To: Department of the Senate
P.O. Box 6100
Parliament House Canberra, ACT 2600.

From: Lesley Kay Howarth (also known as Kate)

April 15, 2011.

Dear Senators,
Re: Commonwealth of Australia Inquiry into former forced adoption policies and practices.

I Lesley Kay Howarth, also known as Kate Howarth, am a citizen of the Commonwealth of Australia resident in New South Wales. As a citizen of Australia I have an inalienable right to protection under the Australian Constitution and the Common Law of this country from those who inflict unlawful and harmful actions that threaten my right to life, liberty and justice.

In 1965, I was an unmarried, pregnant, 15 year old girl and taken to St. Margaret's Home for unmarried mothers in Darlinghurst Sydney. At the time of admission I was presented with a document to give consent to adopt my child and told to sign it. I refused to sign. At no time before this document was presented was I advised of any alternative to adoption. Nor was I advised of the financial, and other material support, which I now know was available at that time, and which the laws of the day dictated was my entitlement to know, prior to any document for adoption being prepared.

For the next four months I was put to work in the hospital kitchen and laundry, for six and a half days a week, working an eight hour split shift. There was no payment for the work I did; it was said to cover my 'keep' while I was confined and awaiting the birth of my child. The accommodation provided by the hospital was overcrowded and squalid. The food supplied was inadequate for the needs of a pregnant girl and resulted in malnutrition that resulted in considerable hair loss and dental problems due to a lack of calcium in the diet.
The treatment I was subjected to while the hospital administrator (Sister) attempted to get my consent for adoption was tantamount to torture and included threats, intimidation and sleep deprivation.
On December 26th 1965, I was discharged from the hospital because I refused to sign the consent for adoption. I was 15 years old, eight months pregnant, homeless, and had less than $20.00 in my possession. An uncle who could not offer me accommodation took me to another relative where I stayed until my labour commenced on January 29, 1966. I was taken back to St. Margaret's for the birth of my son.

The labour and birth of my son was brutal. I was left to deal with the pain as best I could for many hours before I was finally given some pain relief. At one time, when the pain

was so intense I called for help, I was told to ‘shut up’, During the labour I was again visited by the hospital administrator who presented the adoption papers and became menacing and threatening when I still refused to sign them. After the birth I required twenty eight stitches to deal with the lacerations.

After giving birth to my son I had to demand to be able to see him. He was finally brought to me and shortly thereafter I was drugged with a heavy dose Sodium Phenobarbital, a mind altering barbiturate. When I awoke three days later I my breasts were so tightly bound I had trouble breathing. This procedure was done to suppress my milk production and I feared that my son had already been taken. My hysteria and distress was observed by a married woman on the ward who came to my aid. Consequently, my son was finally brought to me. He had lost a noticeable amount of body weight from the baby presented to me in the labour ward. So much so, I hardly recognised him. He was screaming and clearly in great distress. The hospital administrator pulled the bindings from my breasts and demanded that I ‘feed him.’ As my milk had been suppressed, and nipples not prepared for breast feeding, the exercise was extremely painful and distressful for me and my newborn. My baby was pulled from arms screaming and taken away. I was told I was ‘a useless mother, who can’t even feed the child.’

A few hours later the hospital administrator returned and again applied threats and intimidation to get my consent to adopt my son. I refused.

Attempts to get my baby to take the breast were repeated with the same result. This was clearly torture for both me and my baby, with the intention to weaken my resolve. Again a patient on the ward stepped in told the nurse ‘what you are doing to this young girl and her baby is a disgrace’. The nurse in question left the ward and returned with a bottle of milk for me to feed my starving baby.

When all attempts to get my signature for adoption failed the hospital administrator told me that as I was a homeless girl my baby would be taken away by the Child Welfare Department and placed into an institution if I didn’t agree to adopt him. Only hours before I was due to be discharged, and see my son taken away, an aunt heard of my plight and came to our rescue.

On or around February 10, 1966 I was discharged from St. Margaret’s hospital in a severe heatwave. My son’s body weight was 3.66 kilograms. He had not regained his birth weight in almost 14 days. I was not given any instructions for post natal care of myself or my baby. We were not given any formula, or even water, to get the babe across town in what was 42 degree heat. My baby almost died of heat exhaustion that day.

