abuse as the manager of VANISH and a member of the commonwealth reference group is absolute. Prime Minister Julia Gillard is on record on the day of the Australian apology to mothers referring to this man:

Gary Coles, a father, told me today of the lack of acknowledgment that many fathers have experienced.

How ...

they—

—were ignored at the time of the birth.

How their names were not included on birth certificates.

How the veil of shame and forgetting was cast over their lives too.

Yet this man was exposed publicly on television as a father who upon finding out he had impregnated his girlfriend did a runner and left New Zealand for Australia.

Information presented to me over decades by mothers is that most fathers turn their backs on their pregnant girlfriends, many denying paternity. No father of our children, no grandparents of our children have ever been dammed and discredited as we mothers have been cruelly maligned for their own failure to face their own responsibilities towards these mothers and their children. Both sets of grandparents, incredibly and unnaturally, denied their own unborn grandchild, yet these grandparents were apologised to by governments as part of so-called 'forced adoption', even though they themselves had enacted unbelievably abusive actions towards their own daughters. I believe this focus on grandparents and fathers emanated from male members of the commonwealth reference group, which included two male members of VANISH—one being Gary Coles, the other an adopted person—in order to suppress the inhumane abuse mothers suffered by falsely promoting our abuse as being about adoption in order to shame us as abandoning our newborn babies and to alleviate any guilt in others.

The light at the end of the tunnel for mothers has been from Relationships Australia Victoria, RAV, who deserve the highest commendation for their unequivocal support of us mothers. This is without exception the only organisation in Victoria that I am aware of that has acknowledged, respected and accepted unconditionally what their mothers have suffered. CEO Dr Bickerdike and the wonderful counsellors of RAV have reached out

in solidarity, with empathy, and accepted without reservation the truth of our traumatic past and the cruel removal of our newborn babies. RAV have shamed the majority of other organisations relating to our issue, including the Victorian Government, all of whom have continued to deny our very existence. This is an organisation that really does deserve more funding. I have almost finished.

- If we mothers had not been drugged with drugs such as chloral hydrate (mickey fins), and illegal heroin, breaching the 1953 Australian poisons Act –
- If we had not been physically and illegally assaulted by breast binding or administered carcinogenic stilboestrol to suppress lactation (a drug now used only on animals), creating for many mothers, myself included, a permanent inability to ever produce breast milk again—these violations of our legal rights to breastfeed our babies executed against our will and without our consent –
- If our hospital records had not been discriminately marked with codes to inform others that we were not married, we would not have been sexually violated by doctors, me included, who, informed by these codes, took it upon themselves to sexually molest our bodies for their own personal desires –
- Discriminatory codes that allowed a claim for doctors to medically mistreat us, to abuse us and to force upon us long labours and in positions to increase our pain in order to “make us sweat a bit” or “teach us to keep our legs together” –
- If we had not been used as live models for student doctors to practise internal examinations such as Pap smear tests without our written consent –
- Or had our children illegally removed to punish us and then used as a demanded commodity to create families for others –
- When our children already had a family of their own that loved them –
- There would be no so-called forced adoption and therefore most of these organisations would have no need to exist.

I would like to add just for the record to my stolen son Michael: I loved you then. You have denied me knowing you as a man, but my love for that baby has never waned. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, June and Lyn.

Ms SMITH: I have got to take a tablet. I am getting SVT. Sorry.

The CHAIR: That is fine. Shall we take a couple of minutes break?

Ms SMITH: No, no. I am fine. I would rather keep going. But I am sorry, I have to take one—you can see, I think, on my neck; it is jumping out. It is adrenaline that is causing it. I am sorry.

The CHAIR: That is okay.

Mr NEWBURY: No, no. Take your time, please. There is some water there if you would like some water with it.

Ms SMITH: Thank you. I will just pass that along to her husband because he can open it.

Ms SETTLE: Would you prefer a cup, June?

Ms SMITH: Sorry, no. I can drink from the bottle. Thank you so much. I just need a sip. I am fine. It will stop. Thank you for bearing with me.

