



THE HON. BRONWYN BISHOP MP
FEDERAL MEMBER FOR MACKELLAR
SHADOW SPECIAL MINISTER OF STATE
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21 December 2011

Ms Toni Matulick
Inquiry Secretary
Senate Community Affairs References Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Matulick,

I refer to your letter dated 6 December 2011 providing me with a copy of Ms Christine Cole's submission to the inquiry regarding the Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices. I am pleased to respond to a number of Ms Cole's comments in her submission *The Thin End of the Wedge – are past draconian adoptive practices re-emerging in the 21st Century*, and correct a number of false accusations.

Your current Senate inquiry focusing on former policies and practices of forced adoption is a valuable inquiry. Past practices, which often involved forcing unwed and single mothers to give up their babies for adoption, should be condemned and it is important to acknowledge the devastating impact these practices had. Ms Cole's statement in her submission "*History unacknowledged is history repeated and we fear that Bronwyn's agenda is just that*" seems to suggest I advocate a return to these practices. I completely reject her accusation, which is entirely without basis.

As a former Chair of the former Standing Committee on Family and Human Services, I was pleased to oversee the Committee's work preparing the 2005 *Report on the inquiry into adoption of children from overseas* and the 2007 *Report on the inquiry into the impact of illicit drug use on families*. It must be remembered that both inquiries focused on contemporary issues relating to current adoption practices whereas the Senate Committee's inquiry is focusing on past issues. As such there are clearly significant differences in how these matters are approached. The overseas adoption inquiry in particular was extremely valuable and revealed a valuable insight into the anti-adoption culture within the bureaucracy.

The inquiry into illicit drugs showed the devastating impact that these substances have on families, particularly the children of drug users who are exposed to neglect and danger unacceptable in our community and indeed the death of children.

Ms Cole states in her submission that "*Bishop has been openly supportive of adoptive parent groups and supports the Debora-Lee Furness campaign to overhaul adoption laws in*

Australia". I do support adoptive parent groups based on the evidence we took. I also believe Ms Furness recognises the importance of adoption and the need to streamline the process to enable orphaned and abandoned children to gain a loving family. Last month I attended a breakfast in Sydney for National Adoption Week where we met a number of families who continue to struggle with the bureaucracy when trying to adopt children from overseas. I believe the 2005 Report is still extremely relevant and that its recommendations addressing the anti-adoption culture in many Government agencies and making it simpler for children to be adopted overseas, should be implemented.

I also note in Ms Cole's submission she discusses the question about children of illicit drug users. Ms Cole's comment that *"Bishop's support for and promotion of adoption coinciding with her zero tolerance of drug abuse has resulted in her calling for all children under five to be immediately removed from their parents and placed out for adoption, irrespective of whether they are still using drugs or actually causing them any harm"* is a misleading statement. In reality, the Committee believed that adoption should be used for children of drug users when a child was at risk and where the parent's previous attempts at rehabilitation and treatment had failed. Specifically we found:

The committee considers that adoption should be established as the 'default' outcome for child protection authorities, where a child is found to be at risk and where the parent's previous attempts at rehabilitation and treatment within a set period have failed. This would be a way of giving greater stability and certainty for children in out-of-home care, particularly for younger children. As a result, the onus will be on child protection authorities to demonstrate that forms of care other than adoption are in the best interests of the child.¹

This led to Recommendation 5 of the Report which stated:

The Commonwealth Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, in conjunction with state and territory child protection ministers:

- *establish adoption as the 'default' care option for children aged 0–5 years where the child protection notification involved illicit drug use by the parent/s, with the onus on child protection authorities to demonstrate that other care options would result in superior outcomes for the child/ren.²*

I support the former Committee's view that parents who endanger their children through substance abuse should not be allowed to continue risking their children's lives and adoption is a far better alternative for the safety and well being of these children. It was distressing to note in the NSW Government's *Child Deaths 2010 Annual Report* that of the 139 children known to the Department of Community Services who died in NSW in 2010: *"Parental substance abuse was the second most common reported risk factor, evident in*

¹ *"Protecting Children" - Inquiry into the Impact of Illicit Drug Use on Families*, Section 3.110, House Standing Committee on Family and Human Services, 2007.

² *"Protecting Children" - Inquiry into the Impact of Illicit Drug Use on Families*, Recommendation 5, House Standing Committee on Family and Human Services, 2007.

51% of cases.”³ This shows the very real dangers faced by the children of those with substance abuse problems.

For your Committee’s information, I have attached a copy of Appendices A and B from the 2007 inquiry *The Impact of Illicit Drug Use on Families*. Appendix A is evidence from a foster carer which shows definitively the plight of abused children. Appendix B outlines some of the personal stories which describes the impact of substance abuse on families, particularly children. The need to protect children whose parents have substance abuse problems is still a matter of pressing concern.

As the former Chair of the Family and Human Services Committee, the inquiries I chaired into overseas adoption and illicit drug use showed that adoption is a legitimate way of forming or adding to a family. I think the value of adoption was summed up by Anee who gave evidence to our Committee which we published on the cover of the overseas adoption report:

“I am thankful to be here because when I went back a couple of years ago to Ethiopia I saw all the poverty over there. It opened my eyes. I am grateful to have an education and that I am healthy and I can grow up, because over there the life expectancy for women is only about 38... I know that here I can live a healthy and prosperous life, so I am grateful for that.”⁴

Adoption also gives many children opportunities they otherwise wouldn’t have had and in many cases saves them from dangerous situations. Our inquiries dealt with contemporary issues, not historical issues, and we stand by our recommendations.

Yours sincerely,

The Hon. Bronwyn Bishop MP
Federal Member for Mackellar
Shadow Special Minister of State
Shadow Minister for Seniors

Encl.

³ “Child Deaths 2010 Annual Report – Learning to Improve Services, page 8, NSW Government.
http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/docswr/_assets/main/documents/child_deaths_report.pdf

⁴ “*Overseas Adoption in Australia*” – Back Cover. House Standing Committee on Family and Community Services, November 2005.