

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria

Melbourne—Monday, 7 December 2020

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 Suzanne Scholz, Adoptee.

The CHAIR: 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 declare open the public hearing for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria. All mobile phones should be turned to silent at this point. I also welcome Suzanne Scholz, who is in attendance 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 go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media or other platforms, those comments may not be protected by 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. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible unless you deem it confidential and it has been requested.

Today we have support services here. Please be aware we have Reiko Hipple with us. Reiko is from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support services. She is available to talk to you if you would like, whether it is after the hearing or even during should you need to take a break. We can also put you in touch with Carfi and other services at a later time if you request it.

The committee is very much interested in hearing about your experience of forced adoption and in particular the services that you have accessed and what outcomes you would like to see from this inquiry. I also would like to introduce the committee members. To my right is David Southwick, MP, the Member for Caulfield, and to my left is Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong; and Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda. I now invite you to proceed with a brief statement to the committee, which will be followed by questions from the members. Thank you very much for being here today, Suzanne.

Ms SCHOLZ: No problem at all. Thank you. I have written a small response that I wanted to share today, aside from the response I gave in February. I have just written it down to make it easier for myself.

Service providers of adoption-related services in my experience have been lacking. We know from the forced adoption inquiry that 50 per cent of the people were negatively impacted by adoption. We know that state governments and NGOs issued apologies for their part, fully accepting fault for state-endorsed child removal and identity cancellation and that they indicated that they would make changes based on the recommendations of the inquiry. Many promises still have not been fulfilled.

When Relationships Australia received funding, they had no experience with past adoption practices. Not at any time that I have called have they even answered their phone. Today if you call, you will be asked to leave a number, and they will call back. Of course this means they can call at inappropriate times. They have no experience of adoption and have admitted that they have had to interview me as a service user to gain an understanding of past adoption experiences.

VANISH, with whom I have been a member for many years, are now outdated as a support service. They work off a very old and outdated model of search and connection, and they still encourage 50- to 70-year-old adult adoptees, who now have limited time to find our first parents, to write letters and wait for responses and permission to move forward with meeting our families. VANISH refused to support me in any way when I took the Department of Health and Human Services to court to get my fully unredacted file. What is their purpose if not to advocate for me with positive change, with removing secrecy for adoptees? Now VANISH have sent people directly to me to give them an understanding of the process of obtaining their files. Also, when I was consulting with [name withheld] at Births, Deaths and Marriages, VANISH refused to support me or engage with other adoptees as they were, and I quote an email from the manager:

Currently negotiating service agreements with the department to get an understanding of their policy agenda— meaning that they were afraid of losing funding if they were seen to be going against funding providers' wishes.

This is counterproductive to supporting and advocating for the adoptee cohort. Adoptees now use social media and DNA to find their family and to bypass outdated processes. In the absence of useful support agencies, it is well known, and often laughed at, that the adoptees and parents are forced to become detectives, cyberstalking

their own family to learn basic information such as their own identity, sometimes skating to the edge of what is legal. This should not be anyone's experience, but it is true of what is happening in the majority of searches now; adoptees have gone out on their own.

By the time I found my unknown father through DNA, I knew his name; address; phone number; his six children's names, which are my siblings, all their dates of birth and that I had a sister five weeks younger than me; also, where he had lived for the past 50 years; his profession; how much he paid for his home; where his kids went to school and what sports they played; and how many years he had been married. I had photos of everyone and his home. Then I could work out that I was born in the middle of his marriage. And I had no support from any agency to navigate this. This is the story of most adoptees now, and all agencies and funding miss this entirely.

We do not need permission to make contact. We are tired of the control and the political suppression of our stories. We lost our family because of state-sanctioned government identity erasure. We need you to assist us and to give us our lives back. Give us our files, give us our birth certificates, remove the redactions and cancellations, stop with the hollow apologies and compensate us. Adoptees and first parents must have agency in their own story. It is not up to governments or NGOs to keep suppressing us and violating our rights. We have voices that need to be heard. Adoptees are making their own way in searching connection to original families because agencies refuse to move forward with new technologies and methods. Why does the state get to choose when I can have my birth certificate? Why do I have to go to court to get my file and challenge the *Adoption Act* itself?