The CHAIR: No. Thank you, June. I will pass on to committee members if we have any questions or comments—Christine, beginning with you. Thank you.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you both so much for sharing your experiences with us today. I really appreciate it, and I know how difficult it is too, so thank you both. My question is around what you would like to see from this inquiry. What sort of recommendations do you want to see?

Ms KINGHORN: I want truth. Just the fact that it is called ‘forced adoption’—what does that tell you? It does not tell you how our children were available to be forcibly adopted. That is so important for them. A lot of people that are adopted believe that we were relinquishing mothers. ‘Relinquishing mothers’ does not tell the

truth about mothers who said no and were physically, forcibly—there was no way there was relinquishment. We are both absolutely horrified that we are looked at under that banner. So that is really important, that our truth is told.

Ms SMITH: The other thing is that—I am sorry to interrupt; you know I am a mouth—

Ms KINGHORN: No, we are both here.

Ms SMITH: The other thing is, I am 100 per cent with Lyn—we have discussed this before—that this needs focus. It is not about forced adoption. It projects after what happened to us, and if it had not happened to us, there would not have been any adoption—there would be none. So that to me is a fallacy; it is a misnomer; it is wrong. But basically mothers need to be recognised. Mothers need counselling. They need a diagnosis for this trauma, because there is not one. We cannot be treated as a traumatic group along with people like refugees or people who have had stillbirths or car accidents or whatever. This is a unique trauma that has never been experienced in Victoria, and it absolutely needs seeing to. We are all dying off. We have all lived 50 to 60 years of this hell, and it has affected all our lives. At one stage my young daughter wrote to the Premier's press secretary and said all she can remember about Mum when she was young was how sad she was. That is a dreadful thing to find out years later—that you did that to your child—believe me. That is the punishment you give yourself.

The other thing is these women deserve redress. There is no doubt about it; it has just got to be. You cannot do this to people. You cannot take a mother's brand new baby and just say, 'You can't have it because you don't deserve it'. You have got no idea what it was like to have your child ripped from your arms because you would not hand him over. It was brutal, and they did not care. This has got to be acknowledged. People have to know what happened to us, because they will do it again—in fact I know that they are doing it in parts.

I am sorry if I get impassioned about it, but they have just got to be more focused on mothers and not so much about adoption. Our children's story is not ours. It is a different story. Theirs is after they were adopted and they became aware and they were focused and were told what happened to them, that their mums abandoned them, that their mums didn't want them, that their mums willingly gave them up. Well, that is not true. I am not saying there is not an element of mothers that may have done this, but not the majority of us—thousands of them. It just did not happen before or after this era of the late 1950s to the early 1970s, not with this amount of babies being taken. There were tens of thousands of babies taken from their mums. I do not know if any of you are mums, but just imagine what it would be like if the day you gave birth to your first baby someone said, 'No, you don't deserve it because you've got brown eyes'. I mean, it is the same thing. It is exactly the same thing, absolutely. I absolutely detest everybody that did this to me. I don't believe in the afterlife, but I hope there's a hell for them all, and that is my final offer. But anyway, that is all I am going to say.

Ms KINGHORN: You know, just the fact we were labelled on our hospital records—we did not even know that they had that label on us, but—

Ms SMITH: No, we didn't know that.

Ms KINGHORN: We were labelled, so here was the opportunity to punish us and take our children. It did not matter how much you said no or how much you showed your mothering ability and love. They could not have cared less.

Ms SMITH: The intention was always there.

Ms KINGHORN: And they just ignored what they put us through, not just at that point but ongoing.

Ms SMITH: All the way. They would deny it happened to you all the way through, all through the decades you have been denied that it really did happen: you 'relinquished'. We are seen as relinquishing; VANISH do that.

Ms KINGHORN: It is just so offensive to be named a relinquishing mother—

Ms SMITH: It is disgraceful.

Ms KINGHORN: when we suffered abduction of our children.

Ms SMITH: Yes.

Ms KINGHORN: And, you know, it is just unknown—just that the truth is told, really.

