

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

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

East Geelong—Wednesday, 31 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**

Name withheld (3).

**WITNESS**

Name withheld (3).

**The CHAIR:** I will begin the proceedings. My name is Natalie Suleyman, the Member for St Albans. This is Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda; Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong; and Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong.

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 Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria. I welcome [name withheld] here today. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by privilege, but what you say outside, including on social platforms like Facebook, may not be protected.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, to my left. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript when it is available. Any transcripts and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website, unless confidentiality has been requested.

Also, be aware that we have Holly here today. Holly is from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support. Holly is available to talk to you during the proceedings or after the hearing as well. Most importantly, at a later time, should you wish, we are more than happy to make contact between you and Carfi.

The Committee today is very much interested in hearing from you your experiences of forced adoption and in particular the services that you have accessed, but more importantly what you would like from this inquiry. We thank you again for being here. I know it is challenging and it could be difficult for you, but we truly do appreciate you taking the time to present to us. So please begin with a brief statement, which will be followed by questions from Committee members. So we are in your hands, [name withheld]. Thank you.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Did you want me to read out my submission?

**The CHAIR:** Whatever you feel is comfortable, you do that.

**NAME WITHHELD:** I will get my glasses and I will read.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, absolutely.

**NAME WITHHELD:** It is very nice that you are all here to listen to us. It means a lot. I am just so uptight I cannot even find my glasses.

**The CHAIR:** No, you take it easy. As I said, we are here in your hands.

**NAME WITHHELD:** I will just read my submission, but I have something I want to add that I did not connect until just a couple of days ago, really. So can I pop that in?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**NAME WITHHELD:** I had just turned 17 when I realised that I was pregnant. I had been in a relationship with a man for some months. He was eight years my senior. At first it seemed exciting; I was a young naive country girl. My parents had done everything they could to discourage this relationship, but he would not go away. It was not long before I realised that he was not for me, and when I finally found the courage to tell him so, he would not accept any of it and would not leave me alone. He took control of my life and then he began to do what we now call stalking. I was very afraid of him. Finally he went too far, so I told my parents what was going on and my father contacted the local police in our small town, and he was then asked to leave town and not come back. Finally I was free—or so I thought.

At first I could not believe that I could be pregnant—surely I could not be that unlucky—and so I just simply ignored it and moved on with my life, but the months went by and it became all too apparent. My mother had the family doctor come to our house, where all was confirmed, and he and my mother made all the

arrangements for me to go away. It was arranged that I would go to St Joseph's in Carlton, but there was a waiting list so I had to wait my turn, and in the meantime I was hiding out at home. Eventually the day came when Mum and Dad and I made the 5-hour journey to Melbourne. I was very worried and afraid to be going away. As we crossed the bridge out of town I remember looking out the window at the water below and thinking that, 'Next time I cross here it will be all over'. We arrived in Melbourne at St Joseph's in the late afternoon. I did not want to get out of the car, and by this time I was in tears and so scared of what lay ahead. My father said, 'Come on, girl, you know what you have to do', and so I did. Mum and I were greeted at the door by the head nun. We went in and she then told Mum to say goodbye and leave, and so she did.

My time at St Joseph's was lonely and I was sad and very homesick, and the two sisters in charge seemed to be indifferent to us all. I am not sure what I expected, but it was like I was invisible. They were very unapproachable and showed no kindness whatsoever. I managed to make some friends here, but at the end of the day we were all alone. The day after my arrival I was told to go to the office of the head sister. She asked me lots of questions about myself and also questions of my family. She also said that I was entitled to \$2 a week from the government, and I was very excited as I had only a few dollars in my purse, but she soon followed with the suggestion that I would surely want those \$2 to go to the home towards my keep, and of course I agreed. Because by this time I was so far into my pregnancy, I was not given any strenuous tasks to do around the home, just some cleaning and setting up of the dining room each day.

Every Monday I had to go to the Royal Women's Hospital for my prenatal check-up. On my arrival at the front door of the hospital and once inside I had to follow the blue line. This would take me to the doctors' consulting rooms. Each week I would see a different doctor, and each week I was given a different due date, so after a time I was very unsure of when my baby would arrive. I knew that she was conceived on 31 December and told them so, but they took no notice, saying I could not be sure—but I certainly was.

