

Submission from:

Mrs Robyn Cohen
(...)

Senate Inquiry into

“Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices.”

Dear Senators

I Robyn Cohen am a citizen of the Commonwealth of Australia resident in Tasmania.

As a citizen of the Commonwealth of Australia I have an 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

I am writing this submission because I want people to know and understand what happened to me in 1969 when I entered the Gore Street public hospital in Tasmania to have my baby as an 18 year old ‘unmarried mother’ and lost that baby to adoption.

I want people to know that the staff broke the law by denying me my legal right to access my baby and by providing me with no choices other than adoption; that the staff acted unlawfully and unethically and applied undue influence, duress and coercion to get my signature on the adoption consent.

I would like these abuses and violations of my legal rights to be officially acknowledged and documented. I would like the perpetrators of these crimes and inhumane practices to understand how their actions seriously damaged thousands of women and their babies.

I ask why the unlawful adoption practices and unethical cruelty perpetrated upon me and many other women by employees of the Tasmanian State government went unchallenged by the Federal Government for decades.

I want people to know that I was treated appallingly by the staff who openly judged, condemned and shamed me; I was treated without respect and my treatment differed to that of married mothers; I was discriminated against at clinic appointments and during my confinement; I was made to feel inferior, guilty, ashamed and unworthy of my baby. Being unmarried, and therefore (in their eyes) an unfit mother, was a

convenient label that allowed the staff to take my baby for adoption by a married couple.

I want people to think about what it would be like deliver a baby and not be told the sex of your own child; to ask for your child in the delivery room and be told that you cannot see her; to ask repeatedly to see your own baby over the next few days and be denied access. This was illegal but it was done. I was treated as of less than no account. I was nothing in the hospital. They did not see me. I was dismissed. The staff behaved unlawfully and unethically.

I want acknowledgment that the trauma of losing my baby and the cruel adoption practices inflicted on me by staff changed me. I was never the same person after the staff had finished with me. After spending 10 days in a government hospital I walked away shattered.

I want the staff to know what they were wrong about me. I was not bad - I was young and I had no one to help me. I want them to know that their actions harmed me and that 41 years later I am still traumatised by the things that happened in the hospital; that I have been working with a psychologist for three years and it still makes me feel bad. What the staff did to me was wrong.

Most of all I want people to understand how I felt about the baby. I loved my baby. I wanted my baby. I still want her. I did not willingly give her away. Just last year I spoke with a nurse who had worked at the Gore Street Hospital and she said to me "We felt sorry for the babies because they were not wanted." This falsity needs to be rectified.

I hope that as you read my story you gain some sense of what the experience of confinement and adoption practices in a public hospital were like for an 'unmarried mother' in 1969.

During my 21 hour labour I was left alone for hours. For what seemed like an eternity I struggled without any form of pain relief (I was too afraid and out of control to use the gas mask which had been shoved into my hand before they left the room). After listening to me scream for hours a nurse finally put her head in the doorway and said "stop being a silly girl and get on with it." That was the extent of my care in labour until I felt my baby's head crowning and called out for help saying "something is happening." The staff were shocked that I was ready to push and the room was then a hive of activity as they gathered around for the birth.

I was not told that I would not be able to see the baby after the birth. When the baby was born it was rushed from the room despite me saying "I want to see my baby". The staff told me "it's best for you not to". I never saw her or heard her cry. I asked if I had a boy or girl. The staff refused to tell me saying "It's best if you don't know." I was denied full access to my baby.

In the delivery room I was injected with the drug Diethylstilboestrol as a lactation suppressant. I never asked for this drug, nor did I give my permission to be administered this known cancer causing drug. I did not know that such a drug existed

and only realised what had been given to me decades later.

I begged for three days to be told the sex of my baby and the nurse finally snarled at me “you had a girl’ and when I asked for weight and length she snapped that information at me too. She made me feel that I had no right to know about my own baby. Over the next several days I continuously begged to see my baby. All my requests were denied with the staff saying “It’s best that you don’t see the baby.” They added an extra cruelty by placing me in a ward with married women caring for their babies. This was a torture that I could not escape. This practice seriously damaged me psychologically and I began to retreat into myself

Please think about how this affected me. The scariest part for me is how I felt after the birth and trying to deal with how I felt. I tried to see the baby, tried to find out what I had. I was asking and asking and asking. I felt demented, I couldn’t comprehend that I was never going to see the baby and that they would not let me see her. I didn’t know how to make it happen. I didn’t know what to do. I had to do it all myself and I didn’t know how to. I didn’t think I would ever see her. All I could think about was the baby and that I was never going to know its sex, never going to see it. The staff had all the power, I had none. It seemed like I was invisible to the staff.