Ms SMITH: Absolutely. And the other thing I forgot to add, and I am sure Lyn forgot, is that of their 22 recommendations, two of them were put in by the Liberal Party before the Labor Party came in, and not one other recommendation has been put in. Now, that encompasses the organisations that were attached to this, like the Women's, the unmarried mothers homes—all those. They all have to be held accountable. They have all got a past that they cover up.

Ms KINGHORN: This has just been banging our head—we had the recommendations nearly nine years ago now, and I think we sort of sat back thinking, 'Oh, something's finally going to happen', and then suddenly we realised nothing was going to happen unless we got out there. And what do we want? We want the recommendations.

I was part of a meeting with Find, and I would go to that meeting and there would be people all around the table promoting adoption and promoting overseas adoption. Relinquishing mothers were there saying that they were going around the prisons consoling women who had had to give up their babies. And I was saying, 'I didn't give up my baby. I'm a mother whose child was abducted'. And the person sitting beside me said, 'Oh! I could hardly call it abduction'. And I said, 'What would you call it then?'. And then the convener of the meeting said, 'Lyn, we can't discuss this here'. That is the sort of—

Ms SMITH: Reaction.

Ms KINGHORN: Yes, that is what we have been up against to try and have our truth told. We want the truth; that is all. We are not asking for any more than just our history to be validated and acknowledged.

Ms SMITH: Which it already has been.

Ms KINGHORN: It has not really.

Ms SMITH: It has. It was in the Senate, and then since then—

Ms KINGHORN: Well, yes. It might have been said that it was done, but we do not live with—I had this experience of a woman speaking to me, and she goes, 'Oh, Lyn, you know, they're from the stolen generation', and my heart just raged, because we have suffered that and nobody comprehends. People have said to me, 'Oh, you've found your daughter. What a beautiful story'. And I say to them, 'No'. It's hell even being reconnected with your child—the gap that you are trying to forever fill; you cannot. It has been hell, for a lifetime.

Ms SMITH: And it will be for the rest of your life.

Ms KINGHORN: There is nothing that can change that stuff, but it is—

Ms SMITH: It can make it better by being acknowledged.

Ms KINGHORN: Yes, for the truth to be told.

Ms SMITH: It is always having to justify yourself. You will get people, and you will say that you had four children, because we used to always say—well, me—you only had three. And you always felt, 'I'm denying my son'. Now I tell them I have got four children, and if someone says, 'Well, what do they do?', I go, 'Well, one was stolen, and I've got the other three'. This is how you live. You have got to keep justifying yourself. And then they go, 'It was a bad time, wasn't it? You know, there was no pension, there was no—I will tell you, I will give you an example of a pension. In my day there was full-on employment, because I had a baby—I was married then, but we parted. He was six months old, my son, in 1965, and I went to work and he went to a creche. A triple-certificated nurse looked after him all day long. The point I am making is—I have lost my train—

Ms KINGHORN: About the pension.

Ms SMITH: Yes, about the pension. I never went on a pension with my second son. I went to work. I worked, and I worked very hard, because a single mum by yourself in those days—people actually thought I was a single mum even though I was married. So I never took a pension. But then I worked for Centrelink for nearly 20 years, and I got their people in Canberra to do a lot of archival searches for payments. Now, written was: I could not get a pension as a single mum—with Michael, my first baby. I would not be allowed to get a single pension because I was not allowed, even though the law and the criteria for that payment were that—you could not get any other payment in Centrelink, or Social Security then. You could not. So you could not get unemployment benefits because you could work; you could not get sickness benefits because you were not sick, but you had a tiny baby to look after. But they would not pay you a special benefit for that even though the criteria allowed it. But they would pay a girl to stay home and look after her sick father—the same pension.

Now, to me that is pure discrimination. It went all the way from the Commonwealth Government, who have got away with murder over their Senate inquiry, and it has come down all the way through. And that is how we have been treated ever since: ‘It’s all right for everybody else, but it’s not all right for you. This mother’s fine. Even though she’s never had any children, she can rear your child much better than you can, so you don’t get your baby’. I am getting really mad, and I cannot help it because this is so wrong. I have lived it for 59 years. My family suffered. I have suffered. I have had three marriages, and I hate to tell you how many times I have moved home. It is not fair. It is wrong. Bastards.

