

## **The Australian Government Senate Inquiry into Forced Adoptions**

This is the submission of the **Australian Adoptees Network** ([www.australianadopteesnetwork.webs.com](http://www.australianadopteesnetwork.webs.com)).

All members of this group are Australians and the subjects of forced adoption or of unofficial placement.

This Submission has been written with input from the members of the group and represents their views, concerns and recommendations. The group are represented for the purposes of this Submission by Murray Roy Legro, Dr Clare Graydon PhD, Neil Andrew Richards and Elizabeth Hughes.

The official and recognised numbers of adoptions in this country fall far short of the actual numbers of people who were the subject of removal from their mothers and placement by individuals, churches and others. Those unofficial and informal arrangements left adults without identity, knowledge of who they really are or the means to ever discover their history and families. Those Adults have been left disenfranchised by the deliberate actions of others. It is unknown how many people there are in this group or how many others have never been told of their placement and status as an adoptee or unofficial adoptee. Some estimate the total figure could be as high as two million or more. We may never know, but all should fall within the scope of this Inquiry and any Recommendations it might make.

In May 2011 the closed group Australian Adoptee Survivors was opened on face book, to give adoptees a safe place to share their thoughts, views, feelings and stories, without judgement and prejudice. Some of those who joined had experienced verbal abuse, disrespect and insults. The group is trying to achieve the goal of being a supportive, safe place for adoptees where they can alleviate their sense of aloneness, support each other without judgement and feel part of a community of like-minded people who understand and validate each other. This group has evolved into the Australian Adoptees Network which is in the process of becoming incorporated in the State of Victoria and is the only Adoptee support network that solely responds to the needs of adoptees

That complete acceptance by others is something rarely experienced by adoptees, because they often live in isolation from other adoptees, misunderstood by the families and communities they live in. The only people who truly understand the adoptee experience are other adoptees and few people in communities make the effort to try. It is quite common for mothers who lost their children to forced adoption to be the least understanding and sympathetic to the plight of adoptees. It is rare to find anyone amongst the medical, social work, teaching, therapeutic and counselling professions with a grasp on the lives led by adoptees, the issues they face and the problems they live with daily as a result of adoption, stigma and the trauma of loss of attachment.

Those issues of daily life may involve mental health conditions such as depression; thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts, post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, panic attacks and some believe adoption syndrome and Stockholm syndrome. Adoptees often suffer abuse at the hands of adopters or others, because of their vulnerability in relationships, their neediness, their quest for attachment and love, multiple losses and unresolved grief, sometimes complicated grief. Some are abused as children and suffer that trauma, as well as the trauma of loss of attachment and the trauma of adoption itself. Adoptees may suffer problems with self esteem, confidence, trust, learning of new

adoption itself. Adoptees may suffer problems with self esteem, confidence, trust, learning of new skills and may have nightmares and night terrors, trouble sleeping, difficulties with school and bullying and in forming close relationships. In addition adoptees often suffer from allergies, asthma and a range of health problems possibly due to a stressful time in utero, loss of attachment and the stress of orphanage life and adoption placement, abrupt weaning and placement with strangers. Health problems may be life-long, sometimes preventable with a full medical history available.

Many adult adoptees, while appreciating having the legal right to know their birth information, the circumstances of their birth and to experience reunion, to understand their identity and where they came from, find reunion difficult and stressful. A mother who suffered forced adoption has many feelings about that, experiences guilt and has expectations of reunion. Very few prepare adequately for reunion, expecting it to be a natural process. It is of course not that simple and requires much preparation, understanding, good will and compassion from all involved to make reunion successful and build an adult relationship between equals. There is little adequate support or understanding of that process, it's delicacy and fragility. There are often too many expectations and assumptions which doom the reunion to failure. The adoptee suffers further loss of the mother, rejection and sometimes the feeling of not being good enough, failure and inadequacy.

For some, reunion, however much support there is, will never come about, because a mother has suicided, a father is forever unnamed and unknown or the differences between the biological family and the adoptive person's upbringing produce an incompatibility which cannot be overcome. In some instances the damage already present in a biological family, which may have caused a child to be given up for adoption or be the subject of forced adoption is passed from one generation to the next and is too damaging for the adoptee to become involved with. No studies have been undertaken on this area of adoption to our knowledge; what we term "the secondary generational damage", for want of a recognised name. There also needs to be a study done on the frequency of forced or "voluntary" adoption from families where abuse is known. Anecdotal and personal evidence suggests there may be a correlation.

