

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into forced Adoptions

I am the Mother of a child who was lost to adoption. I did not have any other children and have not been able to reclaim the title of Mother, until now.

Early in 1970 I found that I was pregnant. As an unmarried woman who had just turned 21, this was a most distressing time for me. I knew of other women who were unmarried and pregnant; they suffered discrimination, public humiliation, their children were referred to as bastards they were branded as illegitimate. I knew that my child and I faced an uncertain future.

The father (P) did not want to be married or have a child at that time. He offered some limited financial support. He broke the bad news to my father. My father said to me that if I kept my child, I would not be welcome at home or in the family. I was forbidden to have further contact with P.

My parents feared that I would bring disgrace, shame and ridicule and this would damage the family reputation. They worried that my siblings would be taunted about having an illegitimate (bastard) child in the family. It all had to be kept a secret. I was to be banished from home and immediate family members for the duration of the pregnancy and faced being shunned and excluded from the family if I went against the wishes of my parents.

Such were the times, vulnerable pregnant and unmarried woman were at the mercy of social criticism and ridicule. They were socially isolated and treated harshly. At a time when the mother most needed love, compassion and emotional support, she and her child were cast aside by society in general, and manipulated by the adoption system. What drove the agenda, that a pregnant woman at a most vulnerable time could be treated so harshly, abandoned and shunned by the people who should be protective of the mother and baby?

These attitudes were driven by the Commonwealth Government policies of the day, influenced by the privations of a by-gone era, eugenic policies to remove children from so called 'lower classes' and 'unfit mothers' to provide children for childless or otherwise infertile married people.

Adoption was put to me as the only option. I was told many times that if I really loved my child I would give him the best opportunity in life, to be raised in a 'good' home with a married couple and that adoption would remove the stigma of illegitimacy. This was the ultimate emotional blackmail!

I was also told that I should put this experience behind me, to get on with my life and to 'forget' about the child. How does a mother forget her baby?

I moved interstate to stay with my paternal grandmother. This was a relatively safe haven, I was fortunate that I did not have to endure the humiliation of being sent to a state or religious run home for unmarried mothers. Even so, I was very socially isolated and lived a quiet existence helping my grandmother with household tasks.

I had regular appointments with my grandmothers' GP for antenatal visits. I was young and healthy, my pregnancy was trouble free. Arrangements were made for me to see the Almoner at the local hospital.

The Almoner was young and married, but she was in my view not very experienced. She was not able to offer anything in the way of emotional support or practical advice about options available for me and my child. Her advice was to buy a wedding ring to wear while I was in hospital – this was to supposedly not cause any offence the sensitivities of other married women in hospital. I was offended by this advice and I didn't take it.

I told the Almoner that I had chosen a name for my child, she said why bother because the adoptive parents would give the child a new name.

Various details were taken about me and some information about P. It is interesting to note on a copy of the form released from the file, that this Almoner rated P to be of 'above average intelligence' even though she didn't ever meet or speak to him. I was deemed to be of average intelligence.

The appointments with the Almoner were very distressing. She offered no hope, no alternatives, no information about options, no explanations about the adoption or legal processes. In my opinion, she was likely just ticking the boxes for the adoption process rather than acting as an advocate for me and my child.

As the pregnancy progressed, my grandmother could see my growing depression and anxiety, she encouraged me to contact P. We spoke by phone, and unfortunately he could not help me or offer any further support to enable me to keep my child. P agreed at that time to be named as the father of the child and to be open to contact from the child if ever that opportunity arise in the future.

The last weeks of the pregnancy were a very sad time for me, facing the awful fate for my child with a growing sense of inadequacy as a mother. In the final weeks of the pregnancy it was thought that my baby would be a breech delivery. The Doctor ordered an x-ray, but all was OK the baby had turned.

When the labour pains began in the early hours of the morning, I was taken to the hospital. I was quickly taken inside to be prepared for the delivery while the Doctor was called in. I was totally unprepared for being shaved and having the enema! Such was my innocence and naivety. I was unprepared emotionally for the birth of my child.

During the labour I was encouraged to breathe gas through a mask to ease the pain. The Doctor gave me an episiotomy to assist the birth and prevent tearing – this was a shock and I didn't know what was happening until after the event.