One day I was called to the office and told I had to go into the city and buy some items for my baby to wear when she left the hospital. Fortunately there was another girl there who was to do the same, because I had no idea of my way around the city. We went by tram. It was a short journey, and we went to Coles to buy our babies clothes. I had to buy one nappy, one nappy pin, one nightie, one singlet and one bunny rug. Although it took most of the money I had, I left there feeling like a mother, and for the first time I felt important—I was this baby's mother. I took these precious little items back to my room and put them in the cupboard with my own things, but I was soon called into the office and asked to bring my shopping with me. When I asked if I could hold onto them, I was reminded again that they did not belong to me, just like my baby was not mine.

After this time I began to have a fantasy. There was this man that came to the home. He was a widower with three children, and he was looking for a country girl as he lived in the country. There were no romantic intentions, just a lovely home and keep in exchange for care of his home and family. He had all the needs of a new baby, everything a new mother could want for her baby. After talking with the sister it was agreed that I was the perfect fit. I could leave the hospital with my baby and we would have a good life together. It was all perfect, this fantasy I imagined every night as I lay awake.

The home was unfriendly, and the food was poor. I think most of it was donated. Working in the dining room, I would sometimes see the deliveries, and I remember the cabbages being yellow, the cauliflowers brown and the apples and potatoes small and wrinkled. The stews were more gristle than meat, so mealtime was not something to look forward to. Overall at the home I got by, and although I hated being there I knew it was where I had to be, so I simply accepted the indifference and longed for home, as here it made me feel worthless and bad about myself and feel different to others. Some of these feelings have stayed with me, popping up in my life from time to time to drag me down. I sometimes wonder about the person I might have been.

While at the home I was spoken to by a social worker on a couple of occasions. It was a constant reminder that my baby and I were soon to be parted. I had to sign some papers—I am not sure what papers; I do not think I was told. But I do remember it was the first time I had ever signed my signature.

In the very early hours of the day my baby was to be born I lay awake in bed holding tight onto my tummy. I knew what was to come, but I did not want to let her out. At 6.00 am I went to the chapel to tell Sister that I had to go to the hospital. A friend that I had made at the home was chosen to walk me across the road to the hospital but only as far as the front door. Once there, this time I had to follow the yellow line. I do not think I have ever been so terrified. I could not stop shaking. I followed this yellow line and was told to sit in the hall. After some time I was taken into a room, where I was shaved. The girl was very rude and quite rough with me, and then I

was given an enema, and then I was left alone. I was not sure what to expect as no-one was talking to me, just giving me orders.

At some time I was wheeled into the hallway and left alone again. By this time my contractions were getting stronger, but no-one was telling me anything. At some time I was wheeled into a room. There were several young interns. They were here to learn, and so each of them did an internal examination of me. I looked up and noticed these young men were not much older than me. As well as it hurting and it all being uncomfortable, I was immensely embarrassed. It was intrusive, and I wished I could have died right then. At some time I was taken into the delivery room where there was one doctor and one nurse. All was very quiet; they did not talk to each other and certainly not to me. There was just the ticking of the clock and the sounds of my birthing. There was no direction, and I tried hard not to make too much noise as it was obvious that these two could not have cared less about me.

Sometime before the birth of my baby the nurse put a sheet up so that I would not be able to see her when she was born. At 10 minutes past noon on the 29th day of September 1966 my baby girl was born. As soon as she was born she was taken away. After I was roughly stitched up—and I swear the stitches were worse than the birth—I was very sore down there for a very long time after. They then wheeled me to a ward, but we went via the basement. The ceilings were very low, and everywhere I looked and as far as I could see there were gurneys everywhere, each one of them loaded up with bloodied linen. It was an awful sight, and there was a strong smell of blood. I can remember at the time thinking that they probably brought me this way as part of my punishment. My ward was to be the verandah, a long space just outside a large ward. I was desperately wanting to see my baby, so I finally found the courage to ask this young nurse that passed by if I could see her, and to my amazement she said yes—and off she went and returned with my baby. It was wonderful. I unwrapped her and checked her all over. She was perfect and so pretty and so tiny. I found out some days later that she was 7 pounds 2 ounces. I snuggled up with her and we both went to sleep. I was so very happy.

