

Ms Emily Wolfinger, Blue Mountains, NSW

Department of the Senate

RE: Inquiry into forced adoption

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

I am the daughter of a mother whose baby was removed from her in 1975 because she was unmarried.

Reading through the submissions I was struck by how there were none by the family members of those involved in the “adoption” triangle, such as subsequent children like me. I have read many shocking and compelling stories by birth mothers and their children who were taken for “adoption” through the years, but I am yet to come across one story from a family member not directly impacted by past adoption practices, although I have spoken to one daughter. Let me tell you that this is not because they have not been affected by past adoption practices. As the daughter of one who suffered the unauthorised removal of a child at birth, I can tell you that I daily live with the pain of watching my mother, 36 years later, continue to suffer from the brutally inflicted primal wound of being forcibly separated from her first-born. The pain has not lessened with the years, evidently, as many great losses in life thankfully do, but, from what I have observed, worsens.

I also suffer from the knowledge of a brother lost (I always wished for an elder brother growing up) who I will probably never meet (I have his photo on my desk), and of course the pain that has come from being raised by someone who has been psychologically and emotionally traumatised from having her baby removed from her and going through the mistreatment that it entailed.

The shame and secrecy of the mothers whose children were taken from them during the post war period until the 80s in Australia, did not end once babies were taken and “consents” procured; in the case of my mother the silencing and shaming continued throughout her life until the present day (in fact she was very self-conscious about me submitting this). I was 19 when I found out about my brother. That was only seven years ago. For 19 years, my mother kept her first-born child a secret from her subsequent children. For 19 years I thought I was her eldest. My mother admitted that the reason she told my siblings and me about our brother was because she feared someone in her family would spill the beans sooner or later.

Since finding out about my brother, my relationship with my mother’s family has suffered. This has particularly been the case with my grandparents who turned my pregnant mother over to St Anthony’s Home for Unmarried Mothers on the advice of a Catholic nun. ‘Adoption’ was only mentioned in passing by her parents, however, and mum had no idea that the point in going to the home was to hide the pregnancy and eventually take her baby for the benefit of a childless couple. She thought that she was going there to finish her School Certificate with other pregnant young women.

My grandparents played a pivotal role in my life growing up and I loved them so much – to find out what they did years later was heartbreaking. I have forgiven them (because I now recognise they were also pressured and misinformed), but our relationship will never be the same again and I am very sad about that. Mum says that if her parents knew of what was done to her in the home and hospital, they would never have permitted it. They were told that she would “recover” and “go onto having children of her own”.

Furthermore, my grandparents were not permitted to visit my mother in her hospital

room.

It could have been me who was handed over to strangers, forced to languish in a nursery until I was medically cleared and sanctioned as healthy enough to be adopted (talk about eugenics!). It could have been me who was denied my heritage, my family, the gaze only a natural mother can give, as she stares down at her feeding child. Having recently become a mother myself, I know only too well the importance of these things to mother and baby alike and the outrageous cruelty of denying a baby – and mother - these things because the mother is simply unmarried. I suspect, however, that the various parties involved in the unlawful removals of babies also had various motives.

They talk about the generational cycles of poverty and violence that, according to some research, commonly arises from sole parent families, but what about the generational cycles of depression and substance abuse that have come from forced adoption practices? Many more people were affected by past adoption practices than the mothers and their babies, and will continue to be affected down the generational line!

Yours respectfully,
Emily Wolfinger

PS. Below is an article I wrote over a year ago for newmatilda.com, titled ‘Our Dirty Adoption Secret’.

Our Dirty Adoption Secret
By Emily Wolfinger

Tags:

The Federal Government wants to give forced adoption victims an apology, but seems very keen to prevent the public finding out exactly what the apology is for, writes Emily Wolfinger

During a meeting at Minister for Families Jenny Macklin’s Canberra office on 27 August,

the offer of an apology to an estimated 150,000 women and their children who were "unethically" and "unlawfully" separated between 1950 and 2000 was declined by , the official body representing these women.

Macklin's advisor Tracey Mackey phoned Origins NSW coordinator Lily Arthur the next day, asking whether Origins would reconsider accepting their offer of an apology. They declined a second time. But get this: the apology may still go ahead in November. As if it were an afterthought, the Government plans to tack this apology onto the apology to the "Forgotten Australians", those half-million Australians abused as children in institutions. The Forgotten Australians are also upset about this, as they want their apology to be their own — and fair enough. However, it seems the Government is determined to kill two birds with one stone.

Far from being a well-meaning gesture, the offer of an apology is an insulting and deeply disappointing outcome for Origins, who have waited nearly 10 years for a Government response on this issue. They have been for even longer, and not once have they asked for an apology. According to the group, it is only through a national inquiry that Australians will learn of the nationwide extent of the crimes acknowledged as "kidnapping" by Family Court Justice Richard Chisholm in at the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into past adoption practices in 1999.