I had a short labour and straight forward delivery, the Doctor announced that I had a fine baby boy. I asked to hold him, the staff hesitated, but the Doctor was quick to tell them to pass the child to me. I looked into my dear baby's eyes hoping that my love would fill his soul and that he would retain some memory of me. I wrote his beautiful face into my memory. I held my son for those few precious minutes before the placenta was delivered. Then he was taken away.

I was taken to a private room well away from the other maternity wards and the nursery. I remember sleeping a long time, waking up feeling lost and very confused. I was left on my own. Nurses came to check me from time to time, but his was very impersonal, brusque and dismissive. I was given tablets to suppress lactation, although I don't recall much else about my time in hospital or any other medications administered to me.

This was in the era where newborn babies were kept in the hospital nursery and only taken to their mothers for feeding. Prior to this time I had never visited a maternity ward, I had no understanding about babies; apart from my limited experience with helping my mother with younger siblings. I didn't know what was expected of me. It was like I was in a vacuum, kept isolated and getting the silent treatment.

I felt very inadequate because I hadn't prepared any clothes for my son. I was very afraid to ask to see my baby, fearful that my request would be refused and that I would be admonished for doing so. In my ignorance, when he was not brought to me to feed him, I thought that my baby had already been taken away from the hospital.

I heard babies crying in the distance, this caused my insides to form a tight knot. I felt so lost and fearful.

While in hospital, no-one came to see me or to talk to me about my son or to give me information about the formal adoption process to be followed.

I was discharged from hospital a few days after the birth and went back to my grandmother's home. My parents travelled to visit my grandmother and other relatives; they were staying at the house when I was discharged from hospital.

The Doctor prescribed medication to calm my distress; I don't recall the name of the medication. I was overcome by feelings of loss, grief and regret. These feelings have continued to be an emotional burden in my life.

Seven days after my son was born I was told to get ready to go with my father. I was taken to a dowdy, pokey office. I didn't know who had arranged this, or what it was about. The appointment was with the JP, and the consent for adoption and birth registration papers were presented to be signed. I was totally unprepared for this.

The documents were pre-prepared with the personal details typewritten on the forms. My father's behaviour was very domineering and controlling. I saw what had been typed on the forms and challenged two glaring omissions. I told the JP that I wanted to give my son the names I had chosen and that P had agreed to be named as the father. This threw my father into a rage, he said "he (P) has no right to have anything to do with this, he wouldn't marry you, he left you so why should he have any part of this now". I tried to counter argue, but my father was adamant.

The JP did not intervene or make any comments; he sat passively while my father raged at me. He did not ask my father to leave the room. The JP did not attempt to speak to me directly or in private. The JP should not have allowed me to sign these documents under such obvious duress. The fact that I had wanted to give my son his chosen names got lost in the uproar. P was completely left out of the birth registration process. I felt very crushed, small and insignificant.

I now understand that excluding P from the registration of the birth was a legal and administrative convenience. For paternity to be acknowledged, P would have been required to sign the birth registration form. That done; P would also have to sign the consent to the adoption. This would have delayed the adoption formalities. This was a serious manipulation of the process; it was a denial of my rights as the mother, and P's rights as the father. It was a gross denial of my son's birthright to have accurate information on his birth certificate, regardless of this certificate being superseded by the adoption process.

The next uproar was when my father demanded that I nominate the religion for my son to be raised in. I tried to question this, saying words like - if I'm a and have been treated this way, what future can my son expect, I can't even have him baptised! My resistance was futile, under the enormous pressure I succumbed and wrote on the form and initialled other parts of the form as directed by the JP.

Many years later I obtained a copy of this form from the file, my signature is small, (this is how I remember feeling at that time – I was crushed and emotionally beaten into submission). In addition I found my date of birth had been recorded incorrectly - I didn't notice this error on that very stressful day.

My son was left as a nameless, fatherless child – and now with my signature on the consent form, he was motherless as well. But he did have a preferred religion! Religion was given more significance in that flawed process than the rights of the child, mother and father.

The JP told me I had 30 days to revoke my consent to the relinquishment. No one had explained this to me in the months before the birth of my child or in the week that followed. It was as if there had been a conspiracy to keep me ignorant of the facts, to prey on my vulnerability.

The stress of that awful time caused me to emotionally shut down, I was totally emotionally subjugated, I had no fight left in me. I can vividly recall the sense of shock, the metallic taste in my mouth, the dryness of no saliva in my mouth, I was unable to speak. I don't have any memory of leaving the office, I only recall sitting in my father's car in a car park at a nearby beach in an extremely grief stricken state. My father eventually said that I should pull myself together so he could take me back to the family gathered at my grandmother's home.

