

# 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 (5).

**WITNESS**

Name withheld (4).

**The CHAIR:** [name withheld], I will start the proceedings as you organise yourself. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans. To my left are 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, both past and present, and any Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today.

I now declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria. I welcome [name withheld] to the proceedings. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, so whatever you say today is protected by the privilege, but if you go outside and say certain things, including on social media, it may not be protected.

Also we have Hansard here today, and they are recording. As soon as the transcript is available it will be provided to you. Any presentations or handouts will be placed on our Committee's website unless confidentiality has been requested.

We also have Holly here today from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support services. She is available to talk to you during the hearing or after if you choose, and most importantly you can also get in touch with Carfi after the hearing as well.

The Committee acknowledges and thanks you for being here. I know it can be challenging revisiting the past and it can be difficult, so we are totally in your hands. There are some tissues, if you would like, [name withheld].

**NAME WITHHELD:** I have not even started yet.

**The CHAIR:** That is all right. We totally understand. We are in your hands, so take your time. We are here to hear your experiences in relation to forced adoptions but most importantly what outcomes you would like from this inquiry. I know, as I said, it is extremely difficult for you, and we appreciate you being here, so take your time.

**NAME WITHHELD:** You have already read my submission. I was going to read it, but I do not think I will read it now.

By the time I realised I was pregnant I had not told my parents, but when I did they actually knew. My father is a retired minister, and one of his congregation told him that I was pregnant. So that was great, wasn't it? Then we had to meet up with all the parents, and I was to be married. We were going to be married. My boyfriend's mother at the time said she would not support the marriage two weeks before we were due to get married. She said she was not going to sign the papers because we were under 21, so I knew then that I would not be able to keep this baby. She got her son. She had a child at 17, but she did not give me that—anyway.

I was at home. I did not go to an unmarried mothers home. I stayed at home. I have got two younger brothers and a younger sister, and that was hard, horrible. I was scared, and I was alone. I would walk around, and I would try to be invisible. My boyfriend would still come around once a week, and it must have been hard for him. I am jumping right through, I know.

**The CHAIR:** That is all right. It is fine.

**NAME WITHHELD** I had a doctor, so I would go to the same doctor, and I went to hospital. I am pretty sure Mum was sitting out in the hallway, but I did not want her to come in because I just felt so ashamed; I put shame onto everybody. And Dad being a minister was just that added extra really. I heard my little boy cry, but I did not know it was a boy because no-one told me. I had to ask the nurse. I heard him cry. I never saw him. I have seen him once on his birthday, and he was 39. Probably about four weeks or six weeks later we left. He was born in [REDACTED] and we left [REDACTED] to come back to Geelong, come back to Victoria. I have been broken ever since.

I married my husband nearly three years later. We stayed together, and we got married. We have got three more boys, so I have kept brothers from brothers, and that is so hard. I did not feel it was up to me to find him; I did not feel worthy to do that. But he found me, my son [REDACTED]. He is married to a [REDACTED] [REDACTED] an [REDACTED] and she told him, 'You need to find out'. So, really, if I had filled in the medical form—he was not interested in finding me, but finding out about medical issues. He has told me that. That was hard. Luckily I did not fill out that form, hey?

He has had a good adoption. What he has got we could not have provided for him, but I suppose we could have given him himself, I guess. I don't know. We have been together now. We are still in contact. It is going well for—let me see—coming up to 12 years or something. In 2008 he found me. That has been hard, because when he found me, that part that you lock away to protect you, that part of your heart, that door opens and that stuff, what comes bubbling out, is tough to deal with, especially seeing this full brother to his brothers. I felt the guilt. No-one ever spoke about him. My parents never spoke about him. It was like it was just nothing, and I just kept it in, but when it came out, that is—ooh, it is tough. But he is good and we get on well. His wife is very good. She said I have made [REDACTED] happy just being. He has given me his children, which is nice, but that is hard because you lose your son but you also lose your grandchildren, which you never thought—but they love me and we get on well. But I am [name withheld]; I am not Nanna, and I would love to be Nanna, you know. It is ongoing. It is hard. It is tough. But at least now when people ask me, if they ask me how many children—I can say I have got four, four sons, and that is empowering to be able to acknowledge he is here, because some of the other girls in group cannot even do that. The group has helped me enormously. I do not know where I would be without them, because I do not want to talk to anybody. I am not interested in that at all. Those girls are good.

