19th January, 2012

Submission for consideration in regard to:

Australian Senate Inquiry into Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices

Terms of Reference:

(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.

I was born to a young single mother in 1969. She was strongly encouraged by the social workers and hospital staff to give me up for adoption, never given the right to see me or hold me, and was probably not made aware of her rights to support under the Child Welfare Act of 1939:

P A R T V I.

A L L O W A N C E S IN R E S P E C T OF D E S T I T U T E C H I L D R E N AND

Y O U N G P E R S O N S L I V I N G W I T H P A R E N T S.

2 7. (1) T h e M i n i s t e r, o u t of m o n e y s p r o v d e d by

P a r l i a m e n t, m a y in s u c h c i r c u m s t a n c e s a n d s u b j e c t to

s u c h c o n d i t i o n s as m a y be p r e s c r b e d g r a n t an a l l o w a n c e

f o r t h e s u p p o r t of a d e s t i t u t e c h i l d or y o u n g p e r s o n t o—

(a) t h e m o t h e r w h e n s u c h c h i l d or y o u n g p e r s o n is

l v i n g w i t h h e r a n d w h e n s u c h m o t h e r is—

(i) a w d o w, or

(i i) a d e s e r t e d w i f e, or

(i i i) a w i f e w h o s e h u s b a n d i s—

(a) incapacitated from following his

usual or any occupation, or

(b) in gaol, or

(c) an old-age pensioner, or

(iv) a single woman, or

(v) a woman living apart from her husband—

(a) under any decree of judicial

separation, or

(b) under any deed of separation, or

(c) where a decree nisi in divorce has

been made, or

(vi) a woman whose marriage has been dis-

solved by a decree absolute in divorce, or

(vii) a woman whose marriage is void or has

been annulled by any decree or order of

the Supreme Court in its matrimonial

causes jurisdiction;

from

http://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/sessionalview/sessional/act/1939-17.pdf

According to

New South Wales Law Reform Commission Report 69, Review of the Adoption Information Act 1990:

5.29 ...there was a lack of social and financial support for unmarried

mothers. The supporting mothers benefit was not introduced until 1973. For many single mothers, it would have been difficult or impossible for them to manage on their own with a baby unless their own families provided a great deal of assistance.

5.31 ...the young mothers were subjected to a great deal of persuasion and

pressure to give up their children for adoption. This was presented to

them by family members, hospital staff and social workers and no doubt

many others, as the best thing to do, especially for the child.

5.32 The final factor was a combination of hospital practices relating to the delivery and birth. The commission heard of birthparents who were drugged immediately after giving birth and were them transported without their consents to another hospital or convalescent centre where they were completely separated from their child,. who had remained at the hospital.

(From http://www.dianwellfare.com/id18.html)

When I was born, I stayed in the hospital for one month before being taken home by my adoptive parents . An article by Wendy Jacobs, B.Sc., B.A. states:

The first few months after birth form what Kitzinger (1978) calls a fourth trimester of pregnancy. These months are part of a continuum, in which the infant remains psychologically merged with the mother. Interruption of this continuum, by taking the baby away from the mother at birth, has a profound effect on the child. The child loses not only its mother but also part of the self. (Verrier) Yet, when it comes to adoption, Verrier wrote in 1991, there is a kind of denial that at the moment of birth and the next few days, weeks or months in the life of a child, when he is separated from his mother and handed over to strangers, he could be profoundly affected by the experience."

I was raised by parents who loved me and cared for my needs, in a stable family environment, and the faith that I was raised with was a source of comfort and strength to me, although I departed from my faith for several years.

As I entered my teenage years, I had a lot of anxiety, and was very disturbed by the fact that I seemingly had no-one to talk to about my doubts and fears. I was scared to admit that I was "not coping" with life, and fearful of the challenges that others seemed to take in their stride. I went to visit the school counselor at high school several times, and told her that my emotions didn't seem to be keeping up with my mind. I guess what I was trying to say was that many of the circumstances of my life as I knew it were troubling me, and I didn't know how to cope with the emotions that resulted. The very nature of closed adoption at the time meant that I did not have a safe place to talk about these things, as the community attitude was that I should be grateful for being adopted, and to talk about mixed feelings seemed like an act of treachery. The counselor asked if I wanted to contact the Department of Community Services to find out information about my adoption. I told my adoptive parents, and they agreed to me filling out the form requesting information. There was a form sent to me with very scant information about my natural parents, and then several months later, a letter which summarized more of the information from my mothers file. I found the information helpful to some degree, but it highlighted the fact that this was the "cut-off" point, and that I was not allowed any more information about my origins. I held a deep

rage about this fact, which was all-the-more painful because there was no-one in my life who I felt I could be totally open with without the likelihood of rejection.

Secrecy erects barriers to forming a healthy identity. Sealed records implicitly asks for an extreme form of denial. There is no school of psychotherapy which regards denial as a positive strategy in forming a sense of self and dealing with day-to-day realities. (Howard)

I began to experiment with drugs and alcohol, and began to search for comfort and belonging in relationships that were not healthy. I was ill-prepared for leaving home at the end of my school career, and had very little confidence in things such as catching public transport or dealing with people; and as I had been accepted into a theatre/media course at college, I complied with my parents' wishes and commenced my first year of college away from home, but found that my extreme anxiety and lack of confidence hindered me in my studies, and even going to the library and asking for assistance from the librarians was a fearful concept. I bluffed my way through my first year at college, but my inattentiveness and tendency to drift into daydreams, as well as my aversion to going to the library, caught up with me, and I took what seemed to be a good path at the time, leaving at the end of my first year and moving to Sydney to live with my boyfriend (who was my school friend's cousin). I knew he was a heavy drinker, and had experienced his abusive jealous rants on several occasions, but believed that I was to blame for the abuse, as he told me I was. He was charming when sober, and told me he loved me, and that was what I desperately wanted to hear.

