

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria

Wodonga—Tuesday, 18 May 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 Karen Linton.

WITNESS

Ms Karen Linton.

The CHAIR: Good morning, Karen. Thank you so much for being here. I will start the official proceedings. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans. To my right is Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong, and also Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today, and 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. 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, you may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Any verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or handouts will be placed on the committee's website unless confidentiality is requested.

We also have here today Debbie. Debbie is a counsellor, and she is available to talk to you during the hearing and also after the hearing. We are more than happy to provide you with details of how to get in contact with Debbie.

The committee is very much interested in hearing about your experience, your journey, of forced adoption and in particular the services you have accessed or may have not accessed and what outcomes you would really like from this inquiry.

I now invite you to proceed with a brief opening statement to the committee. Again, for the record: Karen Linton, thank you so much for being here today. Take your time. We are here to hear and listen to your experiences.

Ms LINTON: In 1975 my parents found out I was pregnant when I ran away from home and they drove me back. I was five and a half months pregnant, but they wanted it confirmed by a doctor, so I was marched off to the local GP, who confirmed that, yes, I was quite advanced in a pregnancy. And from there the treatment I was to have from there on started, whereby I was in the same room as him but he turned his back on me and addressed my parents.

The first thing he suggested—well, it was not a suggestion; he told my parents that I was to have the child adopted and he would refer me to the Royal Women's Hospital, where they were used to doing this type of thing. He also discussed the option of sending me to an unmarried mother's home, but where we lived was quite rural—it is not anymore; it is Launching Place near Warburton—so he then suggested that the best course of action was not to put me into an unmarried mother's home but to keep me at home but hidden. So I was not allowed out. I was not allowed to see my friends. I was not allowed to talk to anyone about it. The only time I ventured from home was to travel to the Royal Women's Hospital.

The other thing that was discussed while I was with the GP was that he had identified something was amiss and felt that the Royal Women's Hospital was also the best place for me to go at that time. He did not discuss with me what that problem was, and that again became a pattern during the rest of my pregnancy.

So I used to travel to the Royal Women's Hospital. My mother would drop me off at the station and I would go on the train by myself and then walk up to the hospital and have my appointment. I was not spoken to in any direct way. It was 'Go and do this' or 'Go and do that', and if you broached the subject of keeping the baby, you were immediately pounced on and said, 'That's not happening to you. Your baby is going to be up for adoption. There's nothing you can do about it'.

Towards the end of my pregnancy they were doing a lot more tests but again did not tell me what the tests were for or why I was having them. They also asked me to keep bringing a suitcase each visit and said that I could be admitted the next time I came type of thing. I was finally admitted on 11 July—no, 10 July I went in, and on

11 July they then induced me. I have no knowledge of that inducement. It seems things went wrong. I woke up at one stage and there was a doctor and a nurse and they were cutting my arm for cutdown IVs, and the nurse pointed out I was awake and the doctor immediately said, 'Get her back under'. The next time I remember anything was hearing that my blood pressure was 220 over 200 and someone made the comment, 'Her head should be blowing off it's that high'.

I vaguely remember my parents seeing me, but I cannot tell you what day it was. No-one told me what happened or why I was basically in intensive care. Eventually on I think it was a Sunday—I do not know, the days were blurred; it seems that I was heavily sedated for a few days—one of the nurses did tell me I had had a son, he was born at 5 o'clock and he was 5 pounds. And that was it. I later heard someone talking about he was in intensive care for the babies. A few days later I sneaked up to intensive care and tried to find my son—I was with another lady who had had a baby—and I realised I did not know what he looked like. I did not know what name he was going to be under or anything else, so I gave up trying to see him that way. My parents when they came to see me were told that they could see him—they would be taken up and they could go and see him. They asked if I was allowed to, and they said, 'No. There's no way she's going to see her baby', so they declined the offer.

I got told because he was ill that the paperwork could not be finalised. I came back for my six-week visit and they still were not happy with my progress. Again, there were discussions about me but not to me. I had two doctors discussing my case as to whether I had cancer of the kidneys or was in complete renal failure, and I had some more tests and was then told to come back in another six weeks, I think it was. It was at this time I was told that the paperwork was ready. I was marched off into a room with a social worker who sat me at a table and said, 'You're now signing the papers'. And I said, 'I don't want to sign the papers. I don't want to give up my son'. And she said, 'You've got to sign them, no ifs or buts. You're under 18 and we're telling you what to do and you're going to sign this paperwork. These are the choices: you either sign it and let your son go to a good home with a good family who will bring him up or we will make him a ward of the state and when he is old enough he will be placed in an orphanage'. I still did not want to sign it.