Even then Judge Pullen asked that I ask my adoptive mother for permission or that I wait for her to die. Everything is a fight as an adoptee. To seek our identity, government and NGOs suggest we must comply with a set of rules and wait to see if anyone wants to know us. Our parents were told to bury their past and move on. The shame and stigma can still be a painful battle for them. As adoptees we do not always fit in with our adoptive families, and our birth families struggle to find a place for us. There is no support for anyone in reunion. The trauma in reunion and secondary rejection is often very complex, and the strength of emotion is exhausting and confusing because we belong and yet we do not.

The lack of understanding and availability of services only adds to the trauma and feeling invalid as an adoptee. I am an individual who was stolen from my mother, father and 8 siblings, and it was sanctioned by the state of Victoria. I will always carry a lifelong trauma. Why do we have no right to compensation and redress like those who were traumatised by institutions? Adoptive homes were often just an extension of state institutions. There is a pervasive rhetoric that still exists that adoptees were somehow lucky and chosen, but we are broken and traumatised and we are waiting for the government to remedy what they broke. That is all.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for sharing that, Suzanne.

Ms COUZENS: Thanks, Suzanne. I really appreciate you coming along today. It must be really hard to share your experience, but we do really appreciate it. We read the submissions and things that come through, which are really important obviously, but to sit with you and hear your story is really important to us too, so we do really appreciate that.

Ms SCHOLZ: No problem. I am really frightened to be here, but I know that I can speak for many people that cannot—and so many people are profoundly traumatised. I have lost friends from alcohol and drug addiction. They do not come up as a suicide statistic from adoption, but they are a statistic of adoption, and I have to speak for my friends that are not here.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. We really appreciate that too. Thank you. You talked about VANISH and a couple of other organisations and what you think needs to happen. Have you had any counselling support provided through those services or—

Ms SCHOLZ: Yes. Not through VANISH. As I have said, I have tried to contact them. When I found my dad, they would not take up the DNA story. Because I am a forgotten Australian as well, I was a state ward. I found out in 1992 that I was a state ward, and at that time the government was sending out our files. It was a pretty new thing. They sent me 60 pages of information to my letterbox which stated that my mother was raped and that I was a state ward. I had not known until that day, and it was absolutely shocking to me.

Ms COUZENS: So it was the department that sent that.

Ms SCHOLZ: Human services sent that, yes. That was before. Their practices were not so good as they are now; they are doing a lot better now. But a lot of lies were written in my file too, which we have found out since. But VANISH have not provided services. They sent me to a counsellor once who had no understanding of adoption. Open Place I have spoken to. The last counsellor they sent me to, when I spoke about adoption, she said, 'You should be thankful that you were not raped by a priest', and I never went back because I could not believe that she said that. No-one comes to the floor and says, 'I have experience in adoption'. I do not understand why, when we have 50 000 people in foster care right now and we have 65 000 people affected by past adoption in Victoria, there are no specialised counsellors. Why isn't there a course at uni run on specialised counselling to do with family separation?

Ms COUZENS: So do you see that as being critical in terms of this inquiry?

Ms SCHOLZ: Absolutely. I have not found an adoptee counsellor that is an adoptee or has absolute experience of it. There is none. I read in one of the submissions by another agency that are coming here that they have 70, and they could not give me one. I feel like everyone is so worried about getting their funding to keep their agencies open that they are absolutely forgetting the service users. If VANISH cannot support me when I go in and say, 'Look, I'm the first person to go and try this section of the Act and try to get my file'—they just said, 'We don't want anything to do with this'.

I had a staff member come to me two years later and say, 'I'm really sorry. That's not what I wanted, but that is what the manager of VANISH at the time'—they are not the manager now—'said, "We don't want her to do that, because we'll have everyone here wanting us to do that"'. Well, if you are not there to advocate for me, why are you there?

