Submission on the Commonwealth Contribution to
Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices

to the
Senate Community Affairs References Committee
Dear Committee members,
You have received a significant number of submissions describing people's experiences and how these have affected them. I believe that these submissions will clearly demonstrate that there are a significant number of people in Australia needing a range of assistance some of which the Commonwealth can provide. In this submission I would like to comment on the second aspect of the inquiry. A note however about terminology used in my submission: parent, mother or sibling refers to those with a biological relationship and in all cases I have prefaced the relevant relationship with "adoptive" for those who adopted a child. This is in deference to those that feel some of the other more commonly used terms such as birth mother are derogatory. However in no way is this terminology intended to offend adoptive parents.
My viewpoint is as an adoptee, born at the (...) Hospital in 1957 in New South Wales. My mother was advised that I had died shortly after birth and regardless of whether this was intentional or a mistake my mother was denied the possibility of revoking her consent (if this indeed was obtained in a legal manner unlike so many of the consents in that period) so that my adoption can be classified as a forced adoption. All consents were conditional on the parents who had signed the consent. not having revoked that consent within the relevant period. Accordingly any act or advice to the consent giver that prevented them being able to revoke the consent could invalidate the consent. .
The Commonwealth does have an important potential role 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. This is particularly necessary as there is no indication that the States, with the possible exception of Western Australia intend to deal with some of the unresolved issues without some strong guidance from the Commonwealth. They have had a couple of decades to do so but despite a number of inquiries, all of which condemned the practices uncovered and some improvements in providing identifying information they appear to hope that the problem will disappear as those involved progressively die.
There are a number of aspects that I will to comment on:
The need for information about the identity of mothers, fathers, siblings and adoptees separated by adoption.
The need to address some of the misconceptions that many of the individuals involved have about the likely results of finding relatives separated by adoption.
The need for support and counselling for those involved including adoptive parents.
The need for information about the identity of mothers, fathers, siblings and adoptees separated by adoption

At present the access to information about the identity of adoptees, their parents siblings and other relatives varies according to in which State the adoption was carried out. For example access to the identity of adoptees is restricted in Victoria but permitted in other

States. One can only wonder what characteristics are encountered in Victorians that renders them less responsible than other Australians so that this restriction to limit access by parents to adoptees identities is necessary.
The Commonwealth is in a position to negotiate with the States to agree to minimum access to information about the identity of those involved. Victoria needs to be brought into line with the more progressive States, at least in this respect.

Unfortunately delays in obtaining information are frequently significant. For example it took nearly 8 months for me to obtain my social and medical information from the Adoption Information Unit in New South Wales last year. While some of the record analysis involved can be complex the main reason for the delays appears to be that there is a backlog of requests. In other words insufficient staff are currently employed on these activities, presumably because the work is not deemed to be of sufficient importance to warrant more staff. I would however hasten to note that some of the staff engaged in this work are of high calibre and very helpful. An agreement by the States to supply the information within the same time frame as a normal FOI request would force the States to resource these areas reasonably. The Commonwealth has a role in seeking such an undertaking from the States.

Much of the information relating to adoptions is held in print form and some is still held by non government agencies including some of the religious and charitable organisations that were involved in running unmarried mothers homes and the associated hospitals. Some of this information is either unavailable, missing or destroyed. In my case the records created by the Sydney Work Rescue Society(now Communicare) at both their Bethesda Unmarried Mother's Home and at the (...) cannot be located though similar records for other adoptees and mothers at these institutions are held by the Adoption Information Unit and the Royal Womens Hospital. It is likely that these records still exist but their whereabouts is uncertain. Where such inaccessible records still exist their location, preservation, indexing and preferably digitisation is necessary. The Commonwealth could encourage this activity with some funding.