I was awoken sometime later with another nurse removing her from my arms. I tried to stop her, but she roughly removed her and took off with her. She turned as she was leaving and said that there had been a mistake, I had no rights and that I knew better. Next morning I asked again to see my baby. The nurse said nothing to me but left and returned with a more senior nurse, or perhaps she was the matron. She was very stern and told me I was never to see my baby and not to ask again. She said this baby was not mine and that there would be other babies for me and that I should not be fussy and marry the first man that would have me and be grateful. There was nothing nice about the hospital or the staff. They were rude, abrupt and quite cruel with their comments and very rough with our care. The ward that was beside us and off the veranda was for the other mums—the ones who were married and taking their babies home. I could see them with their babies and hear their babies when they were brought into the ward to be fed. It was hard to watch and hard to see. I was very envious of them, and I wondered if my baby was being fed, but I was not allowed near the nursery so I never knew, but I hoped so. To this day I go cold whenever I see a documentary or a movie that includes nurses in those starched hats.

I later married and went on to be blessed with three more beautiful children. Each of my hospital stays were unpleasant; I guess I made them unpleasant. I was like a scared rabbit. I did everything I was told and asked for nothing. I was intimidated by the nurses in those starched white hats and was always afraid and expecting that my babies would be treated differently to the others in the nursery. I lived for the day I could take them home. When my first son was born I always referred to myself as [name withheld] when I was talking to him. It was some days before I was able to refer to myself as 'Mummy'. This entire experience has stayed with me forever and changed the person I should be. I hold the hospital responsible for my inadequate belief in myself. When I brought my three beautiful babies into this world I felt that I did not deserve them. These subsequent stays in hospital were marred by my past experience. Not only did I feel unimportant but I had this feeling that my beautiful babies were not important either. I will never forgive the Royal Women's Hospital for that.

I want to add at this time, if I may, that this baby, my son, that I brought home—I have not got this written down—from hospital to my marriage, after I had married—we did not have a car, my husband and I, and so my father-in-law picked me up with my husband. We had him in the back seat and we were looking at him, admiring him and nursing him and holding him, and I had this overwhelming feeling that I could not look after him, I did not know how to look after him—no idea. So we went back to his parents' place and stayed a few days, and while I was there I did not sleep.

The first night came, and I heard every noise he made. I was up all night; I had not slept. That happened for two nights in a row, so by the third day I was looking awful—wretched. My mother-in-law wanted to have the baby in her room, and I said, ‘No, he has to stay with me’. Then one day I was in the kitchen, and I heard my father-in-law talking to a man that had done some work for him. I heard this man say that he was looking for a housekeeper at his house, and I thought this would be perfect because I could go and look after his house and get the money and then pay someone to look after my baby, because I could not do it. So I kept that notion, and then I brought it up with my husband. He said he thought I had lost my mind, and he said, ‘That’s crazy to think like that’. I said, ‘I can’t look after this baby; I don’t know how to look after this baby’. My mother-in-law said, ‘You’ll be all right when you get some sleep’. I could not sleep.

Eventually we went home, and I was okay then, once it was him and me and this beautiful little boy. We were okay; we were fine. But since doing the submission I have realised how crazy it was. I had a fantasy in the hospital to find a farm, find someone to give me a home, if I could look after their home, to keep my baby; and here I have a baby that I can keep and is my baby, and I am looking to have somebody else look after it because I could not. And I realised that all that brainwashing—that nun saying and the hospital saying, ‘You can’t look after yourself, so how can you look after this child? You’re not capable of looking after a child’. So I now connect that, but I did not at that time.