Ms COUZENS: Yes. So you think a specialised course would—

Ms SCHOLZ: I do not know. I mean, surely there is something of the—people who have done university in counselling and psychology; why is there nothing to do with family separation? We have got the stolen generation. We have got foster care. You know, you are going to have people who are ageing out of foster care. It is about attachment and disorganised attachment. Something happened to me when I was born, when I separated from my mother, that makes it different. It is not the same as growing up in a family where you do not get along with your parents. It is you growing up in a family where you are not getting along with people who were made your parents, and it is a different thing. It is a profound trauma. And I also have that I was calling foster parents by 'Mum' and 'Dad' and I was separated from them as well. And I was in a home as well. So I do not know what happened. No-one can even tell me; the records are not available to what happened to me in my first year of life.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you.

Ms SCHOLZ: That is okay.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Suzanne, you mentioned the importance of being here, obviously for yourself, but for others. Do you have an informal network, and how important is that informal network of other people who have had similar experiences as you?

Ms SCHOLZ: It is the most important. Other than my husband, who is my immediate family, my adopted friends are my family. We can meet for coffee, and we do every couple of weeks, outside of the organisations like VANISH and Open Place. We do not talk about adoption, necessarily, but we have a shorthand that gets us there, to that point, because we can talk about birthdays, and adoptees traditionally do not like birthdays. Even before I was told I was adopted I always locked myself in my room and did not let anyone in, and I was not even told at that point. So there is something in there.

I meet with other adopted people. VANISH even know that I have gone out and said—you know, before the support groups we would meet for a counter meal and go up to VANISH, and they did not want us to do that. They said, 'No, that's not okay'. I said, 'We're 50 years old now. You can't do that'. That is the thing: there is this tacit control that always rides through this adoption experience.

Mr SOUTHWICK: So what are your thoughts about having some support for, effectively, an informal group that meet—

Ms SCHOLZ: I would absolutely support that. I have talked to VANISH before about having informal groups, because they have their support groups for people. And that is traditionally for people who are in reunion, because we are going through and we are finding our family and it is really an overwhelming experience. No-one can really understand what it is like until you have been through it.

But then, other than that, we actually want to heal and get better and just have happy lives. We want to know that when the complexities come along, like, ‘Oh, my father doesn’t want to talk to me anymore, and what does that mean?’, I do not want to go back to the support group where people are dealing with reunion. I want to be able to go to my friends and go, ‘How did you deal with it?’. You know, some things do not have an answer, but we need to know that we can get through something, and that is where my adoptee cohort—and I met with them last week. COVID meant we were locked down for eight months, and I did not get to see any of my friends, and because we are pretty much self-sufficient as adoptees and we have learned, we just cope with trauma. We always look like we are really well put together people, but we are really traumatised people.

We did not contact each other for eight months, and then lockdown was over and we were back out for coffee again, which is great. And, you know, the adoption thing just underlies what is going on in our lives all the time. It does not go away. So when something comes up we know how to deal with it. The most important thing to me, aside from my husband, is my adoptee friends. I do not even do the support groups at VANISH anymore. We actually have broken away from that, and we do our own thing now.

But it would be great if we could do something that was not just focused on the pain and separation of adoption but focused on—you know, I would love to see adoptees get together and just form advocacy groups in support in a positive way, not in a negative way.

Ms COUZENS: Social networks, that sort of thing.

Ms SCHOLZ: Yes, like you see with Vietnam vets, you know? They do not sit around and talk about the war all the time, I am sure, but there is a camaraderie. We have a shorthand that we can talk about anything.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I know you have mentioned it, but what would it mean for you to have an integrated birth certificate?

Ms SCHOLZ: I spoke to [name withheld]. I wrote to the Premier about it. Now, the Premier happens to be my local member, and he is a really busy guy at the moment, but he sent my letter to [name withheld] at Births, Deaths and Marriages. I met with him two or three times to talk about it, and he showed me what they would look like. For me it is something that is really important. It is not important for every adopted person, but for some it is. I ordered my original birth certificate from Births, Deaths and Marriages, and I went in and they put me through the mill. They were yelling out across the room, ‘This person’s adopted. She wants her certificate’. They gave it to me, and it has got ‘Cancelled’ stamped on it. My life was cancelled by the State of Victoria.