The CHAIR: June, thank you. Committee members, any further questions? Michaela.

Ms SETTLE: I just want to—

Ms SMITH: If you want to take me—I am all right.

Ms KINGHORN: Please ask us whatever.

Ms SETTLE: Thank you so much for sharing your story, and I can hear loud and clear that it is about being heard and truth telling. What I wanted to ask was around the statute of limitations. I was wondering if that was not there, people taking responsibility, would that make—

Ms SMITH: Absolutely. We forgot that one.

Ms KINGHORN: Huge. Yes.

Ms SMITH: The statute of limitations must be lifted.

Ms KINGHORN: That is what is keeping it quiet.

Ms SMITH: That has been our fight. I have written like 30-odd letters asking for that since 2018, October, and Lyn has written a lot too. So, yes.

Ms SETTLE: And so it matters, because you can ask those people to be accountable—those organisations?

Ms SMITH: Absolutely, and there is no barrier. You see now they can say, ‘Well, no, you’ve got your three years now’—it used to be six. The Women’s Hospital, for example, can come in and go, ‘Well, you’ve already gone past the statute of limitations. You’ve got no hope, so we will just say no—and go away’. Whereas now, as you just rightly said, if the statute was lifted, those people would have to come and be accountable, and they need to be. It is not about suing. It is not about money. I know people will think it is, but it is not. It is about making people accountable and making them aware for what they have done so they will not do it again—or we hope they will not.

Ms SETTLE: Yes. Thank you very much for sharing your story.

Ms SMITH: Thanks for reminding us. I mean, we will go outside and we will think, ‘Why didn’t we say this? Why didn’t we say that?’, you know?

Ms COUZENS: It is in your submission.

Mr NEWBURY: But what you said was very, very powerful, and it really was heard. I want you to know that.

Ms SMITH: Thank you.

Ms KINGHORN: Thank you. Did you want to say about yourself?

Mr KINGHORN: The only thing I would have to say is—and it is never ever mentioned, really—when these kids were taken I do not think these people were taking babies off these girls because they were nice people; I think they were doing it for money. That is something that is never ever mentioned. Like when people did adopt in these years I think they would have to have been paying money, and it is just never mentioned.

Ms KINGHORN: It is like an industry.

Ms SMITH: Well, it is true because Christine Campbell actually was on the television showing a document saying that they did not ask for money but they allowed donations. So there was a lot of that going on—absolutely. This is hearsay, but other people have found out—like from the Catholic welfare—that they made a monthly contribution to the Catholic Church. So I am sure it went on. I am sure John is right.

Ms KINGHORN: We have got a counselling opportunity here today. Can you imagine coming out of hospital, having had your child ripped from you—out, no follow-up, nothing? They just treated us as an assembly line to fall off into the abyss. They could not have cared less about us. They absolutely injured us and treated us in such a—

Ms SMITH: Abhorrent.

Ms KINGHORN: It is indescribable. Nobody to comfort us. We were told to shut up; we had got what we deserved. We were treated like the worst criminal.

Ms SMITH: You were told to never ever talk about it. I never told anyone. My mum and dad never knew. My siblings did not know. Nobody knew. I was on my own, and for 36 years I did not tell anyone. I told two husbands, and they told me never to speak of it again. Nobody knew. I told my daughter finally when my son was 36 years old, because that is how they made me feel—that I had committed the worst offence in history when I did not. I just loved him; I loved my boyfriend. He just did not love me in the end. You know, that is all it boiled down to.

The CHAIR: I just have one question. You spoke highly of Relationships Australia. If you could just talk a little bit more about that?

Ms KINGHORN: Okay, well, we have had counselling through Relationships Australia. We got onto them through 1800 210 313.

Ms SMITH: Lyn did this. She set the groundwork for me.

Ms KINGHORN: Yes, just on that phone number; they followed us up and organised counselling. After the recommendations came out and we were supposed to be able to get counselling, I went to my doctor and said we are supposed to get counselling. We could not get it. We could not find it. I had tried through other—I do not know; it was through RAV maybe—I cannot remember who it was now. I was sent to them for counselling and they had never even heard of what had happened to us. So I just, you know, did not want to do that. And then when RAV—I think we educated each other a lot, but they were willing and helpful. So we have had counselling and follow-up from the counselling as well.

