

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

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

Kangaroo Flat—Tuesday, 30 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**

Ms Robyn Flanagan.

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**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans. To my right is Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong; Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong; and Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their elders past and present and the Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today. I now declare open the public hearing for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria.

I welcome Robyn Flanagan here today. Thank you. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against anything you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected.

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 unless confidentiality has been requested.

Please also be aware that Holly is here with us today, and Holly is from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support. She is available to talk to you during or after the hearing, but also, importantly, Carfi can put you in touch with other services at a later time if you wish.

The Committee is very much interested in hearing about your experience and in particular what outcomes you would like to see from this inquiry. Again on behalf of the committee we thank you for being here to share your experiences with us. It really is important. I know it may be challenging to do so, but we are in your hands, and we thank you again for taking the time to submit to us. Thank you, Robyn.

**Ms FLANAGAN:** Okay. I did a submission in June of 2020 outlining my experience of being pregnant in 1972. I am not sure how much of that information—I have just got notes that I have written.

**Ms COUZENS:** That is fine.

**Ms FLANAGAN:** My experience then, in 72, is obviously one that would be quite different to one now, given that some things exist today that did not in 1972, like the single mothers pension, for instance, which came out later that year—the Labor Government were instrumental in delivering it—and services. There would not be such a stigma, obviously. I would say that while the culture of adoption and its acceptance is less favourable than in 72, there is still a prevailing attitude of failure to understand the needs and wants of adoptees and natural mothers, with little understanding of their ongoing grief and trauma. Adoptive parents, on the other hand, I think are given a very high profile, and this is not helped by celebrities with slogans like 'forever homes'. I think the media has a bit of a role to play in the focus and use a lot emotive language and photos when these sorts of things happen.

I believe adoption should not exist. I think all focus should be on the state, churches and welfare agencies to support mother and baby to remain together. With my lived experience, I feel that my physical, mental and emotional health would be much less damaged without the trauma of adoption. I gave birth to twins in 72, non-identical twin girls. They were adopted together. My daughter, lost to adoption, I feel would be less damaged too. She also carries the extra trauma of losing her sister too, which is mentioned in my original submission. Just one little point: a popular idea in society is that not all adoptees feel like this—the point I am trying to make about my daughter. I would say that regardless of healthy adoptive family structures, there is always a sense with adoptees of feeling other, feeling displaced and needing, wanting, to belong.

I mentioned in my submission that I think counselling needs to be catered to by professionals with training and education in adoption. After the federal apology in 2013, which I attended—and Julia Gillard did a brilliant job, but the same cannot be said of Tony Abbott unfortunately, at that apology—funding was allocated to Relationships Australia Victoria, which has not had as much success due to small numbers of relevant adoption counsellors. VANISH, on the other hand, is a wonderful organisation, and I presume you are all familiar with VANISH. I think a lot more funding needs to be given to them. They are a wonderful organisation and a perfect

fit, covering all aspects of adoption and being well set up to deliver counselling if they were to receive a lot more funding.

I mentioned in my submission too that having financial support for counselling would be invaluable to me and other natural mothers. In the past, counselling that I have undertaken has been expensive, even with a mental health plan. I would like to pursue further counselling and think it would be of great benefit to me and my family. I have a very supportive, loving family but live with trying to keep healthy boundaries and not overload my feelings onto them, which is just ongoing. I mean, I live a very good life, but the simplest of things can trigger a lot of things. A friend's father died the other day, and in comforting her she told me she had found a birth certificate of his and he was adopted—and that just leads to a lot of things happening, triggers.

Also in my submission I talked about how I would like to see that if an adoption takes place, if there is a death of a child that is adopted, they should be notified upon the death—the natural mother should be notified. This did not happen when my daughter died. I found out eight years after her death and only because it was the year of my twin daughters' 18th birthdays and I was legally allowed to make an inquiry. Information like this, when shared, is giving some power or voice back to mothers when they have been completely powerless.

That is the bulk of what I wanted to mention, but other things that I have thought of were: there was a really wonderful exhibition called *Without Consent*, and that went to a lot of places, but now it is in a warehouse, I believe. I think—whether it is within your jurisdiction—that would be wonderful if that found a permanent home. Also the Treasury Place exhibition, the mother and child, the memorial—I have heard that that is to be moved and replaced by a worthy domestic violence memorial. I understand that, but I and others trust that our memorial receives a fitting and appropriate new site.

The last thing I guess I would like to say is: I would like to see that our responses to this inquiry are respected and well received and that ideas and recommendations will be used to shape future policies. I hope you can have a better understanding after this inquiry. With knowledge comes understanding, and so I implore you to keep asking questions and seeking the voices of us who have lived this. We, the mothers who have bared so much and exposed ourselves to further vulnerabilities, are only able to do so much. I am asking that these submissions presented to you will provide you with enough impetus to push these thoughts, ideas and recommendations into positive, affirming practice. That is it.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Robyn, for sharing your experience. I am really sorry to hear of the passing of your daughter and that the reunification process was not handled well. I really am terribly sorry to hear that.

