

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 Rosemary Neil.

WITNESS

Ms Rosemary Neil.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Rosemary, for being here today. I will just read out some proceedings and then we will get started.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to their elders both past and present and any other 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 Rosemary Neil here today.

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 say it outside—let us say on social media, on Facebook, for example—it may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard to our left. 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 as soon as possible unless confidentiality has been requested.

We also have here today Debbie. She is a counsellor. Debbie is available for you to talk to during your evidence or after the hearing as well.

The committee is very much interested in hearing about your experience of forced adoption and in particular any service issues that you may or may not have accessed but most importantly what outcomes you would like from this inquiry.

I will just introduce my committee. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans. To my left is Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda, and of course Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong. As I said previously, we are very much interested in hearing your experiences, and most importantly we will then follow with questions as well. So take your time. We are here to hear from you. I will now invite you to make an opening statement. Thank you.

Ms NEIL: Thank you. Well, we will start from the beginning, will we? Okay. So in 1966 I was 21. I was seeing a fellow and I became pregnant. His mother wanted to support us and for me to live with them and be able to keep my baby, but I had to go home. My mother had very different ideas, that I was not welcome to come home if I kept my baby.

The CHAIR: Take your time.

Ms NEIL: So then I went and stayed with my uncle in Melbourne for about four or five months, and then I went in to the Presbyterian Sisterhood, which was in North Fitzroy, which was a home for unmarried mothers, and I was there for about eight weeks, I think, something like that. But life was very different in there. We had our work duties we had to do. We had no contact. We were not allowed contact with anybody. The only contact we had were letters from our mother or father—that was the only contact. When we got our letters, sometimes pages were missing or words had been blacked out, and the matron always came around and made sure that she took our letters back, that we could not keep them. So we had no possibility of support from anybody, and we felt very alone.

We were not allowed to use our own names, so we had assumed names. Somebody would be looking at you and speaking to you—my assumed name was Sue—and of course you would not answer them because you were not thinking. And the other girls were the same as me too until we were there for probably a fortnight, and then we sort of started to become used to being called somebody else and being different.

Some of the jobs that I had were to clean the matron's bathroom and toilet and the office. I used to look around and make sure that the filing cabinets—well, they were all locked, but I used to test them. And there were letters burning in the grate, and I said to the matron, 'Why are the letters being burnt?', and she said, 'Oh,

they're just old ones and I don't need them anymore'. So that was probably what was happening with our letters, I expect, but I do not know.

Anyway, the time came for me to go to the Royal Melbourne for the birth of my baby. I was taken in a taxi and dropped off. The matron signed me in, and then I was all on my own. I had never been in a big hospital before, and yes, it was pretty traumatic. Anyway, I was there for quite a while. I was pretty thirsty and I was asking for a drink of water, and it was not brought to me. The only time I got any water was when I was brought pain medication—that I did not ask for, but I took it all because in my mind it would delay the birth of the baby and I would not have to give her up. Of course eventually the time came, and she was delivered by forceps because I was really out of it. And I did not get to see her. She was taken away straightaway. The next day Mum came to see me. She came down from Corryong to Melbourne. She walked in and said what a beautiful baby she was, and I just could not look at her. I just rolled over the other side of the bed and would not talk to her because it was my mum who did not want me to keep my baby and she had seen her and I had not. So that really caused me a fair bit of anger and sadness.

After about two or three days I was put in an ambulance and taken back to the sisterhood. There was a hospice there where we were cared for for a few days, and just as I was leaving I was in the ambulance and the almoner of the hospital, who we had not been told anything about being an almoner or anything, came and said, 'Oh, are you going already?'. I said, 'Oh, yes, the matron's organised for the ambulance to take me back', and she said, 'Oh, I haven't had a chance to talk to you'. I did not know who she was or what the possibilities were, and of course I was pretty distraught so I did not speak to her—I did not ask to speak to her. So we left.

Back at the hospice I had contacts with the girls, you know, from the kitchen, who would bring my meals over and that sort of thing. There was a doctor that I had been to see. When we were at the—sorry, I am going backwards.

Ms COUZENS: That is all right.

Ms NEIL: At the sisterhood we were given enough money for a taxi into the city to see the doctor and enough money for a taxi to get back, but we did not have any access to any money of any kind. And this doctor actually came to the hospice and checked me over. I do not know whether it was three or four days or something like that afterwards. Then the matron came over and said, 'It's time to sign all your documents for baby's adoption'. And I went over to the house, and there was another lady there besides the matron who would come now and again—she was an elderly lady—and she said, 'Dear, if you take this tablet, this will make this easier for you'. Of course I took the tablet; I did not know what it was. Anyway, so we went in. I walked up and down the matron's office, and she got very angry and all sorts of things because I would not sign it. Anyway, eventually I signed [REDACTED] adoption forms. And then I was, I think it was, another two days at the hospice, and then I went to stay back with my uncle for a few days. Then I went and stayed with another aunty in Melbourne, and I did not know at the time that she was actually my real mother. I was brought up by my aunt and uncle as my parents because my natural mother and my natural father were both married to other people, so I was brought up in a different family, but at that stage I did not know that she was my real mum. Anyway, she was very kind, and she did not know what had happened. She did not know that I had had a baby or anything because my mum had not told her. My uncle knew but she did not.

