COMMONWEALTH CONTRIBUTION TO FORMER FORCED ADOPTION POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Background

My story began with my birth at the former Crown Street Women's Hospital, Sydney on 19 November 1949.

However, the real journey of learning of my adoption for the first time, began in February 1990, some 40 years after my birth. Two weeks after my then husband left our marriage, he informed me that he had known for the 12 years of our marriage that I am adopted. This news was provided to him by my adoptive father a few days prior to our marriage. My father did not instruct his future son in law to keep this news a secret.

However this is what in fact occurred and the family secret continued until our separation. This event precipitated a full blown life and identity crisis for me. I had not wanted my marriage to end and here I was faced with the demise of my marriage, my family and then my identity.

By the time I was told of my adoption, my adoptive parents had died. After being told the adoption news, I quickly contacted my cousins and remaining family members and family friends, all of whom were elderly. All knew of my adoption and had absorbed the information and myself into the family and got on with their lives in those 40 years. This was no comfort to me as on hearing one after the other that all knew of my situation, I felt betrayed each time I spoke with a family member.

My life quickly spiralled out of control. I went from being a capable wife, mother and employee to being a person who could barely get out of bed each morning to face another day of gut churning anxiety and terror at the disintegration of my life and identity. As well as the disbelief, anger, grief and loss I was experiencing regarding the ending of my marriage, I was doubly experiencing these emotions regarding the late revelation of my adoption. I also had to manage my young sons' grief and loss also at the demise of their family and departure of their father.

I became obsessed with finding my birth mother. My yearning to do so came from a very young and wounded place within me to which I has regressed. I believed that if only I could find my mother , all would be well in my life and normality restored. I wanted to be nurtured and taken care of . In reality, I was looking to be rescued – a feckless fantasy that no one could achieve except myself.

I embarked on a random search, taking off in any direction I thought there was a lead of some sort. In reality, the NSW adoption laws were still some 11 months away from being changed in line with public pressure and progress that adoptees should have access to their family of origin, history and identifying generational stories.

The only information I had been provided about my birth mother was that she was French, possibly Jewish and possibly a refugee. At the time I commenced my search, NSW adoptees were only able to access non identifying information about their birth relatives. I had almost no information, not even a name, date of birth ....until I applied for and was provided with her non identifying information from Department of Youth and Community Services, as it then was in 1990 in NSW.

When that information did arrive, it was scarce and the city where she was born in France was deleted! The information provided some small detail of my birth and the fact that I was taken to “nursery” – an indication that I had either a low birth weight or that the authorities had already marked me for adoption.

In April 1990 after the introduction of changes in the NSW Adoption Act, I applied for and received a copy of my original birth certificate. There was no veto on contact so this opened the way for me to begin my search in earnest for my birth mother.

My search was long, emoitionally draining ,arduous, expensive and became a national and international project. My leads were consistently frustrated through being unable to find her. This was due to my birth mother having changed her first two names and having married, which I was prepared for.

After two and a half years of an emotional roller coaster ride of searching, having my hopes raised and then dashed, my intuition led me to contact the British Child Migrant Trust (BCMT) who had just opened an office in Melbourne. This lead evolved from an article in the Sydney Morning Herald one July 1992 weekend. I instinctively and intuitive knew that I was about to find her, though logic defied the odds of this happening.

I phoned the BCMT in Melbourne and spoke to a very helpful researcher who had come to Australia to open the new office. When I told him my story, he said he would fax British Births Deaths and Marriages office for me as he felt her first two names were very English, despite a French surname. A week later, he called back to say he believed he was holding my mother's Birth Certificate in his hands. This was a mystery that defied the search thus far, as my birth certificate had shown Marseille, France as her birthplace.

A few evenings later, the ABC documentary *"The Leaving of Liverpool"* was shown on television. The following day, my birth mother and her husband visited the offices of BCMT in Melbourne to ask them to obtain a birth certificate for her as she had never had one! The researcher who had assisted me met her in reception and sensed immediately she was my mother. The staff interviewed her over 2 days and on the last day, asked her about her early years in Australia. My mother broke down and revealed she had a baby daughter taken from her when she was 21 years of age at Crown Street Women's Hospital in Sydney.

The staff then informed her that her daughter , now aged 42, had approached them to assist in finding her. My mother said she had been praying for this miracle for all those 42 years.!

This is a short synopsis of my journey to find my mother and birth family members. After 42 years of being an only child in my adoptive family, I found I have a half sister and half brother , nieces and nephews.