I spent five long days at the hospital, and the day I went back to St Joseph’s so did my baby. I did not take her with me. Another girl, a friend of mine from the home, picked her up from the hospital, and she was waiting for me when I got back to the home. I held her to me, and how I wanted to keep her. She was crying that day, like she knew we were soon to be parted. I cried too. I tried to soothe her, but I felt that she was hungry. I had her for about 15 minutes when these arms from nowhere just reached over my shoulder and took her away. I was told later it was my social worker. I did not see her as she was so quick, and she ran with my baby. All the doors were open for her, including the front door and the taxi door. I watched as they drove away, absolutely shattered. She was gone. I went to my room and cried my heart out. I did not go for dinner; I just stayed there and cried.

Sometime later the head sister sent for me. I did not want to go. I felt sure I was to be reprimanded, as I had been told countless times that this was not to be my baby and that I had to get over it and forget it. To my surprise, she was nice and she was kind. I had never seen her like this before. She told me my grief would pass and that in 12 months the baby would be no more—that she would be a toddler and I would have moved on. She was wrong. She also told me that I should stay in touch with the friends I had made in the home. She said I would never be closer to anyone than I was to these girls now. She was right. Next day Sister was back to her usual self, but I was pleased that for a short time I had seen a softer, kinder side of her. I guess they had to be strict and firm in order to run the home efficiently, but surely they could have smiled as they passed. Instead we were made to feel worthless and so very bad.

There were more papers for me to sign after the birth of my child. I suppose these were the adoption papers. I was not in a good spot emotionally at this time so just did as I was told. Five days later I left St Joseph’s, but I was not that same girl that had entered those few weeks earlier and never have been since. I am different now—different to everyone else that I knew back home. I was scared as to how I was going to cope with having to face everyone again. To this day whenever I think of St Joseph’s I see it all in sepia tones—all shades of brown and beige. Even the clothes I am wearing are brown. The rooms, the drapes, the nuns are all in brown. I am not sure why, but this is just the way it has been for me—it has always been the same.

I returned home to my family, arriving quite late in the evening. We crossed that bridge, and I looked down at the water and thought of how wrong I had been to think that when I passed this way again it would all be over. It was not over. When I arrived home my mother said hello, gave me a hug and said it was time for bed. It was good to be in my own bed, but my thoughts were with my baby. Next morning I sat with Mum and told her everything that had happened to me while I had been away. I thought she would want to know. She listened and did not interrupt once. When I had finished she said, ‘It’s over now and we will not talk of this again’, and we never, ever did. She also said for me to have no further contact with the girls from the home and to forget them. I felt sad because I had promised a couple of girls I had befriended that I would write to them, and one of the girls had given me 20 cents and asked me if I would send her 20 cents worth of Black Cats—lollies. Now I was told that I could not. I felt dreadful about keeping her money, but I did as my mother said and made no further contact—something I regret to this day.

I felt so sad and lonely it was terrible, it truly was. With Mum and Dad and five siblings living in our small house, there was no privacy, but I found a spot behind the chook shed where no-one could see me, and that is where I would sneak off to and do my crying. Five weeks later I had to return to our family doctor for my postnatal check. When I arrived he said to me, 'So you're back. I hear you pawned her off'. I was horrified to hear him say this. I thought what a cruel man he was. I hated him and never went there again.

I returned to work at my old job. My employer was also a friend of mine and my family, so he was kind enough to keep my job open for me. I worked in retail and so had to face the townspeople every day. I was always pleased when the day was over. People were different around me now, but by this time I had built some sort of wall around my feelings so as not to be hurt. I believe part of that wall is still there.

Time went by. I married and had three beautiful children, but I never forgot my baby. In the years since I have had two serious mental/nervous breakdowns. I have also had a few minor meltdowns. At 60 I had a heart attack, which doctors could find no medical reason for. They tell me I have ischaemic heart disease, which my doctor describes as an emotional heart. I take medication to prevent another. I have seen many counsellors and two or three psychologists over the years, but only when I have truly hit rock bottom, as all of this costs money that we simply did not have, so at all other times I would try to pull myself together. I am not sure what impact this has had on my children. They have never complained or suggested that they felt any impact at all, but it did bother my husband. He could never understand why I just could not get over it. He was the only one who knew my secret, but he said we would never talk about it and he did not want to hear about it. It was always between us. I believe this was some of the reason our marriage developed some cracks and after 22 years broke down and ended in divorce.