A few days later I was further shocked to receive an account for the Air Ambulance transport of my baby son to the city, this transfer was done on the day the papers were signed. I was so shocked that my child had been kept in the hospital for the 7 days since his birth. I was so distressed that he had been there all that time, I could have seen him and cared for him. I paid the bill! I should never have been sent that account.

Until the papers were signed, and likely to the expiry of the 30 days revocation period, I was my son's legal guardian, as his mother. Why was I kept out of his life? I was denied the opportunity of bonding with my child. This was a deliberate separation of mother and child, a denial of our human rights.

No information was given to me about the long term emotional impact of adoption. I had to discover that for myself, the hard way. I have not had any other children. The loss of my only child has been a cause of much sadness.

In following years, I became a very keen observer of other people's children and the ways that families interact. I looked for children who were a similar age to my lost son. I looked at the games they played and when the opportunity arose I interacted with children who were of a similar age to my son, always craving time with my own son. Mothers Day is not a time of celebration for me. Happy family gatherings to welcome new babies are cause of distress for me. These events always renew my sense of loss and grief.

I have suffered from depression and emotional distress since the loss of my son. When the pain became too hard to manage, I went through a time when I tried to forget (as I had been told to do). Then for my sanity's sake, I struggled to remember, to claw back all the memories and feelings – they were all that was left to remember my child. I remember having a fearsome anxiety attack when I thought I didn't remember his date of birth.

I kept that film of the x-ray taken before my baby was born and carried it with me for a long period of time, hidden in the bottom of a suitcase. It was the only evidence I had of my son, his little bones showing within my body on the film. I don't recall when I disposed of this x-ray film, but it was likely during a black depressive time in my life, maybe this is when I also disposed of P's letters. I'm sad that I don't have these things now, they were the only tangible proof of my son and P's affection.

When the Adoption laws were changed, after a long time waiting for information from the adoption file, I located my son in 1990. Sadly he declined to have contact with me. While I have respected his wish to not have contact with me, I felt it an injustice that I knew his identity, but he didn't know who I was. In 1993 I started writing to him. It is some consolation to me that I can write to my son even though he does not reply. It is my heartfelt hope that we will have a reunion and form a relationship at some future time.

Over the years I have had many sessions of counselling and participated in group therapy but this has not eased the sense of loss and grief. The counselling, therapy and my affiliation with adoption support groups such as ARMS and Jigsaw have slowly given me the confidence to speak about my son and the sadness, loss and grief caused by the adoption.

In 2002 I was able to have my son's original birth certificate corrected and this was significant to me. The original birth certificate is superseded by the adoption, but the record has been corrected to show the names chosen for my son, plus P's given and surname. This gave me a degree of satisfaction, but sadly paternity remains "not stated" on the original birth certificate. My only consolation is that both son and father know the others names; what they do with this information is now their business for some future time.

In 2003 I discovered that my son had a child, the day before my own birthday. I am the 'hidden and secret' grandmother. This was a bitter sweet discovery. This is another loss in my life.

My parents are now deceased. I recovered my relationship with my mother in recent years and there was nothing left unsaid between us; but with my father there was unfinished business. Whether my father acknowledged it in his lifetime or not, he suffered a significant loss in the adoption process. He was a product of his time, born into the depression era, he was a proud man. Having male grandchildren to carry on the family name was important to him. His compliance with social expectations, and his enforcement of the value of those times, resulted in the loss of his first grandson who would have carried the family surname. Two other grandsons carry the family surname, but the first was lost to adoption, their sad legacy.

The Adoption Apology given in the Western Australian Parliament on 19th October 2010 was a very significant day for me and the many thousands of women who have suffered the loss of a child to adoption. The speeches made by the WA Members of Parliament should be read and taken into consideration by the Senate Committee.

It is my sincere hope that the Federal Parliament and every State Parliament in Australia will make a similar apology to that given on 19th October 2010. Nothing can change the past, but a formal recognition of the flawed adoption policies and practices of the past can provide a pathway to healing the lives of the mothers and children and their families.

The Commonwealth must recognise the damage caused by past adoption practices and due recognition must be given to the distress caused to those caught up in this awful experience. Personally I am not seeking any compensation or 'redress'; however I believe there is much to be done by the Commonwealth to continue/increase the funding to organisations which provide support services to women and adopted people.

Thank you.