Ms SMITH: They are always there. The other thing it proves that they are, because if you go back to your submissions they wrote in there and called us ‘relinquishing mothers’. I lost it, Lyn lost it, we sent our letters and emails to RAV, and they apologised. If you have a look at their submission now, it has been redone and there is no ‘relinquishing’ in there, and we got thanked for it. We got thanked for informing them of how mothers reacted to this—to hear the word ‘relinquishing’ when you did not relinquish your children. So I think they have been unbelievable. I think they are more unbelievable because they are the only ones that have done anything positive. Everyone else is looking out for themselves and talking about adoption.

Ms KINGHORN: I know I have said this in my submission as well, but the memorial—you know, it is so offensive. What does it say? You must all know it.

Ms SMITH: It looks like a lady in a park with her children.

Ms KINGHORN: What does it tell you about our story? If you are a relinquishing mother, that is a consent—I know probably lots of them are not, without comprehending, going under that banner. You know, I doubt whether they are consenting mothers. But that memorial does not tell our history at all. We had our children absolutely ripped from us.

Ms SMITH: Absolutely.

Ms KINGHORN: And that looks like a happy family out there. You know, I cannot read anything in it that tells our history. You know, anybody walking down looking at it—I cannot comprehend what they would learn from it.

Ms SMITH: That she has got nice hair.

Ms KINGHORN: We want our history out there for people to learn from.

Ms KINGHORN: She is wearing a lovely dress with flowers on it. We were in hospital nighties screaming for our children. I mean, it is so revolting.

The CHAIR: So can I just add to that and follow up? Would you like to see another memorial or another way of acknowledging?

Ms KINGHORN: Yes, absolutely.

Ms SMITH: Yes, a big plaque or something outside the Women's Hospital would be a good start.

Ms KINGHORN: Yes, that would be amazing. It is about truth—anywhere that it can be out there with truth. I did bring in—

Ms SMITH: The one from Western Australia?

Ms KINGHORN: Yes.

Ms SMITH: It is beautiful. Very powerful.

Ms KINGHORN: I will just hand it around to you, but it is a mother and it looks to me like she is—

Ms SMITH: She is on a bed.

Ms KINGHORN: She has just given birth, and see the big hand? You know, she is separated from her—

Ms SMITH: The fist of adoption.

Ms KINGHORN: It is so powerful, isn't it? It is not such a good picture, but I thought it was worth just to—

Ms SMITH: It is quite a big sculpture, too.

Ms KINGHORN: It is gut-wrenching just looking at the mother, and then to see the baby separated with the big hand and the baby in it, you know, people are going to go, 'What's that about?'. And it tells what happened. I just feel we need our truth told.

Ms SMITH: I think we are owed it. I think we really are owed the truth because, well, 50, 60 years, it has just been suppressed. It has all been about adoption and what happened to our children. And what happened to our children bleeds in our heart. That is their story. If it had not happened to us, we would have reared our children. We would have seen them grow up, go to school, get married, become men and women. We did not get that chance. We got nothing. We just got told that we did not deserve to have them, that someone else did—

that they were given a better home. A lot of those—I will not say a lot, but many—marriages broke down because those babies were adopted to prop up a marriage that was failing because they could not have children, and then you have got that child there that is a recognition that one of you cannot do this. And a lot of women did end up single mothers, those that adopted. It happened. Doctors used to say to mums, ‘Go and adopt a baby because you’ll probably have one of your own’. Now, that is a dreadful thing, to think that your child was being used as a pill for someone to get pregnant. It is abhorrent. The whole history is abhorrent.

Ms KINGHORN: That is another point as well. I have got a friend whose son and his wife could not have children, and she said, ‘Why don’t they just adopt?’. This is the attitude that people think, and I said, ‘Where? Where does the baby come from?’. People just think there is a supply. They do not comprehend the agony of adoption, so if our truth is told it has to change things. People just think they can have whatever they want, but it is just not right. It should not be about finding a baby to make a family. If there is a baby that has not got a family, that is a whole different thing. So our truth needs to be out there so none of this ever happens again. It is not widely understood still.