Sorry, I thought I would be good with this.

The CHAIR: Take your time.

Ms LINTON: She grabbed my hand, put a pen in it and put it on the paper, and she said, 'You are signing this'. I was crying and she said, 'Shut your snivelling up or I will slap your face'. And I just kept saying I did not want to do it. And she said, 'I've told you once and I will tell you again: you've got no rights, you're not having this baby. This is what's going to happen today: you're not leaving this office until you have signed the paper', and she was getting my hand and telling me I had to sign the paper. So I eventually signed it and left, and I did not want to live.

It was a horrendous trip going home. And the other ruling that had been made in our house the day I came home from hospital: I was never allowed to speak of it again—I had brought shame on the family and ruined my good name and I would not be wanted in the future—and I was to keep my mouth shut. So to this day my aunts and uncles do not know, except two. They are the only two. None of my cousins know. My youngest brother and sister did not find out until they were in their late teens, early 20s, and they were really horrified.

Eventually I went to a GP, and he managed to find out what had happened. I had had severe pre-eclampsia. I had also gone into cardiac arrest twice, and I remember that the nurse told me that she had contacted my mother at work to tell her I had arrested before giving birth and that they needed to come in; they did not think I would make it. And then the nurse said, 'Then you arrested again', and that was the tone: 'You arrested—again. And we rang your parents and they were still at work'. And she just turned and she said, 'That shows you just how much they loved you. They could not even be bothered coming to see you when you were dying'.

I got a job, went back to work and tried to forget, but I could not. Milestones came up, and I would always remember his birthdays, Christmases—it was all of those things. I do not how I got through those months by myself. I had numerous stitches, and it turns out—again I found out by chance—I had had a high forceps delivery. So just the medical information I should have been given but I was not. The GP that tracked it down for me—his comment was, 'You were treated abysmally and you were treated like a guinea pig'. He said, 'They knew when you were 5½ months pregnant that you had pre-eclampsia, and they should've taken steps to

protect you and they didn't'. And he said, 'The medication that they put you on to keep you sedated was gross harm'—and just the whole process.

So in the 1990s—early 1990 I think it was—I heard that Victoria changed and that you could put your name down, so I did after watching a television show. It took a lot, for some reason, to find my son, and he was 17½ when we found him. And to this day we do not have a very close relationship.

At the start I told him what happened but I do not think he understood what it meant, and now I find what he does is when he gets a new girlfriend or a new partner he says, 'Oh, this is my mum. She gave me away'. It is so hard trying to tell him that I did not give him away. To give him away would mean that I gave informed consent. It implies that I had received all of the options available, which I did not. So we see each other, but it is not good. An example was he had a son, and all I wanted to do was to see his son as quickly as possible because my thing was then I could actually see what he might have looked like when he was born. He did not let me see him until he was over three months old. I think there was that significant thing that it took over three months for his adoption papers to be signed because he had been ill. I did find that he was told that he was in intensive care for a while and then he was placed in a foster carer's home until he was deemed fit to be adopted.

The myth that kept you going was that he was going to a good home and a good family and he would have this wonderful, wonderful life, and the reality was it was not. The adoptive parents must have been close to divorcing; however, she passed away when he was seven years old and then he said he just had a steady stream of babysitters all his life. His father has been quite a ladies' man, I suppose you could call it.

When we talked about our experiences it turns out we ended up in the same town. There was a main road. He lived across the road and I lived on the other side in a little court, and I used to go to his father's shop—he did leadlighting—and the local fish and chip shop was next door. I used to buy fish and chips occasionally, and he made the comment, 'Well, that's where I used to play. That's where the kids were next door', and he said, 'Why didn't you recognise me? I was your son. Why didn't you recognise me?'. And I said, 'I'd never seen you. I had no idea what you looked like. I thought you might have strawberry blonde hair because that runs in the family. I thought you might have brunette hair because that was the main thing. I didn't know if you had blue eyes. I didn't know if you had freckles'. I said, 'All of those traits were the things that I would look for, but I didn't know what you looked like'.