Both the Commonwealth and the States have access to a very large amount of identifying information about Australians. At present once we are given the name of our parent, sibling or child it is up to us to use publicly available information to track down those people or their families. This search can either be quite fast if the names are distinctive or involve many years of frustrating and in many cases fruitless searching often at significant cost. Once you are given a relatives name recourse to the online electoral roll will provide the addresses of each person in Australia with that name necessitating contacting each to find if they are the person sought. Usually you also have the date of birth. A number of Commonwealth and State databases include both names and dates of birth so that a mediated service provided either by the Commonwealth or States would be able to identify if the person is still alive and their contact details Provisions to protect the identity of people not wanting to be contacted could be easily built into such a system and would in all probability provide greater protection for not wanting any contact at that time.

The need to address some of the misconceptions that many of the individuals involved have about the likely results of finding relatives separated by adoption

While we can never recover entirely the lost relationships with our closest family reunion with them may help in dealing with some of the identity issues felt by most adoptees and ameliorate the grief, guilt and/or anger that our parents felt and usually continue to feel as a result of our adoption. Reunion and a positive relationship is what most adoptees and parents are seeking.

However there are a number of misconceptions that affect the willingness of adoptees, their parents and relatives in contacting each other. If these misconceptions can be adequately dealt with in the public arena this may encourage a larger number of adoptees and their relatives to initiate searches or to be willing to allow some initial contact. This inquiry if well covered by the media may be useful in correcting the viewpoint of some of these people.

In general adoptees were told that their parents (usually mother) gave them up sometimes so that they could have a better life, other times because their mother was incapable of being a satisfactory parent. Many adoptees feel to some extent that they were rejected by their mother and sometimes their father. Many display significant anger when contacted by the person they feel rejected or discarded them. In most cases this is not the real situation. They are not told that their mother was often given little choice but to adopt her child out, may have not been properly advised of the likely affects on herself or the child, was not given information about alternatives to adoption including the pension that was available, that she has probably thought about them regularly ever since and most likely cried on each of their birthdays. Nor have they been told that most birth parents welcome contact with their children (around 90% in most studies). It is unusual for the parent to not want to have some contact with their child.

There is also a misconception that adoptees brought up in happy homes do not have issues that need to be resolved. Research shows that most do have some issues in relation to their identity. While I do not have the statistics in relation to how many adoptees have initiated a search through official channels I can offer the following: In 2010 the Adoption Information Unit uncovered 36 files for the Sydney Rescue Work Society from the 1950s. Of these 36 cases 12 of the adoptees had previously requested information- a third. Considering that many children were not told they were adopted so are unlikely to search, some will not have survived and some have not decided to search yet (many wait for their adoptive parents to die before searching) such a figure indicates a very significant number of adoptees are sufficiently interested to pay the search fees and tackle the often challenging issues that arise.

Adoptive parents usually are apprehensive when their children decide to contact their parents and many adoptees decline to contact their parents as they fear that this will affect the relationship with their adoptive parents. Yet studies indicate that rarely is the relationship between an adoptee and their adoptive parent damaged by this contact.

Usually the relationship between them in fact improves as the adoptee gains a greater appreciation of the contribution of their adoptive parents, is happier in that they have dealt with some of their issues of identity and the fears that the adoptive parents had that they would lose their child have been laid to rest. Unfortunately there are some adoptees who have had poor adoptive parents or poor relationships with them and meeting their parents may be the final straw and initiate a split. In most cases this would have happened anyway and may indeed be a positive outcome in the longer term. Adoptive parents that have been good parents rarely need to fear reunion of their children and the child's parents. However they may find some difficult issues that they themselves will need to confront again in the process and if they truly care for their children (in most cases now adults) and their wellbeing will be supportive of any searching and reunion.

Parents (usually mothers) in general are in the worst situation. Most desperately want some contact with their children, fear rejection if they try to contact their children, fear the issues that inevitably will be brought up by reliving events most have tried to forget and fear the reactions of current partners and their other children. Most adoptees will be receptive to at least some contact at some stage in their life (maybe not initially) as they will be curious about their origins as indicated by the figures quoted above. Studies in general show that most siblings will welcome contact and frequently successful long term relationships of varying degrees of intensity develop. For parents breaking the secrecy that has so long been seen as necessary will allow them to start to grieve for their losses, start dealing with some of the issues that beset them and in the longer term is likely to contribute to their wellbeing.