I might just start with a question. I know you have shared a number of experiences, but what would you really like from this inquiry? What outcome would you genuinely like, and what do you believe the committee should absolutely recommend back to the Victorian Government?

**Ms FLANAGAN:** Well, I believe in New South Wales it is in legislation now: they have a pyramid of care—out-of-home care—and I believe at the top of that is adoption. Then you might have permanent care, fostering, and other levels escape me at the moment. I believe South Australia unfortunately is moving towards that as well. I think at the moment in the Victorian Parliament we do not have that hierarchy of out-of-home care. I hope it is enshrined in law so that it does not change if there is a change of government—that that could be changed to be like New South Wales and like South Australia. So yes, I do not think adoption as it exists on the books should exist anymore. It should be replaced with different birth certificates so that children know from the start. I mean, they are not a product of people that have not given birth to them. So whether they show that child, the baby, their certificate of birth—which obviously is silly—as a small child, but whatever. But that is the truth, and it is living a truth if that is done. So if birth certificates represented that, they could have both on their birth certificate: the original name and the mother and father, and then, if it still exists, 'adopted by'.

**The CHAIR:** Christine?

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks so much, Robyn, for coming and sharing your experience with us today. We really do appreciate it. I was interested in your comments about the *Without Consent* exhibition. Yes, most of us have seen that and how powerful it is as well, and obviously it travelled around, as you mentioned. Do you see it being a fixture somewhere permanently or that continual moving around? What is your view on it?

**Ms FLANAGAN:** A fixture somewhere.

**Ms COUZENS:** Okay. So any particular idea, is it in a museum somewhere—Melbourne Museum, for example?

**Ms FLANAGAN:** I do not know. A rich benefactor might have a warehouse somewhere where it could be permanently on display, and then people could visit, and it would mean something to families.

**Ms COUZENS:** As an educative tool.

**Ms FLANAGAN:** Yes, schools and workplaces even—a lot of education could be involved with it.

**Ms COUZENS:** And would you mind explaining a bit about the assistance of support groups that you have sought over the years?

**Ms FLANAGAN:** Yes. I am a current member of ARMS. I have been since probably 1989, 1990. I was living in Melbourne then when I first heard of them and I joined. It was a little room out the back of St Francis Church in the heart of Melbourne, and since then it has had many homes. I do not go as often because I am in the Macedon Ranges now. But I went for the first meeting of the year over February, the 9th or whenever it was, when that little lockdown came and we could not have an in-person one. I do go but not every month, because it is wonderful to sit there and not have to explain at the ARMS meetings. It is just wonderful, and you hear a variety of stories, like from someone who was in a religious group and escaped it, and that is how their child came to be. Then there is someone in our group that through IVF had a family and then thought that she could donate an embryo and has never been able to live with it since. So she comes for support, because it is law; she cannot get that child back. And there is quite a mixture of women from different places, different walks of life, and it is just great.

At times I have found that that whole collective grief can be a little bit too much at times too, so that is why I seek out my own counselling from time to time, and that has been really, really good. The last time I did it was probably two years ago after my mother died, because she knew all about this. When you are dealing with one it sort of topples over into others, so I did seek some counselling then.

Then during lockdown I tried again. It was someone I had used before, and I thought I would go back to this person for a second and third and whatever time, but the person's ending statement to me was something about, 'I had someone in who has had a termination, and she has told me that that is'—not using the words 'so your situation could be worse', because our conversation was about trying to find peace within about decisions that were made all those years ago. It was hard to leave and get out, and I have not been back, because that was just a ridiculous statement to make. But I always find it helpful, though, except in that last instance. But ARMS is great, and they do wonderful things. They have things for Mother's Day, where you go, and all these women get together, and they are lovely. They are great. You can ring them. I ring them occasionally. It is just amazing. Really good people.

**Ms COUZENS:** I am so sorry to hear of the loss of your daughter and you not being able to meet her before her death. You talked about notification of a death of a child. Do you see that as an important recommendation through this Committee?

