

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

WITNESSES

Ms Patricia Gall, Mother, and

Ms Elizabeth Edwards, Support Person.

The CHAIR: I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to the elders past and present and the Aboriginal elders of our communities who may be here today.

I declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria. All mobile phones at this point should be turned to silent. I welcome Patricia Gall here today.

Ms GALL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I will also introduce our committee members. To my right is David Southwick, the Member for Caulfield. To my left is Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; and also Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong; and Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda.

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, you may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as possible. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or any handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible unless it is marked confidential and this is requested.

Today we have with us Reiko Hipple, who is here to provide support services, from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support services. She is available to talk to you if you like, whether it is during the hearing if you need a break or even after the meeting concludes. We are more than happy to provide you with Carfi's details or those of other services as well.

The committee is very interested in hearing about your experience of forced adoption and any other issues or services that you have assessed and what outcomes you would like from this inquiry. I now invite you to proceed with a brief opening statement to the committee, which will be followed by some questions from the committee members. Again, Patricia, thanks very, very much for being here today and sharing your experiences with us. Thank you.

Ms GALL: Thank you for having me. My name is Patricia Gall, otherwise known as Patsy. Thank you all for allowing me to speak today. I lost my first two children against my will or informed consent to adoption. I was not allowed to see or embrace them at birth. Unexpected serious bonding problems arose with my third, subsequent child, [name withheld], and I succumbed to heroin dependence, nearly losing my mind and almost my life. His paternal grandparents raised him.

The first pregnancy was the result of rape. The second was the result of repressed trauma and grief. Many mothers who lost a child to adoption had serious bonding and attachment difficulties with subsequent children. The first pregnancy was spent in St Joseph's foundling home, which unbeknownst to me or my parents at the time was an orphanage. It was attached to the Royal Women's Hospital, which was an adoption agency within its own right.

The voluntary agency which carried out both adoptions was the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau. I believe that both church and state are guilty of violating my human and common-law parental rights. This occurred before a consent to adoption order could be signed by me—five days after birth. In fact I was reduced to begging to embrace my babies. This could fall under the *Crimes Act*—a federal offence—taking the baby by improper means. In the 1998 New South Wales inquiry into past adoption practices Dr Geoffrey Rickarby, with 45 years experience in all aspects of adoption, called the way in which our babies were taken 'abduction'. I believe the adoption of my babies left me psychologically disassociated, which I had no insight into at the time, and with post-traumatic stress disorder.

My first two adopted children and my third, [name withheld], were also adversely affected. Separation from me was also traumatising for them. Although I spent a lifetime in and out of counselling and mental health hospitals, not one professional ever detected the source of my anguish as stemming from adoption—and neither did I. This is so for a number of reasons. I rarely spoke about the adoptions. Sometimes I referred to [name withheld], the first child to be taken, but gave no details, because I had closed them down. And I never referred to the second, [name withheld], because that adoption was more traumatic than the first, in part because of a profound shame.

One of the other factors was that counsellors had little or no expertise in adoption for mother and child. They assumed it was consensual. They had no idea, and neither did I. In the mid to late 70s I recovered from heroin dependence, living in a community of women in the country. I later married and had three loving well-nurtured daughters, whom I raised, but I still had serious problems raising them, because of psychological disassociation and post-traumatic stress disorder. However, while they were young I returned to school, completing year 12, gaining entry into university and obtaining a BA in Asian studies and professional writing. In the following years I became conscious of the details of the adoptions and the loss of my third child, [name withheld]. My whole life fell into place. It finally made sense. My three lost children always had a profound need to find me, to know who they were, and indeed they did contact me. All three have had serious drug dependencies but are now on the road to recovery.

To close now, the Commonwealth Government had a legal duty to make states accountable to ensure our legal rights were upheld, as adoption institutions could not have survived without commonwealth funding. Mothers like me have a right to compensation. I have enclosed a recent copy of the latest changes to the 1964 Adoption Act, written by [name withheld], a former director of the Children's Court Clinic. The legislative changes are deeply disturbing.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Patricia, for being here today and sharing your experiences with us. I will move to Christine, who will start with the first questions.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you so much, Patricia, for coming along today and sharing your experience. We can read it, but having you here today doing it in person is fantastic, so thank you so much. It must be really difficult for you, but it is great for us to be able to hear that firsthand. When you talk about compensation, can you elaborate a little bit on that—what you mean by compensation?

Ms GALL: Well, I think as a—I cannot think of the word. I think that monetary compensation is in order here—

Ms COUZENS: Okay, yes. And anything else?

Ms GALL: because some of us were never able to work properly again after.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. And do you think things like counselling and other support services would be useful as well?

Ms GALL: Well, I am currently having counselling.

Ms COUZENS: And is that through a private facility, or is it through one of the agencies?

Ms GALL: It is through CAREinMIND.

Ms COUZENS: Okay, and how are you finding that? Is it useful?

Ms GALL: Not too bad, but we have had to do it by phone because of the COVID virus, and that has been a bit difficult.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. And have you been doing that for a long time, or is it a fairly recent thing?

Ms GALL: Look, I was seeing another counsellor at the Saltwater Clinic in Footscray. I saw her for many, many years. I discontinued with her, and through Saltwater Clinic I was able to find other counsellors, although I still need [name withheld]. But look, like I said in the speech, I went to countless counsellors and I have had lots of counselling.