I was so immobilised by my treatment that I didn’t think to look for her and go and get her. I didn’t even look for the nursery. If I could have, I would have, because I wanted her so badly. I never thought I was going to see her and I kept asking and asking and asking.

Unexpectedly I was taken to a room and the baby was placed in my arms. A nurse stood watching me and I felt her anger and animosity toward me. I was acutely aware that I should not be seeing the baby. By this time I was in a state of extreme psychological distress and was numb. I sat in the chair with the baby in my arms and was unable move. I did not remove her blankets, I did not touch her face, I did not see her body and I never kissed my baby. I never said hello and I never said goodbye. I have no memory of what she looked like. She was taken out of my arms and I was led back to my bed to watch the babies.

I know now that it was my legal right to have my baby with me whenever I wanted to as I was her legal guardian until I signed the consent form. I could have at least had a sense that I had had a baby and that she was mine.

During therapy I received a copy of my daughter’s original birth certificate which had a blank space where her name should have been. I was devastated to discover that I had had the right to name my baby. Again, I was not informed of my legal rights and my baby is forever nameless and faceless.

The Australia wide Adoption of Children Acts, 1965, added offences clauses into legislation against coercion, duress and undue influence to prevent the exploitation of mother and child. In spite of this protection my legal rights were ignored and during clinic appointments, during my hospital stay and prior to signing consent I was bombarded by comments from the staff such as “your baby deserves the best”, “its best for the baby”, “its best for you” , “what can you give the baby”, “the baby deserves two

parents”, “the baby needs a family”, “how can you look after a baby,” “if you love the baby you will adopt it”. Ironically when my baby was gone they said “She didn’t love the baby, she gave it away.” I was exploited and coerced.

I was not warned of the permanency of adoption and the lifelong implications and emotional risks of dire future regret if adoption is being considered, ie I was never asked if I was sure that I would not later deeply regret my decision to surrender my baby as I would never see her or hear of her again.

I was offered no options other than adoption. I was provided with no information prior to signing a consent about financial assistance available to me, foster care, state child minding facilities, and no information about applying through the courts for maintenance from the child's father that were available under the Child Welfare Act which could have enabled me to keep my child. . The Child Welfare Act said that only when a mother has considered these options, and still wishes to proceed with the surrender for adoption, should the consent be accepted."

The Child Welfare Act of the time also said, "A mother giving an adoption consent must be fully aware of the import of her action and, must be emotionally and mentally able to appreciate all the implications of such consent. Consent should not be taken if there is any suggestion of indecisiveness or that she has not given sufficient consideration to the matter".

I never personally asked to sign the adoption consent forms. I had no prior warning of the date or time and was suddenly taken from my bed to a room full of nurses and a JP sitting at a table. I began to cry uncontrollably and my distress was so great that I did not hear what was being said to me by the JP. I was alone with no advocate or representation from my family. The staff in the room ignored my distress which clearly showed that I was emotionally and mentally unable to appreciate all the implications of such consent. The JP pushed the papers in front of me and I was told to sign my name. I did not want to sign the papers but in the face of this authority I did. At no time during the proceedings was I asked if I was unsure and I was not offered more time to get myself together. My consent was therefore not legally taken and was not valid. I was totally alone, unsupported and powerless against authority.

I had no idea of what was on the papers until I received copies 36 years later at which time I also discovered that because I was 18 and under the legal age of majority (which was 21) the consent to adopt was not legally enforceable.

After I signed the consent I asked to be discharged saying “I can’t watch the babies anymore”. Due to a medical condition I was told that I had to stay and the staff ignored my obvious distress. I went back to my room to watch the babies. The staff finally sent me out the door with the words “Go home and forget you had a baby,” ringing in my ears. What sort of a thing was that to say to a mother who had a baby? They totally ignored the fact that I had a baby. I walked away without my baby and felt bad and worthless, with my self esteem at zero.

