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connecting and strengthening  
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## **Adoption in Australia The role of the Commonwealth Government.**

**Submission to Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee Inquiry into  
the Commonwealth contribution to former  
forced adoption policies and practices.**

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### **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.

### **Introduction**

Adoption Research and Counselling Service Inc. is a non-government agency with charitable status offering services to all parties to adoption and their families. We were founded in 1984 by Professor Robin Winkler as a result of his ground breaking research (Relinquishing mothers in adoption. Their long-term adjustment). The recommendations from this research, were the need for specialist counselling and support and increased information for professionals and the community about the emotional impact of relinquishment on mothers and children.

Over the past 27 years our therapeutic services for those affected by adoption have evolved with our deepening knowledge of the complexity of their experience and the diversity of the impacts. Despite the wide range of people involved and the differences of their experiences we have found a pattern of core issues and core responses. Briefly these are the traumatic nature of relinquishment, internalised grief, pervasive shame and helplessness in birth parents. In adopted people we have seen the impact of disrupted attachment and loss on their personal identity and sense of self and their intimate relationships.

Another pattern is the life long nature of adoption. At times of developmental and life stage change, the loss/trauma reemerges to be reworked and ideally integrated.

As our work is with all parties to adoption and has been consistent for nearly 30 years we see daily that all parties are impacted. We have seen how the experience of adoption/relinquishment flows on to affect those in relationships with birth parents and adopted people, ie parents, partners, subsequent children and children of adopted people.

### **Terms of reference**

- (a) The role, if any, of the Commonwealth Government, its policies and practices in contributing to forced adoptions:

As far as we can ascertain the Commonwealth had no direct involvement or responsibility for adoption legislation or practice. However in our experience for the majority of birth parents the lack of financial assistance from the Commonwealth effectively took away their choice of raising their child. It is interesting with the introduction of Single Mothers Benefits (1973) the numbers of children relinquished has dropped drastically to the very small numbers of today.

In our experience it was common for single mothers to travel interstate or even overseas to relinquish in order to maintain the secrecy. This was more often than not a decision made by their family or for their family to hide the pregnancy and birth. This has implications now when those involved in searching have to navigate different state jurisdictions. It poses many challenges for search and reunion. There is definitely a role for the Commonwealth to accept some co-ordinating role to facilitate search and reunion.

## Terms of reference

- (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.

The term “forced adoption” or “coerced adoption” is emotive and thus open to conjecture depending on personal experience and often how a person has tried to construct their own psychological survival of such a deep loss. However the treatment of women who found themselves single and pregnant is not arguable. These women and children were treated to varying degrees, inhumanely often humiliated, drugged, not able to see or hold their babies and left alone “to get on with their lives”. They were often shut away from society and “punished”.

The “choice” they had is questionable. For many the only way they could have choice was to believe they were doing the right thing for their child – putting their own feelings and desires aside for their child. Sadly this often has ramifications many years later when they find their child has suffered from their separation from the mother. Many women have carried the belief that they are “bad” and were “bad mothers” despite the fact that they were trying to do the “right thing” for their child. The changed social attitude towards single parents makes it difficult for younger generations to understand the lack of choice and that the decision was not about the mother not caring for the child but in fact the opposite.

We have identified what we consider key issues to assist in the healing of those affected by adoption practices.

1. Independent specialist services with skilled therapists who have:
  - Knowledge of trauma counselling
  - Understanding of the potential to re-traumatise by insensitive and unskilled counselling
  - Knowledge of attachment and the impact of ruptured attachment
  - Understanding of internalised grief and pervasive shame
  - Skills in sensorimotor psychotherapy as the healing of trauma and early attachment rupture is held in the body and “talking” therapy alone will not lead to healing.
2. Independence from government department’s/agencies who were involved in the adoption process allows choice.
3. Accreditation of adoption workers. The development of national standards and recognition of the need for specialist skills, knowledge and ongoing training.

4. A national coordination of search resources.
5. Development of awareness that reunion is not the end solution for those affected by adoption but rather just one aspect and one that in itself has ongoing ramifications. Reunion is not the panacea for adoption pain/loss.
6. Education for GP's, mental health practitioners on the impact of adoption.

We also see that the Commonwealth does have a responsibility to provide services now for those currently adopting from overseas and locally. Research clearly demonstrates the impact of attachment disruption on the life of the child. In our work with children and their parents we see great value in early intervention services to promote attachment and address attachment fracture.

We feel that the Commonwealth has a duty of care to these children to provide services to meet their needs and optimise their healing. Ignorance of the impact of adoption separation can no longer be an excuse for not putting services in place. The Apology in WA was most welcomed. Parliamentarians spoke in a heartfelt and informed manner of the impact of past adoption practices on people's lives. However this acknowledgement has not been backed up with funding to provide the much needed services and to make them accessible to all. An apology is not enough there should be suitable services put in place to meet the needs that have been so poignantly recognised and shared.

Jennifer Newbould