Ms COUZENS: Okay. And in terms of this inquiry, are there specific things that you would like to see? So aside from the compensation, are there other things that you would like to see come out of this inquiry?

Ms GALL: Well, attached to the speech is a paper written by [name withheld] about the latest legislative changes to the *Adoption Act*, and I am really deeply concerned about the changes.

Ms COUZENS: Okay, thank you.

The CHAIR: If I could just add one question, did you find it easy to access services or was it very difficult?

Ms GALL: Well, it was very difficult because counsellors did not understand adoption. I have done so much research into it, and the professionals that I saw did not have the expertise to take in what I was trying to express to them. But [name withheld] did. She understood the consequences of that kind of adoption.

The CHAIR: Okay. Michaela.

Ms SETTLE: Pat, in your submission you talk about the sixth schedules and the second-schedule birth certificate. Do you have an opinion on whether there should be change around birth certificates and how they are issued in the case of adoption?

Ms GALL: Yes. Well, I think Elizabeth would be best to answer that question. Elizabeth is a mother who lost a child, her first child, to adoption too.

Ms EDWARDS: I would prefer the notion of the choice of a birth certificate. I really feel that there should not be adoption until a child is 18, and they have to make that decision themselves. I think that the child—

Ms GALL: But what is wrong with the birth certificate, the complexities around that?

Ms EDWARDS: I think you are taking away the child's identity. You are creating a problem before you even start. The child is entitled to their own identity. They have no say in the adoption, so they are feeling powerless before they even start. That is why I stress that I think that a formal adoption should not really occur until the child reaches 18 and they make that decision. I think that if they are with loving parents they will make that decision. But with the birth certificate, they have talked about an integrated birth certificate. I think that it has been my limited experience working with both adopted people and mothers that the child should make that decision themselves.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Patricia, thank you for being here today and sharing your story with us.

Ms GALL: You are welcome.

Mr SOUTHWICK: You mentioned that your child made contact with you.

Ms GALL: The three of them did.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Right. And how did they search you out? Was there support in—

Ms GALL: Well, the first two went to the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau and asked for records, and at that stage they were legally entitled to have their records. But I was messed around by them as well, which is too complicated to go into. I am sorry, what—

Mr SOUTHWICK: No, that is okay. Just in terms of how they sought you out.

Ms GALL: The first two contacted me through the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau. The third child that was raised by his paternal grandparents just rang me up one night. I do not know how he found my number, because my number is a silent number. He was in a relationship at the time, and I think she encouraged him a lot to find me. Yes, but that reunion did not really work very well. He is very angry for being abandoned. They all had abandonment issues.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Yes. Do you think in terms of that there needs to be more support around the unification or the ability to provide the support when the child wants to search out the mum or vice versa?

Ms GALL: Yes, I believe that they should have the choice. Yes.

Mr SOUTHWICK: And you mentioned about the *Adoption Act* that you have attached a copy here and that you have got issues with the changes to the *Adoption Act*.

Ms GALL: Look, I am not au fait with it now. I was working with an organisation that was trying to do something about the recent changes to the Act—the *Adoption Act*.

Ms EDWARDS: Can I say something?

Mr SOUTHWICK: Yes, sure.

Ms EDWARDS: Sorry to interrupt, but I think our issue here is that the secretary of the department can now make a decision. She can dispense with the need for parental consent. Sorry, I am a bit shaky today.

The CHAIR: No, you are fine.

Ms EDWARDS: Yes, I have got another issue.

The CHAIR: That is fine.

Ms EDWARDS: But that is our big issue with that, and it is not the *Adoption Act*, but adoption comes into this Act. It is the changes to the *Children, Youth and Families Act*. So, you know, I think parents are the only ones who should make a consent, not the secretary of the department. Apart from that there are other issues too where they become the police, the judge and the executor.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Can I ask just one last question if I may? In terms of you and Elizabeth, how did you search out one another? Did you come together through the commonalities of the adoption—

Ms GALL: Look, I cannot recall now. I became conscious of the adoptions, not so much the loss of my third child, [name withheld], because I was watching *Lateline* one night and there was a mother talking about her adoption. Her adoption had similarities with mine, and just her expressing that started the process of me becoming conscious.

Ms EDWARDS: And I was the organiser of a support group for mothers. I began that group with Christine Campbell 20 years ago, and Patsy contacted me from there.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Does that group are still meet?

Ms EDWARDS: No. They really waned after the apology. We had fought for 20-odd years and they felt, ‘Well, that’s all we’re going to get’, you know.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Thank you, both of you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Patricia, for being here today.

Ms GALL: You are welcome.

The CHAIR: And Elizabeth, I know you will be presenting in the future as well, but thank you for being here today. Your valuable contribution today in your submission, the Committee will clearly take that into consideration when we prepare our report back to the Victorian Government, a report that will have strong recommendations. I know today and at times it is very difficult to revisit the past and it can be very painful and confronting, so I do want to again thank you. We truly do appreciate you for sharing your experience with us today.

The Committee will table the report next year on 1 July, and we will make sure to keep you updated on progress. And most importantly if you feel after this hearing that you would like to provide a further submission or something comes to mind, please feel free to reach any one of us, particularly Yuki. You have got her details, I am sure. But I do take this opportunity to again wish you all the very best and thank you for being here today. We are going to really look forward to a very strong report next year.

Ms GALL: Good. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.