At some stage when the issues relating to forced adoption have had a substantial amount of public scrutiny, acknowledgement through an apology will be a very useful as an additional step. Until the public understands what went on and what needs to be apologised for an apology of any sort has little meaning.. In the meantime publicity relating to the inquiry and the outcomes may help get some of the issues into the public's view. Dissemination of the findings of the inquiry is crucial to how successful it will be in this respect.

The Commonwealth may assist in the process of providing information about the issues and dealing with some of the misconceptions still held in society by long term funding of studies on the effect of adoption in Australia. The current study being undertaken by Monash University and ACU is a good example. Such studies inevitably result in reports and papers the results of which in due course are disseminated through the media and may help to deal with some of the misconceptions held. Funding such programs is the Commonwealths responsibility.

The need for support and counselling fot those involved including adoptive parents

Adoptions relate to two of the most important aspects of life, conception and birth so it is hardly surprising that the emotions and reactions brought up by adoption are strong and often somewhat volatile. At various stages those involved with closed adoptions often need support, particularly from people who understand what they are going through, and

many need counselling at some point.

Mothers in particular have been diagnosed with Post Trauma Stress Disorder as most have lived a lifetime of secrecy not being able to grieve or have their loss acknowledged by those around them. As numbers of reunions are not successful whether because the person searched for has died/cannot be located or because the person does not want any contact the effect on the person searching can be very significant and is likely to continue for the rest of their life. The need for counselling and support are unfortunately often long term.

As with many other mental health issues there is fair evidence to indicate that many of those in need are not receiving the attention required

At present there is very little available in the way of support and counselling even in major cities. For example in Sydney there is one very small (less than 10 people) self help support group, sponsored by the Parramatta and Holyroyd Council. In addition, Origins NSW and the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) run by the Benevolent Society provide some services and support. The last of these organisations receives funding from the New South Wales Government and runs courses, seminars and provides some counselling. I have found all three of the organisations to be of help at different times.

One concern is that the frequency of courses run by PARC is insufficient. For example in the general Adoptions Connections meetings that they run, suitable for those starting the processes of reunion, are rather infrequent. I have had to wait almost a year to attend one of these. That there is only one small regular self help support group in Sydney is astounding considering the number of people going through the issues associated with adoption.

The establishment of independent organisations, with no history of involvement in adoptions, in addition to those existing organisations should be considered. While some of the non government organisations that were intimately involved in carrying out the forced adoptions seek to continue to work in the area and may be providing useful support to some of those affected by their past activity not all adoptees or parents are able to trust their viewpoint and accept any help offered because of the organisations past involvement. For example at least one organisation in the past has employed some of the same social workers who were involved in accepting consents from mothers to give up children for adoption.

Most of those affected by adoption have found the support of others involved most helpful and for many may obviate the need for long term formal counselling. Unfortunately many of the people seriously affected by adoption issues have indicated that much of the counselling provided to them in the past has not been helpful indicating a need to train professionals with relevant understanding of the issues involved.

Funding for the self help organisations and support groups should be considered as well

as contribution to the funding of new independent counselling and support organisations in cooperation with the States.

The provision of support for long term and regular counselling through Medicare can readily and directly be provided by the Commonwealth.

Training in the issues involved in forced adoption to expand the pool of counsellors available in the community with relevant understanding is necessary and the Commonwealth has a role in funding these programs at tertiary institutions..

Many of those needing support and counselling are isolated whether by distance or their situation. Consider for example the mother living in a country town with no local support organisation, unable to talk to anyone local due to the archaic attitudes of family and others in the local area. Provision of a phone support/ counselling service specifically for adoption issues should be considered and the usage over a period of a couple of years would indicate if such a separate service is warranted.