So that is where we are at, but even when I am with [REDACTED] it is very difficult. I have broken down with him and I have told him things, and he has had to cope with a lot too. It has been tough for him, tough for me, tough for my husband, because he has got guilt because he has seen the effect it has had on me. I do not share a lot with him. It is too traumatic for me to talk about. But he is happy I am here today. I mean, we are very close and it is good, but he and [REDACTED] there is not a bond there, really. I think it is because of the guilt. I suppose it is different for a mother-child thing. That is interesting, that bond is strong even though I never saw him until he was 35, I think, or 36. Yes, it is tough. Behind the smile, it is tough.

I guess I am strong. You do not realise how strong you are, really. You have just got to get up and do it, don't you? But my boys did not know, so when [REDACTED] wanted to find me I had to tell my kids. They would always say, the three of them, to the youngest son, if there was something going on, 'Well, you're just being adopted' as their joke, growing up, the kids. So when this happened I said, 'I want to see you', so the three of them came in. [REDACTED] which is the next one to [REDACTED] said, 'Mum's going to tell us that we're adopted'—that is what he said as a bit of humour. And I said, 'Well, actually, [REDACTED] so that shut him up. Like, he felt really, really bad. I actually read something to them because I could not talk.

But that bond with [REDACTED]—I think with the distance it is hard, him being in [REDACTED] [REDACTED] is full on with her career, and the kids are at school. That has been hard, trying to get that bond happening. I think in your mind you sort of think, 'What's she going to be like?'. I think he is quite happy that I presented all right, because he did not know what he was getting. I remember once—this is going right off track—I came in and he just looked at me, and he said, 'You're hot'. And I think his wife, [REDACTED] just about collapsed on the floor; I did as well. And he said, 'I suppose the boys tell you that', and I said, 'Well, they're probably used to me'. But I felt sorry for [REDACTED]. He was probably just looking at me and saying, 'You're hot', and I was thinking—but I thought that was—

**Ms COUZENS:** That was kind of a compliment.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Well, yes. He probably did not even know he was going to say that. But I go back to that. Anyway, that is just off track. But that is fine.

So everything is good. I am going to see our grandson, who is now at uni this year in [REDACTED]. He is wanting us to come and stay with him, my husband and me. Maybe my husband will bond more with the grandson than with [REDACTED]. I think [REDACTED] now is 18½, and he wants to know. He has got my humour, which is a bit off track, which his father has not got. But he has got my humour, and we understand each other. I think that is important for him, to find out why he does stuff and just things like that—plus with his uncle. It is tough, yes.

I think that is it. You know all the other stuff.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, [name withheld].

**NAME WITHHELD:** That is all right. At least I am better now—finish on a smile.

**The CHAIR:** So my question would be: what are some of the points that you would like to see covered in this inquiry? Is it the compensation, is it a redress scheme, is it the medical cost, is it—

**NAME WITHHELD:** Well, you see, for me, I have not spoken to anyone. I am not on medication. I think I am the only one in the group that is not on medication. I do not know why that is. I never felt the need to talk to anyone, and I do not want to talk to anyone except the group, because it understands. Our stories are similar, and they are different. But at the bottom line we know what is going on, and we support each other, and that is very, very important to me. Because [REDACTED] was born in [REDACTED]—I do not know—for me, I would like to be able to apply, maybe, to have some support for the cost if I am going to [REDACTED]. I used to go probably twice a year, but I have not seen him for nearly two years now; it is probably over 18 months. But something like that, even just to partially help pay for that. But because it is [REDACTED]—I do not know if that does anything. But if they offer compensation, yes, I will take it, and I would like for us to all go on a holiday. I do not know if I would be able to tell [REDACTED] that, but I would like us all to get together and go on holiday, and that is what I would do with something. To be honest I am not expecting anything to come of this. It is just nice that you are listening really, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, [name withheld]. Christine.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks so much, [name withheld], for coming today and telling us your experience. I know how challenging and stressful it is, so we do really appreciate you taking the time to tell your experience of what happened to you, which is really valuable to us and will help formulate our recommendations as an end result of this inquiry. I am interested in your views about the support group because a number of women giving evidence have said they have not sought counselling but they have used other supports—for example, the support group you are referring to. Do you think that that is probably something that should be supported as a recommendation from this Committee, whether it is supporting those support networks that are already there, or do you think there is a need for that specialised counselling to be available? I know a number of women have indicated that they would not use the counselling but rely heavily on other supports.