Somehow, I did know about the 30 day revocation period but I did not know how to go about this. Every day after I went home I thought about going to the hospital to collect her but no one acknowledged the fact that I had had a baby, she did not exist.

I was totally unable act on my own and when day 30 passed I was desolate as I knew I had lost her forever. Even if I had managed to do this I know now that my baby was not in the hospital as she was collected by her adoptive parents a few days after I was discharged. I lived with the thought for decades that because I did not go and get her it proved that I did not love her.

I went off the rails for a couple of years. My life was so abnormal without the baby but the baby was never mentioned and had disappeared. Everyone acted as if nothing had happened and nobody, including my family, acknowledged that I had had a baby. I managed to pull myself together, got married and had two children but of course they did not replace my lost baby. I began drinking heavily. Alcohol numbed me and helped me to bury my feelings

The baby was never spoken of by me or my family until my daughter and I were reunited 20 years later. For those twenty years she was never out of my mind. I constantly wondered: Is she still alive? Is she happy? Is she well? What does she look like? Does she know about me? Will she want to find me? We both started searching when she turned 18 and were reunited by Jig Saw when she was 20. I was walking on air. I was finally going to see my baby, but of course she was no longer a baby. I did not begin to deal with this fact until I began therapy.

Reunion did not bring peace to either of us although I thought at the time that it would. Both my daughter and I have been damaged by adoption. She is angry with me for adopting her. She feels abandoned and has said to me “there must have been something you could have done to keep me.” In 1969 there was not, but it seems that the idea of mothers losing their babies to adoption simply because they are unmarried is so bizarre that it is beyond the comprehension of society now.

Please think about these words which my daughter said to me “I forgive you for adopting me.” I do not need to be forgiven. I want my daughter to understand the powerless situation I was in and understand that once I entered the hospital I was never going to be allowed to keep her. I know that now

I drank for decades (I am a recovering alcoholic) but I managed to stop drinking seven years ago (after several attempts). Without alcohol I had nothing to numb me and my grief, loss and buried emotions began to surface.

Six months after I stopped drinking I was extremely depressed and overwhelmed by my emerging emotions and had no idea of how to deal with what was happening to me, I found the courage somewhere inside me and began seeing an adoption counsellor. Finally, after 34 years of guilt, shame and secrecy I began to talk about the baby and my experiences in hospital. It was like a dam had burst and I was completely overwhelmed with repressed emotions. I saw my counsellor for three years. She recognised that I needed to seek additional help and assisted me to find a psychologist and supported me during the transition. I have been diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder, complicated grief and depression and have been seeing my psychologist for the past three years.

Therapy is agonisingly painful but I have a much better understanding of how I came to lose my baby to adoption and of the damage done to me in hospital. I am facing

my ongoing grief and loss and trying to make some sense of the cruel and inhumane adoption practices I endured in hospital but my journey toward healing and resolving my grief and loss is not completed yet.

Society said that adoption was in my and my baby's best interest. It was not. The cruel and inhumane ordeal that was labelled adoption separated and damaged my baby and me. Just as they deprived me – they deprived the baby. I find it very upsetting that she and I could have had 10 days together and we were not permitted even that. They didn't have to deprive us, we could have had that time together

I understand now that I was psychologically shocked and traumatized by the birth, the loss of my baby and my experiences in hospital. I was easy prey for a society determined to punish me and at the same time provide a healthy baby for a married couple who, in my case, had two natural boys and wanted a girl. I had something they wanted, a girl, and for that reason alone they were able to take my baby.

For decades I believed that I was bad and that I did not love my baby. Now I know why I lost the baby and it was not because I was bad. It was because I was young, vulnerable (partly because I was unmarried and pregnant), helpless and I HAD SOMETHING SOMEONE ELSE WANTED. That is why I lost her. It was NOT because I did not love or want my baby.

I survived only because I didn't allow myself to think about anything and even after three years of help from my psychologist it is still really hard to deal with my emotions and my ongoing grief for a baby that no longer exists but is 41 years old.