The one that New South Wales brought out, I am not really a big fan of the language that they used. I cannot recall it exactly, but the language of ‘adoptive parents’ and ‘birth parents’—anyway, a little bit needs to be worked on with the language, but it is a start. I recognise that we have to start somewhere, but I do not know why seven or eight years after the recommendations were handed down they are not done. We would like it to be a legal document. I have spoken to my dad and I have got DNA to prove he’s my dad, and he does not want to be on my birth certificate. It is like, ‘Well, hang on, do you even get that choice now? Because you’re my father and that’s it’. But it is complicated. Everything is so complicated with adoption. You know, I have got a sister five weeks younger than me, so he had a family when he cheated on his wife. It is a long, slow burn at 50 years to get caught, but he got caught. It is pretty funny. He got caught, and as much as he was shocked to learn that his child was in state care and he was all remorseful and he said, ‘I wish I could have looked after you’, now it is like, ‘Don’t want to know you’. I do not know how it can change. I did not change, but obviously they just thought I would come for my medical information and leave, and I did not. That is not okay.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Suzanne.

Mr TAK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Suzanne. I heard more about what you wish or want to see as an outcome from this inquiry. Are there any other things that you want as a result to this inquiry?

Ms SCHOLZ: Yes. VANISH were a really good thing, and they have good people in that organisation, but I would like to see people stop being so fearful of losing their funding. I would like to just see, you know what, there is money there for adoptees. I would like to see more money for people that are not NGOs and government service providers, so people like myself and my friends could as a small group go and apply, get a submission in and do some stuff. I do not know what it even looks like. I just see that VANISH changed.

When Tony Abbott came in—was it in 2015 or something?—the apologies had just happened, but he just went to a pro-adoption stance. He got people like Deborra-Lee Furness and Hugh Jackman in and just said, ‘We’re going to streamline adoption in Australia’. It was like him being the minister for women; it just made no sense. I just cannot see how the government could say that they wanted to streamline adoption when they had just apologised. Everything that was done for the apology they were trying to have undone, because they just thought, ‘Oh, every child is homeless on a street corner overseas’. And we have found through intercountry adoption too that most children have parents that want them; there are just systems in place that mean they cannot keep them.

So the things I would like to see change are for people to stop having to fight so hard for their funding, because it affects us as service users. We can see that people are scared to go, ‘Okay, well I want to make a change and I want to do a course on people exploring their DNA to find their family’, and the people go, ‘Oh, I don’t know that we can do that because we might lose our funding, because it’s outside of what our guidelines are’.

Adoptees are going out and finding all this information. We are stalking people. People I know wait outside people’s houses to look at their father. That should not be our story. You know, this is a human right. The government took it away, and they are not giving it back. It just does not make any sense.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr TAK: Thank you, Suzanne. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Suzanne, for being here today and sharing your valuable contribution through your submission as well. The Committee appreciates the time and effort taken to prepare this evidence, and we acknowledge that revisiting the past can be painful and confronting. Please be assured that your evidence will help form our understanding to be able to make strong recommendations to the Victorian Government. The next steps will be the Committee will table its report by 1 July next year, and we will make sure to keep you updated of that progress. If there are any other issues that you feel that you would like to raise with us for our attention, please do not hesitate to reach out to anyone of us, in particular Yuki. You have got her details. But again, on behalf of the committee, thank you so much for being here and sharing your experience. We have heard you loud and clear.

Ms SCHOLZ: I hope it is worth something, I really do.

The CHAIR: It certainly is.

Ms SCHOLZ: Because I know that a lot of agencies—I have read some submissions that came in from some other agencies, and I just think, ‘Ugh’. They have spent all their money on people that write great submissions, but they are not spending their money on their service users. It is really frustrating.

The CHAIR: And that is why it is so important for you to be here today to share your experience with us. We truly appreciate it.

Ms SCHOLZ: No problem. It was great.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much.

Ms SCHOLZ: Okay. Thank you, guys.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Thanks, Suzanne.

Witness withdrew.