Ms SMITH: No, it is not.

The CHAIR: Is there any further commentary or anything further you would like to add?

Ms SMITH: We will get outside and say, ‘Gosh, I wish we’d said that’—I know we will. When this started and when we were confronted with a committee, I was furious because I did not want it. I wanted the statutes lifted, and I thought this was another ploy to get rid of a few women as they dropped dead on the way and all that, so I apologise for thinking like that. I honestly from my heart thank you all that you are there, you are listening, and I just hope with all my heart that our truth is heard. That is not sort of saying, ‘You must’; I am just saying that I hope that this comes and tells me that perhaps I should shut up and let life go the right way and it will come good in the end, because I have lost my faith, this girl has, and I just am so grateful that you are here and I thank you all. I cannot do any more than that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, June. Thank you so much.

Ms KINGHORN: Kelly has just reminded me that there are many mothers that still have never said to anyone, ‘This happened’, living a lifetime of feeling you are just trash. If our story is out there and people know what happened, they can go, ‘Oh, there’s more of me out there’, because until we could really get together and find out just how huge this was, we were not aware of it ourselves. And I have spoken to mothers that have not known that there has been an apology, just coming across people—I am just on the spot now trying to think. Even my old neighbour wrote to me, because I have been very vocal about my history. Even the girl in the chemist said to me, ‘Oh, you might feel a bit embarrassed that I am saying it, but I saw you on TV’. I said, ‘Oh, please don’t feel embarrassed, you know. Please talk to me about it and talk to anybody you can’. So I sent her the submission page; it is just about getting it out there. So anyway, my neighbour wrote and said, ‘Oh, Lyn, you know so-and-so’—another neighbour—‘has just said’—you know, she is my age—“I had a son, but I don’t know what they did with him””. You know, she is just coming out now saying it.

We were shamed, and these people still are feeling shamed. You know, it is so awful. I just feel so sad for people who cannot be who they are. I feel I really relate to gay people, because they were made so ashamed, just for being who they are. We had to live that shame of not being who we are. You know, why can’t we just be who we are and acceptable? Everybody has history. It is just so important for us to be able to be truthful and accepted for who we are. I want those women that are living this trauma and shame—another neighbour also, her husband said to me, ‘Oh, that happened to [name withheld], but she won’t want you to say’. And I spoke to [name withheld], and she said she had never told her kids. She felt it was too late for her to be able to be—

Ms SMITH: I think you are always trying to justify your life to other people too. You know, you—

Ms KINGHORN: Yes. You are a young person. And we were told to not even tell our husbands. That is what they said—‘Don’t tell anybody’. You know, that made us complicit in the crime that was committed against us. So you know, we just need to live with our truth.

The CHAIR: Absolutely. Can I at this point also acknowledge Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda, who has attended, just for the record.

At any point, Lyn and June, if there are any further things that you may remember, please pass them on to Yuki and the Committee. At this point can I genuinely thank you for your contribution today and your in-depth submission. I know that each and every committee member appreciates your time and the effort that you have taken to prepare this evidence, and we acknowledge that revisiting the past can be painful and confronting. Please be assured that your evidence will help inform our understanding of the relevant issues, but most importantly we have heard you loud and clear, and there will be some strong recommendations reported back to the Victorian Government. The Committee will table its report by 1 July next year, and we will make sure to keep you updated and most importantly continue communicating with you on the Victorian government's response to our recommendations.

Again, I just want to say I am truly thankful that you have presented today and told us your story again. I did meet you a while back, and I just really want to assure you that your recommendations and what you have passed on to us—each and every committee member will make sure that we have a report that tells your story.

Ms KINGHORN: Thank you.

Ms SMITH: Thank you.

Mr TAK: Thank you, Chair. If I may, my sincere apologies—I know it is a very important inquiry today.

Ms KINGHORN: Thank you for coming.

Mr TAK: Thank you.

Ms SMITH: Thank you. Thank you all very much.

Witnesses withdrew.