**NAME WITHHELD:** A lot of the ladies that you have spoken to today have seen counsellors over the years. It may or may not have helped them with things, but they are saying now that they do not need that anymore because they have got us. We started in Melbourne, and we were part of ARMS. We are a breakaway now. We are a group of friends now that meet up. That is important just to us because we get along so well and we support each other. I have been extremely lucky and blessed to have found these girls. I only looked for something once [REDACTED] found me. Then I needed something, and I saw an article that [REDACTED] who you have spoken with, had in the paper.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes, she talked about that.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes, because growing up I did not know anyone that was pregnant and not married. It was such a terrible, terrible thing—my goodness me. We were so, so young and had no idea; I had no idea. Mum just did not speak. She never spoke at all about me, and it was nothing—it was like nothing happened. We were marked, and our children were marked. They would never have got over the shame of it either. It is just a horrible thing. Whoever thought it was a good idea, it was not a good idea. I think we thought, ‘Yeah, we’ll probably get over it’, but it gets worse, because then it is your grandchildren. It just gets worse.

**Ms COUZENS:** You talked about [REDACTED] finding you.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** Have you been able to access records, or have you attempted to access any records?

**NAME WITHHELD:** I have via the group. I have got some records. He has got some as well.

**Ms COUZENS:** Okay. Did you find that difficult to do? Were there barriers put in place?

**NAME WITHHELD:** No, because [REDACTED] who you have spoken to too, she got all the information and, ‘Oh no’, she said, ‘No, no, we’ll apply for this and we’ll just do all this’, and we did it.

There is one thing I must say too: I did have a social worker in [REDACTED] I remember going in to sign the adoption papers. I can remember going in. I think I came on the bus. I was on my own going in, and then I was aware that I was up here and I am looking down at this poor girl down here. It was like I was up here. I was not here physically. I had left my body and gone up here and I watched this poor girl sign this form, and that is the thing that [REDACTED] has got. He said, ‘I’ve got the form’ He said, ‘It’s the tiniest little signature’. That was just so traumatic. I mean, I was only 18. It was awful. It was such a horrible thing.

**Ms COUZENS:** So would you see access to records as an important—

**NAME WITHHELD:** I think it is important, yes. It was interesting for me to see, and also to see how he did not thrive. He was only a little fellow and he did not thrive.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** That concludes the questions. It was not too bad, [name withheld], hopefully.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Was I good?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** You did amazingly. Thank you.

**Mr TAK:** I was about to say have a good trip to Adelaide.

**The CHAIR:** I just wanted to conclude by saying what the next steps will be. Your evidence today will form part of the deliberations of the Committee members in preparing a report to Parliament. We are hoping to table this report with very strong recommendations before 1 July, okay? But our secretariat—Yuki—will be providing communication closer to that date just to inform of when we will be tabling the report. The report will be made public as well, with our recommendations, but again I do want to on behalf of the Committee thank you very much for being here. I know it was difficult and very challenging for you to share your experience, but most importantly you have been courageous to share it with us. Please know that your experiences will be taken as part of the deliberations for our report. We thank you again and wish you all the very best in your journey. Hopefully we were not too bad.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Oh no, it was fine.

**The CHAIR:** Not too daunting? It was fine?

**NAME WITHHELD:** No, it was all good. It was all fine. Thank you so much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Committee adjourned.**