None of the counselling I have had has helped me get over this, because there is no getting over it. It was all too little, too late. I needed counselling when they took my baby away, not now. I have since met my daughter who I lost to adoption and enjoy a friendship with her, and it is lovely. But someone else is her mother.

In 2012 I made contact with the Association of Relinquishing Mothers, and it was the best thing I had ever done. I finally met with other women who had been where I had been—women who knew my pain and understood it. They helped me tremendously. With the approval of my husband and children I did a piece for our local paper. I told my story and found it liberating to have it out there. I had found the courage. No more secrets. I am now part of a birth support group here in my home town of Geelong. We are a small group and are very supportive of one another. They are my beautiful friends. I have also become involved with the VANISH group. I went to the Victorian Parliament apology in Melbourne. I listened to the Premier and others say sorry. I did not expect to get much out of it, but as it turned out, I did. It was so good to hear someone say they were sorry. Never before had I heard such words. I even had a small piece in our local paper saying how much it meant to me. But that feeling soon passed. What did it really mean? A few words and a light buffet lunch. I decided not to attend the apology in Canberra.

With the treatment that I and others endured at the hands of others, I believe we should in some way be compensated. We should all have been given some sort of gold card when they decided to offer us their apology, that they make amends for what they did not give us when we needed it—for us to be able to access free medical attention in our later years without having to go onto a waiting list. Our needs have not gone away; they have intensified with the passing of years. I believe something should be done for us now to make up for the appalling treatment we have experienced, especially while in the care of the Royal Women's Hospital.

As I write this and now read what I have written, I see that it is impossible for me to convey my thoughts and feelings to paper. It was all so much more. In fact I feel like this comes across as a whinge, like it was nothing, but whilst writing this down I have revisited this time and these places, and it has not been easy. There are so many old wounds, and they just will not heal. I hope it was not too long.

**The CHAIR:** Not at all. Thank you so much, [name withheld]. Thank you for sharing that with us. I know and appreciate it has been extremely challenging for you to do so, but you have been absolutely courageous to be here today and share that with us. I just probably will start with one question in relation to support services. You have mentioned ARMS and VANISH. I know you have said they have been helpful, but what are some other, I suppose, challenges or issues in accessing other support services, and how reliable are these services now?

**NAME WITHHELD:** I am sorry, I did not understand.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry. So what I am saying is: you have mentioned support services like VANISH and ARMS; are there any other helpful support services that you can think of, and if there are, how important are these support agencies or services at the moment to assist?

**NAME WITHHELD:** Counselling—I do not think I need that anymore. I am 72 now, and I think I have done it all and said it all. Nothing helped me more than the group. I mean, I probably did not have it as much as I should have in the early days, but it cost money and we did not have that money and my husband was not supportive of that situation. I probably needed counselling then, but I did not get it and I battled through. I think it is too late now for me.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. So would you see support services being important for us in the inquiry? Would that be something that you would like to see?

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** You know, some of those expenses or compensation.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Do you want to just talk about it in relation to how important it would be if there was, I suppose, a payment of your expenses, paying for your medicine and other expenses?

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes. Well, when the word came up, ‘redress’, I have to confess I did not know the word—I did not know that word. And then somebody explained it was money, and I was horrified. I thought, no, we cannot take money—it is like we have sold our babies. We just cannot have money. But I have spent a lot of money in later years—not in those early years. I have been out of pocket for that.

And another thing, if I may say so, I lost my daughter from my marriage four years ago—she died.

**The CHAIR:** I am sorry to hear that.

**NAME WITHHELD:** I have a good relationship with my adopted daughter, but I am having a few problems with guilt because my beautiful daughter [REDACTED] died and my other daughter is in my life. I thought about having counselling for that, but I shied away from it a little bit. I spoke with [REDACTED] last week. We had lunch, and she listened to me and talked. She helped me a lot, and I do think that talking to those that have been there is so much more powerful than talking to a stranger who may be qualified. I am not knocking that. One counsellor helped me tremendously. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] was her name. She helped me to tell my children about my child when I could not tell them; it would not come out. But apart from that I have not had a lot of help from counselling, so I do not know that I need any more. Does that answer your question or not?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, it does.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks, [name withheld], very much for being here today. We really appreciate your time and understand how challenging and difficult this can be, sharing your experience with us, so we do really appreciate it. So thank you.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Thank you.