I am very pleased to finally have this opportunity to share my adoption experience, although I do not believe that I can fully portray the desperation and helplessness I felt in the hospital when denied access to my baby.

In closing my submission I ask that you read some of my poetry. At times it has been incredibly difficult for me to speak aloud about my hospital experiences and my feelings. Writing enabled me to express my thoughts.

ROBYN

Robyn was a quiet, nice young girl
That changed when she became pregnant
An' unmarried mother' took her place
Society decreed 'unmarried mothers' bad
Said I was unfit to mother my own baby
And conspired to take her for adoption

My barrenness was overwhelming
My pleas to see her fell on deaf ears
The staff had power, I had none
And baby Clifford became an orphan
My missing baby engendered shame
But she was not officially a secret

The staff put many hurdles in my way
But Robyn was there to hold the baby
The staff assaulted me with animosity
And as I held her in my arms I knew
I was bad when pregnant, bad when not
The weight of shame crushed me

Surrounded by intolerant, blank faces
I looked like Robyn as I signed consent
But a very different girl sat in the chair
As baby Clifford became baby (...)
Discharged with the words "forget her"
She was now officially a secret

To the outside world I was still Robyn
But I had altered beyond belief
'Normal' life was not possible without her
I buried all emotions and existed
No one noticed that I had changed
I did not know what had happened to me

VISIBLE/INVISIBLE

During labour no one saw me
I was only visible when I delivered
A sexless, nameless, hidden baby
My cries to see this baby were ignored
Unmarried mothers had no babies
They were put aside for someone else

People were affronted by my presence
The staff ignored my desperate pleas
Mothers glanced at me and looked away
Evening darkness covered my disgrace
Gave an escape from scorn and anger
The morning light always revealed me

Footsteps echoed through the corridors
I heard faint sounds of babies crying
The rumble of their cribs got closer
Then the room was filled with babies
Happy mothers held them close
Invisible, I watched them from my corner bed

I was visible when they needed me
They only needed me to sign consent
I did as I was told and had no further use
Invisible again I retreat inside myself
And wait until released from torment
Where was I when this was happening?

In 1969 the baby disappeared forever
Her existence was obliterated by adoption
In 2010 I long to hold her close to me
But she is 41 years old with many faces
I do not know the baby that I bore
She is from my past but fills my present

WHO IS THE BABY?

In 1969 I held the baby once
I felt the nurse looking straight at me
She saw a bad, unmarried mother
She knew I did not love my baby
I did not know that I loved her

The baby mine but she was hidden
She was waiting for her real parents
A motherless baby cared for by nurses
She was nameless so they named her
The nurses took my place but did not love her

The baby is a thought without substance
She hides in dark recesses of my mind
Covered up by negative experiences
I try to retrieve my memories of her
I do not know if they are there or not

I still long to hold the baby close to me
But there is no baby to fill my need
Unfathomable feelings make me cry
The emptiness inside is all consuming
I want to take a journey back in time

The baby was my secret for decades
I still need to know the baby that I lost
I still need to touch her, hold her, kiss her
I need to feel that she was mine
We never said hello, we never said goodbye

TO THE STAFF

You left me all alone in labour
I tried to capture your attention

But you refused to see or hear me
I asked you did I have a boy or girl
I begged you to let me hold her
I never knew I would not see her

I felt demented with my need
I begged you for my baby daughter
To no avail, you would not concede
You knew that this was best for me
But you never, ever spoke with me
You never saw me as a person

You had more rights than I had
You held her close and fed her
You chose the name (...) for her
A couple waited for my baby
They had more rights than I had
You made that crystal clear

You watched me cry as I lost her
You did not utter one kind word
You led me to my solitary bed
I was still crying but you left me
I felt your attitude toward me
I realised that I was nobody

I was distressed and asked to leave
You heard my words, but did not listen
You saw me cry, but did not help
Crushed by your lack of empathy
Defeated by your indifference
I sat and watched the lovely babies

You never thought that I had rights
Never thought I loved my baby
Never saw me as her mother
Never heard me when I cried
Never saw me in the corner
You never thought of me at all

Forty years have passed since then
I want my baby that never was
I need to hold her close to me
I want to feel that she was mine
Your practices were damaging
To this day you do not know this