I still do not tell people. It is still secret, 46 years later. It has affected relationships because I know I am not telling everyone everything, but there is still that whole thing of shame—and anger, I suppose, too, at what was done. My first marriage, I met him in the November through work and six days later we were engaged. Hindsight is wonderful. It was me kind of snubbing my nose at my parents and saying, 'Ha ha, there is someone who wants me'. It was a violent marriage, and I left him. I went and fell into another marriage that was similar circumstances and it was again more secrets, because DV back then was not known or talked about, so it was just secret after secret we are compressing.

Eventually I realised that because of what happened to me as a child, having a baby and losing him, I was making really bad decisions and I needed to step back and take me time, which I did. I left my second husband and moved to Sydney with my daughter, started further study and ended up going to university and graduating. My daughter—when I had her I was terrified that someone was going to take her from me. That terror stayed with me, and it still does. She mentions every now and then about moving to Queensland, and it just raises that whole thing of 'Someone is taking her away from me'. I think I have run out of steam.

The CHAIR: You are doing really well. All right, we might just have a little bit of a break before the questions. Did you want to start, Christine?

Ms COUZENS: Yes. Thank you. Thanks, Karen, so much for giving us your time today. We know it is challenging and difficult for you, but we do really appreciate your input into this inquiry. It is really important, so thank you so much for coming along today. I have got a couple of questions. Have you accessed counselling at any time?

Ms LINTON: No. The only time was—I think it was through VANISH, the place that I contacted to try and contact my son. They did, over the phone, a couple of things, but it was more in preparation of, 'There's a possibility that he won't want to see you' and that type of thing. It was more about counselling that there could be more loss and grief, but that was only a couple of times. Then once he was found they were kind of in the

background suggesting different things—like to start off with letters or to start off with phone calls and then to eventually meet.

Ms COUZENS: So you have not looked at any professional counselling?

Ms LINTON: No.

Ms COUZENS: Okay. And what are your thoughts about a redress scheme? You know, we have got the opportunity to make recommendations to government, which we will be doing, but I am interested to hear what you think would be important for you. Is it paid counselling? Is it compensation? You know, there are a whole range of things that are being proposed, but I am interested in what your view is on that.

Ms LINTON: I still am not sure. How could you put a monetary price on what we experienced and what we went through and continue to go through. I have got scars, both physical and mental scars. Counselling? I do not know. I do not know if it would help when you have had such a big secret for such a long time. I am not sure what would be the best option there.

Ms COUZENS: We certainly understand the difficulties. Nothing we do is going to change what has happened.

Ms LINTON: No. That is right. I think one of the biggest things is really dispelling the myth. That is the huge one. That is the one I come up against. That is the one where I have got the most hostility whenever I have been brave enough—it is brave—to actually tell someone what happened, and then I get the reaction, ‘Oh, how could you give your child away?’. And even as I said, with my son, that is how he sees it. He had not told his friends that he was adopted, and when it came out most was when he got married. I was sitting on the table with his adoptive father and stepmother and someone came to the table and said, ‘Oh, who are you?’, and I said, ‘He’s my son’. They said, ‘She died’, and I said, ‘No, I’m his birth mother’. She said, ‘What do you mean?’, and I said, ‘Oh, he was adopted’. She must have gone off and spoken to my son, and he came barrelling over and he was so angry with me for saying something at his wedding about how he was adopted. So it is just that whole myth and breaking down the secrecy and just the way we were treated as well. We were not seen as people. I think we were seen as numbers, and it was a ‘Just get them through the door’ type of thing.

Ms COUZENS: I mean, obviously we would like to see this report highlight what many women experienced—and hopefully it does—and put it in the public view for a better understanding of what women like yourself had to endure really. Are there any other outcomes to this inquiry you would like to see?

Ms LINTON: One was making it more common knowledge, the practices and the coercion that was used—and there was so much coercion, and it was either overt or covert. It depended who you saw. For me because I was not in an unmarried mothers’ home it was the medical profession—everyone I saw at the Royal Women’s Hospital it was the same thing.

And if someone wants to talk about it, not judging them—I think that is a huge one. By the time I had my son I was only just 17 by 10 days or something, and I still was not treated as an adult because I was technically under 18. So, yes, it is giving people the chance to come forward. But, as I said, it has taken quite a bit to come forward. My daughter knows. I tagged my son in the post, but I do not think he has worked out that I have come here today. And even I told my partner last night, and he just looked and said, ‘Oh, was it forced?’, and I said, ‘Yes’, and then he went back to what he was doing, and it was like, okay. But his has been the best reaction considering some of the reactions I have had.