**There are a number of areas of concern regarding the outcome of forced and unofficial adoption: -**

1. The unknown numbers of male adoptees who remain silent and would not be able to avail themselves of any counselling or support provisions should they exist. Reaching male sufferers in our society is notoriously difficult and such a sensitive area that it would have to be approached with the greatest of knowledge, sensitivity, skill and experience. It is not an area for amateurs or eager volunteers, while at the same time the distrust amongst many men in our community of professionals and "experts" is well known. Perhaps being able to combine informality with skill might be the solution, providing it was given the importance and financing it deserves. No figures are available, but must at a guess, number in the thousands of men who are alone, in relationships or are parents. Adoption impacts on others and the results of adoption such as addictions, violence and inability to control anger, play a major role in relationship difficulties and breakdown and often the inability to parent adequately.

2. The lack of counselling specifically designed for adoptees, to deal with the areas of difficulty. Adoption Counselling cannot be effectively carried out by those who think they understand, those who think they know; it is not simply about loss as many believe. While we do not have a system of registration for counsellors and continue under the misbelief that psychologists are counsellors, we will never have a counselling service which is suitable for adoptees. There needs to be special training and adoptee counselling modules on every training course at University level, whether it be at Diploma or Degree level.
3. Until adoptees set up their own specific organisations and support, the damage of adoption will continue to be misunderstood or partially understood with the self interest of other groups detracting from the tasks that need to be addressed. Those damaged by forced adoption may with good will and much work benefit from an Alliance at some point in the future. Currently adoptees are not well served and that is of great concern to the members of this group.
4. There are those in our society who believe adoption is always a good thing and that it saves children from "illegitimacy", a life of poverty and provides unwanted children with parents who want them. Other Submissions have no doubt addressed these areas and may have indicated that adoption for adoptees is about loss of identity, biological family, history and choice. To take those things from generations of adoptees has been cruel and can never be fully repaired or compensated.
5. We do not have accurate figures on how many admissions there are of adoptees to psychiatric units, hospitals, prisons and other institutions. Studies in other countries indicate that adoptees are represented at higher levels than other groups, sometimes at much higher levels. That is no accident of fate but the result of a regime of decades of forced adoption.

**The recommendations of this group are that: -**

1. Professional counselling be made available to adoptees over a lifetime and to their children, for any one affected and "lost in the darkness of adoption".
2. Independent support services be set up to assist with some of those things adoptees have been disadvantaged by due to their emotional, physical and mental health difficulties due to adoption. Those areas include affordable housing, cheap mortgages and loans, assisted training and education, internet access to alleviate isolation and training for those who are currently not users of those facilities.
3. Adoptees living in remote or rural areas should be afforded all the advantages available to other adoptees and not find themselves unable to engage in reunion with biological family due to lack of funds or to be unable to access services such as counselling and support, tracing of records, the need for specialist services due to health problems caused or exacerbated by adoption.
4. A Support Hotline along the lines of Lifeline be available free and at all times.
5. Current and Future Governments carry forward the information gained from this Inquiry into current adoption practice and law and into law regarding the "gestational products" of

Assisted Reproductive Technologies in order to prevent another disaster for children and their rights in the future.

6. DNA testing needs to be made freely available for adoptees needing to confirm relationships.
7. Those agencies that practised unofficial adoptions, thereby leaving adoptees without official documents, need to be made accountable for that breach of human rights and in some way put that right for as many adoptees as possible.
8. Funding be made available for a National Conference with all adoption related parties involved to create a National framework and approach to services, allocation of funding and a unified approach.
9. An Apology be made specifically to those who were the subjects of forced adoptions who have suffered the effects all their lives and will continue to suffer for the rest of their lives. While nothing can compensate for the losses imposed on us as adoptees and on our families, this gesture would be a move forward and may recognise, validate and bring into public consciousness our plight and that of the unknown ones. Our hope is that an Apology might encourage them to seek others who understand and help to alleviate their lifelong aloneness.

**In conclusion:** - The senators and the government members reading this submission hold not only the hopes and prayers of all those affected by forced adoption, but the opportunity to affect future lives, wellbeing and dreams. The opinions and decisions you make from this inquiry are not about statistics but human beings.

The actions you take will not only impact on the immediate lives of all of us negatively affected by adoption, but will carry on down the many following generations and will shape the society we hand on to our children.

This Submission is made by Murray Roy Legro on behalf of the Australian Adoptees Network