**Ms COUZENS:** I just want to go back to the redress point that we were talking about earlier. Given the costs that you have incurred for paying for counselling or whatever else you needed, do you believe that one of the recommendations from this inquiry should be some sort of redress system?

**NAME WITHHELD:** I do now, yes. I do now. I do. I did not, as I said. I have always said the gold card—it has always been with me. I think ‘gold card’ because the Royal Women’s Hospital is such a big issue. The treatment was appalling. Our bodies were treated badly. I cannot convey to you how awful it was, and I think that sticks with me, you know, that they should make up for that. So that is why I always keep going back to the gold card—

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes, and we have heard evidence from other women.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Have you? The same. But, yes, we were out of pocket a lot, and we had to make adjustments to our lives to be able to fit that sort of stuff in.

**Ms COUZENS:** And in terms of the counselling—and obviously you identified that you really should have had it back many years ago—

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** do you think a specialised counselling system of some description should be part of the recommendations of this inquiry?

**NAME WITHHELD:** Perhaps, I think, yes, but it should be just for adoption, not just a counsellor that—

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes, the forced adoption—

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes, the forced adoption. I think somebody dealing just with that, that really gets to know what we know—gets to know how we feel. They can never feel what we feel, but deal with us enough to know that—is able to feel that. And I think they are the ones that can help, not so much other people that are dealing with everything.

**Ms COUZENS:** A general counsellor.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Because it is like no other. It just destroys you. It took so much. I know I have been a good mum. I made it my mission to be a good mum. I had my three children in a little over three years after the adoption one. But I know that there is a part of me they did not get. I know there is a part of me. They have never said, but I know, because you cannot carry a child and then have someone take it away and not be affected. You never get over it. Even when I met her, she was this beautiful, tall, lovely young woman. Can I show you a photo?

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes, of course you can.

**NAME WITHHELD:** I just want to show you because this child here—there are two of them; these were given to me by my daughter—this is a photo of a child that was needing her mother. Do you see that child? She is six weeks old. She was adopted that day. But you can see she needed her mother. But I could not be her mother because I did not have any money. I did not have any support. I did not have anything.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you for sharing that.

**NAME WITHHELD:** It is just that she needed her mother. You can see that there.

**Ms COUZENS:** So just going back to the question around specialised counselling—and you do not have to answer this if you do not feel comfortable—but I wonder now if that service was available, so a specialised counsellor in the forced adoptions field, would you use that counselling service?

**NAME WITHHELD:** I have to say maybe. I think right now probably only grief counselling, if anything, because I do believe that having lost my daughter and my marriage, it was different altogether to when I lost my daughter to adoption. But it is all grief. It is grief. And I realised that when [REDACTED] died. It is grieving again.

**Ms COUZENS:** Do you want to take a break?

**The CHAIR:** Do you want to take a little bit of a break?

**NAME WITHHELD:** I did not think I would do this. I thought I was okay.

**The CHAIR:** No, you are doing really well.

**Ms COUZENS:** That is okay. Just let us know when you are ready to start again.

**NAME WITHHELD:** It is okay.

**Ms COUZENS:** Are you sure?

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** Okay. In terms of information and documentation about the forced adoption, was there anything in particular that you wanted to identify? Were there difficulties for you in getting that information?

**NAME WITHHELD:** Oh, yes, in the beginning. Everything was closed to us. My daughter found me. I could never have found her. Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** And do you think that needs to change?

**NAME WITHHELD:** Oh, definitely.

**Ms COUZENS:** So a recommendation from this inquiry to make all information accessible across the board—

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** because we know some people are successfully getting a full set of the documentation, others are only getting parts, and some are getting none, depending on where it is all at—so you would support that recommendation or something similar if that was proposed?

