

The role of the Commonwealth Government in relation to Adoption in Australia

Submission to Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee Inquiry into the Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices

This submission briefly addresses the terms of reference of this inquiry.

- (a) the role, if any, of the Commonwealth Government, its policies and practices in contributing to forced adoptions; and
- (b) the potential role of the Commonwealth in developing a national framework to assist states and territories to address the consequences for the mothers, their families and children who were subject to forced adoption policies.

Background

I gave birth to a child in 1976. I was not married and I relinquished my child for adoption. This was in the peak period for adoption of newborn babies in Australia. The Commonwealth had introduced income support for single mothers in 1973, offering some financial support for women who were not married and who had children. However, by 1976, the values and attitudes of the community and key institutions had not yet changed. There was still some stigma attached to single motherhood and there was a prevailing attitude that children ought to have two parents in order to have a good life.

Under the Australian Constitution, state and territory governments were largely responsible for the welfare of children. Queensland government institutions through legislation, policies and practices discriminated against single mothers and their children. The following examples provide evidence for this discrimination:

- My child's birth was registered using a form that was headed "Birth/Death of an Illegitimate Child". Presumably one or the other was to be crossed out. The message was clear that birth or death were all the same for an "illegitimate" child.
- At the birth of my child the obstetrician said "BFA" and my child was taken quickly from the room. "BFA", I later realised, stood for Baby For Adoption. This practice offered no opportunity for any bonding with my child.
- I was taken to the antenatal ward immediately after the birth and was not offered any opportunity to see my child. I had to approach the hospital social workers to advocate on my behalf so that I could see my child.
- There was no positive counselling towards caring for my own child. All messages were that I would be selfish to keep my child when there were heartbroken couples who would love my child. The most powerful message was that My child deserved two parents.
- Very soon after the birth I realised that I had given my child up for a myth. It was too late as she was adopted very soon after her birth.
- A later Right to Information search has revealed that Social Workers who were meant to assist me knew nothing of my anguish and agonising decision making.

I lived in a hostel for unmarried mothers and was in company with many young women who would have been competent parents. Some of the young mothers had lived in other hostels where they were treated with brutality and were required to work long hours at heavy manual jobs.

Back home in my community there was no opportunity to grieve, no counselling and no sympathy. The attitude was that it was all in the past. During the first year of my child's life, I seriously contemplated suicide. The reason I made the decision to live was the thought that I might one day see my daughter.

Making a decision and giving away my daughter has had a profound effect on my life. The grief is deep and underpins my life in many ways.

Legislative changes in Queensland enabled the reconnection with my child when she was eighteen. Although we have been in touch for most of the time since, it is obvious that the adoption has been a significant factor in her experience of and attitude to the world.

My other children are also affected by the adoption. Despite my openness and willingness to discuss with them any of their concerns, I am not sure that they will ever really be able to understand what happened and I wonder what they really think of the idea that their own mother could have parted from their sister.

My professional life has led me to understand the importance of attachment and the many ways in which attachment was actively avoided in the hospital system at the time I had my child. Much of the bonding and relationship between babies and their mothers occurs in those early interactions that simply were not allowed to happen in my hospital at the time of my child's birth. Even the hospital social workers demonstrated a total ignorance of attachment, grief and loss.

The adoption of my child was forced through legislation, policies and practices, underpinned by the attitudes and values of the time. These were leftover from the long period preceding the introduction of the Single Mothers Pension.

Throughout the whole experience of birth, adoption, grief and loss, the fathers have remained invisible, so any further discussion should be very clear that it is the mother who is most affected.

The Role of the Commonwealth

The establishment of income support for single mothers was a most welcome improvement and probably the most significant factor. Unless there is some serious impediment, it is important that children are raised by their own people. Attachment and bonding is vitally significant in the early stages of a child's life, the time when an adopted child was often abandoned to the rushed ministrations of a busy hospital nurse and later a temporary foster carer. The fact that the Commonwealth took so long to establish income support means that the Commonwealth must take some responsibility for the above-named legislation, policies and practices of the states.

My child and I should have equally been citizens of the Commonwealth and yet my child was able to be named as "illegitimate" by the state, rendering her a non-citizen. The Commonwealth did not intervene at that time to change this situation.

The Commonwealth provided funding to my state to provide health services and therefore has some indirect responsibility for the institutional neglect of the children of mothers who were not married.

The Potential Role of the Commonwealth to Develop a Framework to Address the Consequences of Forced Adoption Practices

The Commonwealth has developed a number of very important National Frameworks in

recent times, for example the Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. These Frameworks provide an opportunity for all levels of government and community to work together through shared understanding. The development of a framework to address the consequences of past adoption practices would be most welcome and would provide an opportunity to identify the sort of support required for those most affected.

In addition, I believe that an apology from the Commonwealth would have a profound and positive effect on the lives of all concerned. For the mothers who were treated with contempt and in many cases, outright cruelty, I think there would be some solace in an acknowledgement that forcing apart mothers and their children was wrong and damaging.