Anyway, so I stayed there for three weeks and a bit. I knew that at 30 days I could go back and try and get my baby back, so I went back into the Royal Melbourne and took the things with me that I had prepared. The girls at the desk laughed at me and said, 'What do you think you're doing here?'. And I said, 'Well, I was told that within 30 days, and I have got my documents here'. And they said, 'Oh, no. You've got to go to the courthouse'. And so I said, 'Well, where's the courthouse?', and they said they were not going to tell me, that if I wanted to find the courthouse I would have to find it by myself. So I walked around the city and I asked a couple of people, and they tried to give me directions. Anyway, by the time I eventually got to the courthouse it was closed. So I went back to my aunty's, and then I went home a couple of days later back to Corryong, where I had to apply for my job again. I was a telephonist and I had had to resign when I left Corryong, but the postmaster had kept my job for me, which was really lovely of him, so I got my full-time job back again. So it is really traumatic and distressing. That is just the way it was, you know—the world was very different 50 years ago to the way it is now.

I met [REDACTED] just before her 22nd birthday, and it was very strange—as an adult, with being her own self and the values and the way she had been brought up, which was different to the way that I would have brought her up. She had two older adopted brothers. And yes, it was just really emotional. I stayed for about three days I think. We had exchanged letters before that, and I had been to Melbourne, to Community Services Victoria, to be able to get the contact and all that sort of thing. But now it is something you have to work at; it just does not happen. It took us quite a few years to get to know each other and to work at our differences, but now it is just really natural. She has differences, yes, but we both know our differences and we get along really well.

When she had her two babies I was always very included in all my grandsons' activities. They used to come and stay with us because [REDACTED] was a single mum. Well, she had been married, and after the second baby was born she became a single mum, and she was working full time. So the boys would come down to us for school holidays or I would go up there. So we really got to know and trust each other at that stage. She comes to all our family things, which is lovely. Doug accepts her as part of our family, and although she has got her differences—you know, all families have got their differences—we all get along pretty well. That is most of my story. Is it time to ask questions?

The CHAIR: Yes. We might just pause for questions. Thank you so much for your evidence. We really do appreciate it. I will move to Christine for some questions.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you, Rosemary. I know how challenging it is to share your experience with us, but we do really appreciate it and it is important that we are able to reflect in this report those experiences of women across Victoria. So we do really appreciate your time today.

Ms NEIL: Thank you.

Ms COUZENS: Did you, or were you able to, access the records from the Royal Women's Hospital?

Ms NEIL: Yes. I went down for my interview with Copelen Street, Community Services Victoria. I went down there, and we had one group session and then we went individually in to speak to a lady—I cannot remember what her name was. She asked me if I would like to apply for my records as well as finding out where [REDACTED] was and all of that sort of thing. She sent me a copy of all my records. Then when the laws changed so that we could apply for our own records, I applied again. I got a more extensive record, when I applied myself, from the Royal Women's.

Ms COUZENS: And were you satisfied with those records—that they were accurate?

Ms NEIL: Yes, I think I was. Because I had had so many painkillers and stuff I was not thinking straight anyway. But yes, from what I can see—

Ms COUZENS: Was it recorded that you had all those painkillers?

Ms NEIL: Yes. They had, from the records that were there, but I do not think all of them were on there. But, you know, I cannot remember exactly.

Ms COUZENS: Yes.

Ms NEIL: But I remember when they gave me the heroin, because that was about 4 o'clock in the morning and I was really distressed. So they said, 'Oh, we'll give you something to quieten you down', and they certainly did—certainly quietened me down. I was not allowed to contact anybody or anything like that. The only person the girls at the hospital were allowed to contact was the matron.

Ms COUZENS: Okay. Also I would be keen to hear your thoughts on what you think a redress scheme should consider as part of our recommendations for this report. What sort of outcomes do you think would be significant particularly for yourself and other women who have experienced forced adoptions? Is there anything in particular you see as being really critical—financial compensation, paid counselling? The fact that we are doing the report actually puts it in the public eye, which is for a lot of women really significant. Is there anything in particular that you would say, 'Yes, that should be put forward'?

Ms NEIL: Yes, definitely for people who need counselling, and that should still be an ongoing thing. I have been involved with VANISH and Origins. I have not had a lot to do with ARMS—relinquishing mothers—but

mostly Origins and VANISH. Our get-togethers are really important because while I have for a long time been able to talk about my story, a lot of women have not, and they are really important, I think, for the girls who are coming in and just wanting to start to talk about their experiences. So yes, definitely counselling and support for the groups—definitely.

The other thing: at the apology in Canberra we were promised integrated birth certificates for our adopted children. Our daughter works in New South Wales, and she has just said that integrated certificates are just being introduced as legal evidence et cetera, et cetera. But as far as I know, last time I contacted Births, Deaths and Marriages it was not available, and [REDACTED] would certainly like to have an integrated birth certificate.

What else would I like to see? I would like adoption to be banned altogether because it is not good for anybody—not good for the babies or for the parents or anybody. It really does not always work for adoptive parents either. Adoptive parents—actually a lot of them need counselling. We had a lady who had adopted two children who used to come to our get-togethers in Albury-Wodonga. We did that from 1989 to 1994, I think. Anyway, we had a group going, and this lady came and she was just so upset because she could not really connect with her two adopted children. They all lived together, but she just felt that there was just this divide there all the time. So some adoptive parents really have a tough time too.

Ms COUZENS: Thanks, Rosemary. I really appreciate it.

The CHAIR: Rosemary, can I take this opportunity to again thank you so much for your contribution today. There being no further questions, the next steps will be that the committee will deliberate all evidence and prepare a very strong report to be tabled to Parliament in August. Yuki and our website will also keep you updated on the progress from now to August. But again, on behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for your valuable contribution. Also I know and acknowledge that raising these issues today caused a lot of challenges and was a painful experience for you, but we truly appreciate you taking the time to give us this evidence today. Thank you so much.

Ms NEIL: Thank you. I appreciate you giving me the opportunity.

The CHAIR: No, thank you. We wish you all the very best as well.

Ms NEIL: Thank you. Yes, I am very lucky compared to a lot of mums—that is for sure.

Witness withdrew.