That inquiry only served to reveal the extent of criminal and unethical adoption practices committed in NSW. Origins fears that until all states are held accountable in a national inquiry, Australians forcibly removed from their unmarried mothers in other states will remain in the dark about the circumstances surrounding their adoption. A national inquiry will also provide an opportunity for mothers from all states to tell their stories. Origins says it is very unlikely that any of this will happen if the Government goes ahead with the apology, because such a move would look to many as if some degree of recompense had been made.

It makes no sense at all for the Government to insist on making an apology before Australians even know of the nationwide extent of the crimes to which such an apology would correspond. The Indigenous Stolen Generations had their national inquiry first, and it demonstrated very clearly just what was being apologised for. Why not use the same process for mothers forcibly separated from their children through adoption? Is this offer of an apology an attempt at an easy way out of actually doing something to address the damage caused by Australia's adoption practices? Perhaps, worse still, it is an attempt at a cover-up of the extent of the crimes perpetrated against these women and their babies. Lily Arthur believes it is. "The reason why they want us to accept an apology is [so that they can] continue to hide the unlawful practices." She says that the Government is trying to cover for the states who are afraid of what a national inquiry could reveal, and in turn, how much it could end up costing them in terms of redress and litigation.

It's not hard to see why the many victims of these criminal adoptions are deeply sceptical of government bona fides on this issue. Beyond failing to fully investigate and acknowledge what happened to these women, the federal and state governments are still misinforming people about the bumper adoption era that occurred from the 1950s to the 1980s and even trivialising what happened. The Victorian Government, for one, the decline in adoptions from the mid-70s to "... a number of interrelated factors: the introduction of government benefits for single parents, increasingly tolerant community attitudes toward exnuptial births and single parenthood, improved contraception [and]

the widespread availability of pregnancy terminations".

In fact, while the Supporting Mother's Benefit for single mothers was not introduced until 1973 under the Whitlam Government (and it did not extend to fathers until 1977 under the Fraser Government), financial assistance was actually available to single mothers well before the 1970s, as in a 1956 government publication titled *Children in Need* by Donald McLean: "To avoid any misunderstanding or any suggestion that the mother was misled or misinformed, District Officers are instructed to explain fully to the mother, before taking the consent, the facilities which are available to help her keep her child. These include... financial assistance to unmarried mothers under section 27 of the Child Welfare Act ..." However, as documented in the transcripts of the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry this fact was largely concealed from mothers.

While that inquiry has put on the public record much that needs to be better understood, there is still much more that needs to see the light of day. An apology, therefore, would be an irresponsibly premature step on an issue already so marked by institutional culpability. Origins want full acknowledgement and accountability first — which they believe a national inquiry would ensure — then suitable redress, and then perhaps an apology.

The other point about government apologies is that they must be done properly, and at the right time — that is, when people want them — otherwise they become devalued. As Arthur also points out, in their eagerness to issue an apology, the Government is reducing the significance of the apology to the Stolen Generations of Indigenous people. "If they are prepared to offer an apology to people who don't want one, what kind of substance does the original apology to the Stolen Generations have?"

So, what were some of the unethical and illegal practices perpetrated against these women? Well, as documented in the transcripts of the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into past adoption practices, they include: the detainment of unmarried women during pregnancy; the immediate separation of mothers and babies following births (many mothers were not allowed to see their babies until they signed adoption forms and many others never met their babies); the use of coercion to solicit adoption consents from mothers (in some cases, mothers were told the adoption papers were discharge forms); the use of mind altering drugs (not administered to married mothers) following births and preceding consents; promises of a 30-day cooling off period to get mothers to give consents when the rights to revoke consent during this period were rarely observed; the absence of any counselling prior to and following adoptions, and the failure to notify mothers of alternative options to adoption (as noted above, many mothers did not know that financial support was available).

It is not surprising then that these mothers suffer a number of mental health conditions ranging from depression to post-traumatic stress disorder. Half of these mothers did not go on to have more children, while the female suicide rate was highest between 1962-72, reaching an all-time high of 13 per 100,000 women in 1967, compared to 4.3 today. This period coincided with the peak in adoptions — nearly 10,000 in 1971-2. Taken together, these facts represent an appalling and poorly understood blemish on our human rights record.

In a press release on the Sunday following the meeting at Jenny Macklin's office, the minister said that she had "begun a dialogue" with mothers separated from their babies. However, when asked whether this means a national inquiry is on the cards, a

spokesperson from Macklin's office would not say, sending instead this vague response: "This dialogue will explore what sort of acknowledgement of their experiences would assist their healing process."

Clearly the Federal Government wants this issue to go away, but that isn't about to happen any time soon. Arthur says that mothers like her won't go away until the so-called past adoption practices — or, as she calls them "abduction practices" — are seen for what they were.

Next year will mark 10 years since the Final Report into past adoption practices in NSW, titled , labelled those practices "unethical" and "unlawful". It will also mark 15 years since Origins was founded and first started campaigning for a national inquiry. It is time that the Federal Government allowed the country to face the reality of this part of Australian history and set up a national inquiry. National inquiries have been instigated for much less serious reasons than the theft of over 100,000 children.

These mothers want their children to know the full truth. They are not asking for much.