Ms COUZENS: You mentioned earlier about when you got access to the records of what occurred, and I think your GP got them.

Ms LINTON: Yes, I think he got some of them. He did not get all of my records.

Ms COUZENS: Okay. So you do not have all of your records?

Ms LINTON: No.

Ms COUZENS: Have you applied to the Royal Women’s Hospital for those?

Ms LINTON: No. I was told that they are all destroyed after seven years. I do not know. And as I said, more of it was what I could remember and my doctor piecing it together, and, you know, things that I have said about being sedated. My parents told me the first time they saw me I was so swollen they could not recognise me—I had gone into renal failure—and that I had some bracelets on my arm and they were going to cut them off because my arms had swollen so much and they asked them not to; they meant something to me. Previous to his birth they had also kept asking me about my fingers and my feet. I refused to wear a ring. My mother bought me one—it was ghastly—and I was supposed to wear that in public, so I would wear it when I went out of the house and then put it in my handbag when I got around the corner. I did not know, but there were things like that that indicated that I had pre-eclampsia—and protein in my urine. They made me do lots of urine tests.

Ms COUZENS: Thanks, Karen. I appreciate that.

Mr TAK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Karen. Just to follow on from Christine, I heard before what you said about, ‘This is my mum, and she gave me away’, and all of that. It is very tragic for you, but the other side is your son may not realise that it has an adverse impact on you. As part of this inquiry, do you think that public awareness in terms of education and all that would assist?

Ms LINTON: I think so. It was like when HIV first came about and there was all the fear factor and all the myths and things that went with that, but once people became educated and understood more, then there was more acceptance, and I think it is a similar type of situation. And there was also a great deal of inequality in that time as well, because I paid a price and my child paid a price but the person who impregnated me was patted on the back and ‘Job well done’. There were no ramifications, there were no repercussions for him. It was always the mothers and the children involved, never the other half of the party. But again, I think education definitely—it is not a pleasant part of our history, but I think we need to really bring it out for people to understand what it was like and how terrifying and scary it was.

Mr TAK: All right. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Just to follow up on that, I think I can ask: has the father been able to meet your son?

Ms LINTON: No. I still have his details, and I asked my son, you know, he tracked me down, did he want to track down his father? He said no, he was not interested. And I said, ‘I did see him a couple of years after the birth but didn’t speak to him, and then I heard on the grapevine that he’d actually passed away due to a drug overdose’. I told my son that, and I said, ‘Look, I don’t know if that rumour is true or not. I’ve never followed it up. If you want to follow up, I’m more than willing to give you what I know’, but he was not interested at all.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Any other questions?

Ms LINTON: And these are the only two things that I have in regard to my son. This was the little book that I used to have to take every time I went to the Royal Women’s Hospital. There is not much in it. And I was sent that in the mail: it is just an extract of his birth certificate.

The CHAIR: A description book.

Ms LINTON: That is it. Most women get a book where it records their weight and blood pressure and all of those types of things. That was it. That is all I used to have to take every time I went down there. I was told I could name him but in all probability he would have a different name, and he did end up with a different name.

Mr TAK: Not much detail in it.

Ms LINTON: No. My son—now I have forgotten what he has told me—has said that his birth certificate has different details. There is some confusion about the time: I was told he was born at 5 o’clock and he was 5 pounds, but he says that he was born earlier. But I do not know. I think there were some details that VANISH were having trouble finding too.

The CHAIR: Karen, thank you so much for being here. We truly appreciate your valuable contribution and your strength and courage to be here today and through your submission. The committee very much appreciates it. The next steps will be we will deliberate on all submissions and all evidence and we will be handing a very strong report to government, hopefully in August. But we will endeavour to keep you up to date with the progress, and you are able to do so through Yuki and the secretariat. But again I do, on behalf of the committee,

really, really appreciate you coming in. I know how difficult and challenging it may have been for you today, but we really do appreciate your submission.

Ms LINTON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: And we wish you all the very, very best.

Ms LINTON: Thank you, and thank you for the opportunity.

The CHAIR: No. Thank you for your evidence. As I said, we do understand it is difficult and challenging, but it is very important for us in our work.

Ms LINTON: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.