Senate Inquiry into Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices

Terms of Reference

That the following matters be referred to the Community Affairs References Committee for inquiry and report by 30 June 2011:

(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.

Preamble

I, Darelle Duncan, am a citizen of the Commonwealth, resident in NSW. As a citizen I have inalienable right to protection under the Australian Constitution and the Common Law of this country.

As an Australian citizen, the Commonwealth affords me protection from the unlawful and harmful actions that threaten my right to life, liberty and justice from those who would deny me these rights, within and without the borders of Australia.

Submission -

In this submission I will assert that my child and I were subjected to harmful actions by agents of the State Government namely the Department of Child Welfare, Wollongong Branch, and staff at Wollongong Hospital in 1971. Further, I maintain that the Commonwealth did not protect me, or my child, by failing to monitor the implementation of common law and the Adoption of Children Act. I believe I was duped by an industry committed to adoption that insisted and promoted:

"Only selfish girls keep their babies"

I will support this contention by detailing my experience under the following headings:

1. Hospital social worker,
2. Child Welfare social worker,
3. Staff of Wollongong Hospital,
4. Taking of consent

5. Revocation of consent.

I will conclude with my recommendations for a national framework to assist states and territories to address the consequences for mothers, their families and children who were subject to forced adoption policies.

1. Hospital Social Worker, Wollongong Hospital, May 1971

When I presented at Wollongong Hospital to 'book in' for the birth of my child I was sent immediately to the hospital social worked by staff when I admitted to being unmarried. I did not ask to go. The Hospital Social Worker was a formidable woman and she did not feign to hide her disdain for me. She said I had to go to the Department of Child Welfare to arrange the adoption of my child. She provided no alternatives. Further, she insisted I was not to use my medical benefits allowance for an intermediate ward as I had to go to the public ward were "girls like me went". When I asked about pre-natal classes she told me they were not for me, they were for 'married couples'.
It was clear from this interview that I was seen as morally reprehensible. I felt extremely upset by this labelling and her treatment of me.

2. Social Worker, Department of Child Welfare, Wollongong Branch (May 1971)

I dutifully went to the Department of Child Welfare as instructed by the hospital social worker. She was a woman who was very clear about what she was doing. Her 'mission' was to convince me that adoption was in the ' best interests of the child'. She painted a bleak picture of what life would be like for me as an unmarried mother. The allowance was 'a pittance', 'the child needed a father', and of course, "only selfish girls keep their babies".
She repeated this catch cry several times throughout the interview while she took details from me to complete the rather large form.
The child, she said, would be better off with a deserving couple who could provide for it. The child would be carefully matched and would be much happier with a mother and father.
She stressed that adoption was for life. When I asked why, she said that some unscrupulous girls came back later and asked for money. She too was clear about how she felt about unmarried pregnant 'girls'.
At this point she told me about the 30 days revocation period for the adoption consent. She stressed that any girl who came back to revoke her consent was doing a dreadful thing to the adoptive parents who had bonded with the child. She was clearly warning me not to do this.
I left her office in tears.

3 (A). Labour Ward, Wollongong Hospital, September 5, 1971

My son was born at 2.30 pm (. September 1971. I had been all by myself in a large room for most of the labour. When the birth was imminent I was taken to a theatre where many people arrived to view the birth. At no time was asked if this was OK or told anything about what was going on. My legs were put in stirrups and a sheet was strung across so I could not witness the birth. I pulled the sheet down when my son was born and reached for him. The midwife was extremely angry with me and shouted "Get that baby out of here!" When I said, "No don't, leave him", she snarled at me and told me that I had chosen to have my baby adopted, not her. I was admonished for asserting my right to my child. It was clear that she too had a punitive approach to me as an unmarried mother in her care.

3. (B) Staff of Wollongong Hospital September 5-10

I repeatedly asked to see my son but was told by all the staff "that it was not allowed".
Some friends who visited went to the nursery to see him. After they left the Matron came and told me to stop sending my friends to see my son, as it was not allowed. During this time in hospital I was prevented from seeing my son until I had signed the adoption consent. Then I was allowed to see him through the glass for a brief moment.

4. Taking of Consent

I believe it was Friday (. September 1971 when a young man appeared saying he was there to take my consent for adoption. I had not seen him before. He told me he had never done this before and seemed quite excited by the prospect. I am unclear as to what was said but it didn't take very long. He offered no alternatives, no advise, no support for me, or my child, I was just to sign the papers. I had no one with me to advise or support me. I signed the paper and he went away, only to appear again a moment later as he had forgotten to get me to initial something.

5. Revocation to the consent

Towards the end of the revocation period I realised that I could not lose my son forever. I returned to Wollongong and went to the Department of Child Welfare. I saw the social worker who had taken down my details in May. She was shocked to see me. She was the one who had made it very clear that revocation was a very bad thing to do to the adoptive parents. I was intimidated by this and unable to actually say what I wanted. She, understanding what I was there for, told me how she had been at the hospital when the adoptive parents had picked him up; how they had cried; how they had come such a long way and how lucky he was to have them.

She guided the conversation around to my return to work and “getting on with my life”. Revocation of the adoption consent was not an option.

Conclusion

From my account I believe it is clear that agents of the State of NSW subjected me to unlawful and harmful actions in their efforts to procure a baby for adoption. I was treated differently to other mothers, I was denied access to my child and was told he would be better off without me. I was never told of the harmful effects of adoption on me, and my child.
I was fortunate enough to be reunited with my son when he was fourteen. We have now known each other for 26 years and enjoy a happy mother/son relationship. However, the enormity of the forced adoption where I was duped into giving away my only child to strangers continues to haunt me.

My recommendations for a National Framework to address the consequences for mothers and their children who were subject to forced adoption policies

- Recognition that crimes were committed by agents of the State
- An apology for past forced adoption by the Prime Minister
- Education campaign to highlight the past forced adoption policies
- Grants for the study of past forced adoption policies on mothers and children
- Opening of the records of past forced adoption including birth registrations
- Legal recognition of the original birth certificate
- Funding for pregnant single girls to continue their schooling
- Establish a national body to oversee overseas adoption policies to ensure that the abuses of the past here in Australia are not revisited on poor, vulnerable women overseas.