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes. They are entitled to know. I think so. Secrets are destructive in any area. Secrets are destructive, they destroy you from the inside, so I am not one for secrets at all.

**Ms COUZENS:** And is there anything in particular that you can think of—maybe it is not in your submission, but just sitting here today—that the Committee should take on board in terms of developing the recommendations?

**NAME WITHHELD:** I think you are doing a good job. I am really pleased that you are here because nobody has ever listened before. I went to the apology and they spoke, but no-one listened, so I think your listening is just powerful—that I am sitting here with you people and you are listening to me. That is powerful because, apart from the girls and the same, nobody ever did, even friends—‘Oh, yes’. I did not tell anybody for years, but when I did they listened for a minute but they did not want to know any more about it. But you listening, I think that is powerful.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you for contributing to it, because it does make a difference when people come forward and tell their stories—

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes, absolutely.

**Ms COUZENS:** so that we can formulate the right recommendations. Although it is never going to take away what has happened, hopefully moving forward we can put recommendations that will make some sort of difference.

**NAME WITHHELD:** It needs to be recognised, and I think also the stigma was a dreadful thing too, and that need not have been. If we had had money, support, when our babies were born, we could have looked after them. I could have gone to another town and had my baby and kept it because I would have had money for support, but I did not, and my family did not want another baby at home. I had a 15-month-old brother when my baby was born. So we needed it then, and we just did not get it. Everything happened too late. But the fact that you are listening now—I am so pleased.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you. Thanks, [name withheld].

**The CHAIR:** I think Heang had a question.

**Mr TAK:** Yes. Thank you, Chair. Thank you, [name withheld]. That is very important, what you said.

**NAME WITHHELD:** That is good.

**Mr TAK:** As part of this inquiry I just would like to hear from you—I know that in your submission you also talked about that you put a small article in the local newspaper and all of that.

**NAME WITHHELD:** It was hardly small; it was the front page.

**Mr TAK:** Yes, front page. I think that is really important, and we do think that public awareness about forced adoption would help going forward and also encourage other mothers or impacted parties to come forward and tell their stories.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Definitely. I definitely believe that. It has to be out there. There are a lot of people out there like me that are still carrying that secret, and I cannot imagine—

**Mr TAK:** And it is very hard to keep it inside.

**NAME WITHHELD:** It is very hard to speak when you keep something inside for so many years. I tried to sit with my daughter and tell her about her other sister—it would not come. It was stuck. I tried so many times. It is a secret, and we need to get it out there and talk. When I did this story in the paper—thankfully I did not see it—there was a bit on Facebook or something about it. Somebody commented like how wrong I was—it was about me—and was saying the likes of, ‘If I’d had a baby, I’d live in a cardboard box if I had to. Nobody would take my child away’. I did not see that, and I am glad I did not, but my response to that would be: well, first you have got to be able to afford the cardboard box. I mean, it is easy to sit back and judge.

**The CHAIR:** That is right.

**NAME WITHHELD:** So it has to be out there, to answer your question; definitely.

**Mr TAK:** Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** No further questions? Thank you very much on behalf of the Committee for taking the time and for your courageous submission to us. I know it has been difficult and challenging revisiting the past. We will be putting forward a report to the Victorian Parliament—the Victorian Government. It will be tabled before 1 July. Please be assured that your presentation will be part of that report. As I said, we have got Holly here today. If you do need any form of support, we are here. At any point you can reach out to Committee members and our secretariat—Yuki—and hopefully before 1 July there will be some communication back to you about tabling the report. But again we truly do appreciate you taking the time and being here. I know it has been challenging, but we are just truly, truly honoured to have met you and listened to your story.

**NAME WITHHELD:** That is so nice. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Is that going to go in the paper, my name?

**The CHAIR:** Unless it is marked for confidentiality—no.

**NAME WITHHELD:** It is just that I have done three bits and I do not know for my children whether I should do any—

**Ms COUZENS:** You can talk to Yuki about that.

**The CHAIR:** No, that is fine. Yuki will arrange all that. Thank you again.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Thank you all for listening.

**The CHAIR:** All the very best.

**Witness withdrew.**