Mental health professionals are surprised at the alarmingly high number of their patients who are adopted. Studies show an average of 25 to 35% of the young people in residential treatment centers are adoptees. This is 17 times the norm. (Lifton, BIRCO--Pannor and Lawrence)

Adoptees are more likely to have difficulties with drug and alcohol abuse, as well as, eating disorders, attention deficit disorder, infertility, suicide and untimely pregnancies. (Young, Bohman, Mitchell, Ostroff, Ansfield, Lifton and Schecter)

I found a job close to home in a dry cleaning business, and after a neck injury at this job, went to work as a filing clerk. It was mind-numbingly boring work, but I was convinced that it was worth it to hold onto my relationship, and fell into the Florence Nightingale syndrome of trying to help this person when I couldn't even help myself. I married him at the age of 20, partly because I felt guilty about living in a de facto relationship, and the control and abuse worsened immediately. I developed what I believe was agoraphobia, as I went through a period of unemployment where even going to the letterbox caused extreme anxiety.

I realized something had to change, and reasoned that I was more confident to deal with people after living in the "real world" for several years, so after consulting my then-husband, applied for mature-age entry to several universities. I was accepted to study teaching, and we moved to a more affordable suburb for me to attend university and complete my Diploma of Teaching.

After completing my studies, I threw myself into working as a casual teacher and tutor, and developed a lot more confidence. I had always been gifted musically and theatrically, and auditioned for a musical production, which my then-husband reacted to with a lot of negativity. I got in to the production, and spent a lot of time at rehearsals after work, leaving a cooked dinner for him in the fridge. He was very threatened by the life that I was leading, and I started to enjoy being away from him so much that I hated being at home with him. He tried to erode my confidence continually by making disparaging remarks, but I had begun to shut him out after he repeatedly ignored my pleas to get counseling or give up drinking.

After the musical production was over, I had to stay at home with this person of an evening, something which I now found intolerable. Our relationship had degenerated to the point that I felt nothing for him apart from hatred and fear, and I decided that I needed to get out. I was terrified that if I left him he would attempt to kill me, as he had threatened to do so once before. I packed up a few possessions while he was at work one day in 1994, and left to stay in share accommodation, telling my adoptive family not to tell him where I was. I divorced this man 12 months later, and never saw him again.

I had found and contacted my natural mother by mail after the adoption laws were changed in the early 1990's. She was unable to cope with any kind of relationship with me, and had kept my existence a secret from her subsequent children when she married. The fact that these children were my half-brother and half-sister and that I would most probably never have contact with them was very difficult to accept, as was her repeated refusal to have any kind of relationship. She explained as best she could that she was affected a great deal by the experience of having me and "giving me up" for adoption , and then in one letter she told me that, "I never saw you, never held you in my arms, and never thought of you as my child." This was, I could only conclude recently after hearing about many mothers' experiences, as a result of the inhumane treatment given to single mothers by the social workers, staff at the single mothers' homes, and hospital staff. At the time, however, I did not have the benefit of knowing all the reasons for her inability to cope with a relationship, and I interpreted much of her response as a rejection of me, confirming my fears of being unloved and unwanted by her.

I went on to marry the man that is now my husband, and we have three children together . When my first child was born, I experienced a lot of problems settling him. I felt extremely anxious, and was always worried that something was going to happen to him or that I would lose him. I was very uncomfortable having to deal with the nurses at the hospital when he was born, and felt very defensive, I think because I was worried about them calling me a bad mother and allowing him to be taken from me. My husband and I stayed at a mothercraft nurses' residential care facility with him for several days when he was four months old, for help with settling techniques, and I remember filling in the post-natal depression questionnaire with not-quite-accurate answers, also because of a fear of being judged as a bad mother and having him taken from my care. I love all my children very much and it brings me great joy to be their mother, and there is no logical reason why any of my children would be removed from my care, so I can only conclude that my problems at the time of my first-born child's arrival were some kind of reaction to the circumstances of my own birth and removal from my mother's care.

I have contacted my natural mother by mail several times over the years, and most of the time she has replied. I have found that my experience as a mother gives me a better perspective on her situation , and has helped me to understand her better. She told me in her last letter that she hasn't ruled out the possibility of contact, but that she couldn't bring herself to make contact with me still at that stage. That was around 2004, and my next letter did not receive a reply. She would be around 61 years old, her other children are both in their thirties, and probably have children of their own, and I am now 42 years old. I wrote another letter to her today, simply giving her my current address and phone number. The remembrance of these things is making me feel very emotional lately, and I'm finding it difficult to hold onto hope of ever meeting the woman who gave birth to me. But now I have another reason to hope, because my children have a right to know their flesh and blood as much as I do.

I hope that the stories of those affected by forced adoption practices are heeded in all future planning by government, and that provision is made for helping those who have been traumatised and disadvantaged by the mistakes of the past. I believe that adoptees, those who were deemed "unadoptable", and mothers affected by these past practices have very valid reasons to mistrust those who are supposed to be "helping" them, and that they need to be listened to in planning what kind of help to be offered. I have personally found it much easier to communicate freely with other adoptees and former state wards, and have found it to be a very healing experience to have (at this stage) online friendships through adoptee support groups. I believe that we have many in our midst who have the potential to help many people through their knowledge, their experience and their empathy and compassion. It is essential that we are collectively given the right to be heard, to have our experienced acknowledged, and to be consulted in planning for any "help" measures to be offered.

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The two references above are from an article by Wendy Jacobs, B. Sc., B.A. at http://www.originsnsw.com/mentalhealth/id2.html