When my medical records were accessed over forty years later the charts show that my baby weighed 3.88 kilograms at birth and dropped alarmingly over the next three days to 3.66 kilograms. 2.2 ounces of body weight for a newborn weighing 3.88 kilograms was a significant and noticeable loss.

The records show that my son was not given any feeds other than 'boiled water' for two days following his birth. On the third day he was given three feeds in the 24 hour period and a total of three ounces of milk per day. This continued for the next 10 days with an increase in the volume to a maximum 10 ounces of milk per day. This was barely enough sustenance to sustain him. As a result he failed to thrive and regain his birth weight. In essence my newborn baby was being tortured, by means of starvation, to keep him fractious and inconsolable. His pulse rate and body temperature was extremely erratic, due to the long periods of distress, denial of adequate food and bonding with his mother. He was circumcised without my consent.
The medical records show that I received ante natal care, which was a total fabrication. I was discharged from the hospital on December 26, 1965 and did not return until January 29, 1966 and yet a consultation for me for ante natal care is dated January 17, 1966 when I was living at Cabramatta, some distance from the hospital.

Post delivery the records show that my temperature and pulse rate reached dangerously high levels, which was most likely the result of the cruel and inhumane treatment I had to endure following a traumatic birthing process and well as the constant intimidation and threats from the hospital administrator and having to witness the profound distress of my baby.

In sworn evidence at the Parliamentary Inquiry into Adoption Practices in NSW that ran from 1998 – 2000, Sister Antoinette Baldwin, the spokesperson for St. Margaret's Hospital claimed that when a young girl expressed a desire to keep the child she was treated no differently to any other mother giving birth at the hospital. She claimed that it was 'policy' to offer assistance with accommodation at the hospital for an unmarried girl and her baby, for up to one year, while the mother went out to work. And that during this time the hospital provided clothes, equipment and even childminding for the baby. At no time was I advised of this policy. Nor was I advised of the financial, and other material support that was available to all single mothers at that time, which was paid under the same entitlements as the Widows Pension. Not to do so while attempting to get my consent for adoption was in clear violation of the Child Adoption Act 1939. To have withheld this information from me was not only a crime it resulted in me eventually having to leave my child in the care of others, as I had no means of support. When I returned to claim my son, access was denied. It would be another 14 years before we could be reunited.
The distress, depression and mental anguish this caused almost drove me to take my life on more than one occasion. It was not until I underwent extensive therapy that I even began to cope and lead a relatively normal life. The pain and suffering of this time is revisited on me and my son today.
No one can give me back the 14 years I was separated from my son and him from his mother. Nor can they erase from his memory, or mine, the shocking birth trauma, emotional and physical cruelty to have been deprived of food and comfort at the hands of the hospital administrators of St. Margaret's Hospital.

Laws of man, and nature, were breached before, during and after the birth of my son. The NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Adoption Practices 1950-1998 concluded that agencies

operating at the time acted ‘unethically and in some cases illegally,’ no one has been held to account for these crimes.
Although I did not lose my son at birth, the failure of those responsible for my care to advise me of the support I could have accessed to help me raise my son on my own makes them accountable for my loss.
As a former Ward of the State I hold the Department of Child Welfare accountable for not protecting me and my son from the unlawful practices of St. Margaret’s Hospital, by ensuing that they complied with the legislation that was in place to protect me and my son from exploitation, cruel and inhumane treatment. I hold the Department of Labour and Industry responsible for not ensuring that I was protected from exploitation by St. Margaret’s Hospital administrators with regard to workers rights and work safety practices, and especially with regard to child labour laws, four months unpaid wages and employee entitlements.
I hold the NSW Government responsible for not implementing the recommendations in the Releasing the Past Report at the conclusion of the NSW Parliamentary Practices into adoption practices 1950 -1998.
I am hoping that this inquiry will assist the process to bring to accountability those responsible for the heinous and unlawful practices surrounding forced adoptions that shattered to lives of tens of thousands of young women and the children they had taken by unlawful means.

Attached are my medical records to verify claims made herein.

Yours sincerely,

Kate Howarth.