My reunion was mediated by the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) in Sydney. This is a peak organisation providing services via the Benevolent

Society for those impacted by adoption. I have had a 20 year connection with PARC and have been involved as a committee member on their Sydney Network and Support group which provided monthly meetings and information to support adoptees, adoptive and birth parents. I have done media interviews for PARC, contributed articles to their various journals and newsletters and contributed to *"Why Wasn't I Told?"* a published research document of contributions by those affected by the late telling of their adoption.

I have also conducted workshops at PARC for those impacted by the late revelation of their adoption. In 1999, I gave evidence at the NSW Parliamentary Social Justice Committee enquiry into past adoption practices in NSW.

I have also undertaken additional training resulting from my adoption experience and become a psychotherapist, specialising in adults and their adoption experiences.

I am also the author of *"Surviving Secrets"* – my memoir of the late telling of my adoption, my search and my intention that my journey and story will assist and empower others involved a similar search and situation .

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF FORCED ADOPTION POLICIES AND PRACTICES

The following is a summary of information I learned of my mother's experience following our reunion. Sadly, my mother died in 1999, just 7 years after our reunion. However I will always be grateful that we were able to meet, learn about each other and share our experiences in those 7 years. In many ways, I feel I need to advocate for her grief and loss issues, both at having her baby removed from her and the inhumane way she and countless other young women were treated by the medical profession at Crown Street Women's Hospital.

- My mother indicated to hospital staff during her pregnancy and confinement, her desire to keep and raise me
- During labour, nursing and medical staff treated my mother with disdain and denigration due to her unmarried status
- No pain relief was offered to her during delivery

- She was continually badgered by the Senior Social Worker, Mrs (...) , at the hospital that she could not provide an appropriate upbringing for me
- A Doctor within the hospital offered to adopt me, with which my mother disagreed
- The Doctor then suggested that my mother and I go to reside with the Doctor and his wife where my mother would be employed as their housekeeper. My mother declined this arrangement
- My mother continued to assert her desire to leave the hospital with me and raise me herself
- Eventually Mrs (...) , the Senior Social Worker, tired of my mother's determination to keep me and informed my mother that she knew of a couple who wished to adopt a baby and she had chosen me for this couple.
- My heartbroken mother then left the hospital without me
- My mother stated at no time did she sign any consent papers to an adoption or for fostering
- A year after my adoption, my mother married (not my birthfather) . She informed her husband about me and they travelled from Wagga Wagga back to Crown Street Women's Hospital to see if I could be returned to them
- They were informed that I had been adopted and to get on with their lives and create their own family

My Research

- I have been unable to trace my birth father despite my mother providing me with details of his names
- Resulting from the NSW Parliamentary Enquiry in 1999, I learned that adoptees could apply for their medical records relating to their birth from NSW Health
- This I did and received under Freedom of Information mine and my mother's medical and birthing records
- Contained in these documents was a falsified discharge summary stating "mother and baby discharged together – baby weaned from breast to formula"

- This begs the question as to why a baby would be weaned from the breast and placed on formula, if it was being discharged with it's mother?
- At no time was I discharged from hospital with my mother
- The Senior Social Worker, Mrs (...) was a close personal friend of my adoptive family. She ultimately became one of my god mothers
- Mine was a private adoption, engineered by staff at Crown Street Women's Hospital. My adoptive parents were in their early 40's at the time of my adoption and probably deemed too old by authorities to adopt through those channels.
- In my search for my birth mother, there were almost non existent past records relating to myself and my adoption
- Any information that I obtained came from the Crown Street Hospital "birth book" as it was known – a record of birth's that occurred
- Non identifying Information provided to me from Department of Youth and Community Services in 1999 was scarce and incomplete
- In my view, the Senior Social Worker and the Doctor who offered my mother adoption of me to he and his wife, were complicit in unethical practices under cover of the hospital regime
- My adoption was one of forced removal from a mother who intended keeping me. True, in late 1949 when I was born, there were not the financial supports to assist a young, unmarried mother as there is today. However my mother had the intention and determination to make the situation work and she was denied her true mothering rights.

I firmly believe that these issues need to be addressed and outcomes arrived at that would assist some healing of what has occurred. For those of us removed from our families of origin, there can be no reclaiming the lost years caused by such separations.

However I believe that a public acknowledgement that such unethical practices are a violation of people's human rights, would go some way to assisting in people's healing.

Margaret Watson