**Ms FLANAGAN:** I do. I think I was in the early stage of pregnancy with my third child, who is now 31—because at the time I thought in the year they turned 18 you were allowed to send letters and you could receive information, so I wanted to start the process. It was really disappointing. I changed on the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau because I went to a convent in Grattan Street, diagonally opposite the building there—the structure is still there, but it has all been changed inside; it is apartments—so it was a holding bay for, basically, people like me. Yes, so when I put in an application, I was not given any warning that I might receive bad news. I travelled from a southern suburb of Melbourne by public transport to North Melbourne, and sitting in an office I was given paperwork and then told, 'Oh, unfortunately'—it was just overwhelming. I could not walk, so I hailed the first taxi and got home. I do not know how. Then soon after I changed it to I think Community Services Victoria, CSV, I think it was—

**Ms COUZENS:** So did they offer you no support at the time when they gave you this information?

**Ms FLANAGAN:** No, not even just a standard, 'We recommend you bring someone with you. It's just what we do. But bring a girlfriend or bring a partner'. If they did not want to tell me until I got there, that would have been okay, but at least I would have had someone who could function to get me home. It was just horrible.

Yes, I think it is really important, because it could be said, ‘Well, what can you do? You know, you’ve got to carry on your life, and what would it do, finding out at the time?’. But it is your choice. It is your choice. That decision should have been left to me, whereas my other children have grown up knowing and they grew up hearing that one day they would. Then to know that it happened two years before my eldest was born was just—I did not have legs; I was just so winded. It is your decision, you know, to find things out. It was not their choice to make. I do not know whether it even exists now, the Catholic—I suppose it does.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks, Robyn. I appreciate that.

**The CHAIR:** Michaela.

**Ms SETTLE:** Thank you, Robyn. Thank you very much for sharing your experience. It really does help us to understand as we go through this. Something I want to ask you about is: you mentioned around the funding how rather than going to Relationships Australia, you would prefer to see it is as a specific service like ARMS or VANISH. One of the reasons that has been explained to me that it went to Relationships Australia was that they already had reach into regional areas. I am a regional MP, so I guess what I am interested in is how well ARMS could service you when you are living here in the country. Do you think that is better than having organisations throughout regional cities?

**Ms FLANAGAN:** I quite like going to Melbourne—you mean to go to a support meeting?

**Ms SETTLE:** Yes.

**Ms FLANAGAN:** I quite like the travel. I could drive, but I like the train journey to gather my thoughts. After only one meeting, I had to say to someone else I had been with, who I had met for the first time, and she understood, ‘Look, I always travel home on the train alone. I just need to gather my thoughts after being in a meeting’. All the stories they just wash over you, and the sadness, and you have got to sit with it and feel it. She was great: ‘Oh, yes, yes’. I like that. That is not a burden to me at all to have to do that, you know, to travel to Melbourne.

**Ms SETTLE:** Do you think we need more support services in regional areas?

**Ms FLANAGAN:** I would think so, yes, because everyone would not be like me where it is as easy for them perhaps. Yes, I think that would be wonderful to have them in regional, yes, most definitely.

**The CHAIR:** So that concludes the questions. Thank you so much, Robyn, for being here today and sharing your experiences with us. We truly are grateful. I know it was difficult and challenging at times, but we do value your submission. The next steps will be for the Committee to deliberate on all the evidence. We will be putting forward some strong recommendations and tabling our report before 1 July. In the meantime if you need to reach out to any one of the Committee members, including our secretariat, Yuki, to keep up to date with the progress, please do so. But, again, I take this opportunity to thank you so much and wish you all the very best in your journey, and hopefully we will see you again before July.

**Ms FLANAGAN:** Thank you very much. Will that report be made available to us?

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Once it is tabled, before 1 July, it gets presented to Parliament and the document becomes public.

**Ms FLANAGAN:** So when it is presented to Parliament is there a possibility of being in the room?

**The CHAIR:** Depending on the formalities, we will be in touch with you—note that down, Yuki—and we will clearly advise the date when we will table and how we could possibly make the opportunity of maybe having something beforehand or even after. But we certainly will do something before that.

**Ms FLANAGAN:** But we could not be in the chamber when you are delivering that?

**The CHAIR:** Not inside the chamber. I do not know—by then, by July, you would be in the gallery.

**Ms COUZENS:** In the gallery, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Due to COVID.

**Ms FLANAGAN:** Oh, COVID. Okay.

**The CHAIR:** But perhaps we can do something once the report is tabled—maybe a morning tea or something, depending on that. But we will take that on board and see what we can do in relation to the formalities. But we will be in touch with you.

**Ms SETTLE:** It is telecast live.

**Ms FLANAGAN:** Oh, is it? Okay, good.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** But we would get news of it.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. I think I have seen you in Parliament before, haven't I—or not?

**Ms FLANAGAN:** I have done a few courses over the years, and I like to come and have a little look, so I do not know. But then again I think I have got a very common face, because people often stop me and say, 'Are you such and such?'. So it could be that.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Robyn, and I am sure we will get to see you again.

**Ms FLANAGAN:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Take care.

**Ms FLANAGAN:** Thank you for listening.

**Witness withdrew.**