

Australian Government Senate Inquiry into Forced Adoption - 2011

The Submission of Elizabeth Hughes – subject of Forced Adoption 1944 from (...) (...)
(...) Home, Brighton, South Australia.

My mother, (...), joined the RAAF and was posted to the RAAF facility at Victor Harbor, South Australia in 1943. She met and formed a relationship with my father, (...) when she was 23 years of age and he was 32 years of age. He also was in the RAAF and posted to the same facility. When she became pregnant she expected that they would marry, because of the existing, loving relationship. She was informed by her Officer-in-Charge that he was already married and had a family of four children in Western Australia. It was the first she knew of it. He was sent on leave and then to a posting in the islands North of Australia. She went to the (...) Home in Adelaide. In order to earn her keep she scrubbed floors on her hands and knees did washing and other strenuous household tasks throughout her pregnancy. She came from a family of hard-working people, was used to physical work but found the regime difficult and without choice.

When she went into labour in July 1944, she was taken to the Queen Victoria Maternity Hospital, at that time for poor mothers. Following the birth, she was taken, with me, back to the (...) (...) Home where she undertook my care. This involved breast feeding, but not on demand, changing and bathing under strict supervision. Mothers were not permitted to cuddle or comfort the babies they had given birth to or show them love and affection. The babies were kept in a nursery, where there would have been many uncomforted, hungry, distressed babies crying at any one time.

She had no choice in my adoption; it was expected, arranged and forced on her by the staff and the attitudes of the times. She had no choice about who her baby was to be adopted by, was not allowed to meet them, once she had been told they had been found and was given no counselling or support, other than to have an injection to dry up her milk once the placement day arrived. After six weeks she was instructed to take her baby into a room where she had to be left for the Adopters to collect. The time before placement allowed the development of the bond between us, but only in a strictly limited and regulated environment. It served as punishment for what she alone had been blamed for, a pregnancy without marriage. She was given to expect she would never see me or hear about me again.

There was no choice, no discussion and no sympathy, understanding or kindness. (...) referred to the women, girls and their babies in her care as 'the unfortunates'. They were stigmatised, traumatised and many never recovered from their experience.

My mother suffered secondary infertility and in her subsequent marriage was not able to have children, despite her love of them and her wish to be an actively participating mother of her own child, in her care. She never forgot her experience or her baby and was scarred for life by the trauma of the loss and forced relinquishment. She never stopped hoping that one day she would meet her baby again, that the adopters were good parents and that they had given her baby a good life. Since there was no open adoption and anonymity was assured, she had no photos, no record of my birth and nothing to prove I existed or had ever existed. The names she gave me after her loved cousin and my father were taken away, wiped out as if she had never made the choice; the only one she had in the whole time of pregnancy, birth and the six weeks of care of me.

My original birth certificate shows her name and my name and date of birth, nothing more than a

string of entries “not known”. My birth records and the records of the (...) Home were unfortunately “destroyed in a fire” many years ago, making the story of my life and many others incomplete and unavailable.

The supposed wiping out of “illegitimacy” by adoption was not successful in my case, as my adopters lived in a small community, where it was immediately apparent they had adopted a “bastard”. I was known as “ (...) s Bastard” for my formative years, stigmatised by adoption, traumatised by the loss of my mother and raised by people who were not approved to adopt after one visit, but were able to bring about a reversal of decision. In what way was never revealed. My adoptive father had what today would be diagnosed as a Bi-polar Disorder and my adoptive mother considered “eccentric”. Their motivation in adopting was never discussed. Today they would have been considered un-approveable.

The damage of adoption was life-long for both my mother and for me. She never recovered from the loss of a forced adoption and I expect the effects on me of the loss of attachment and the trauma of adoption, to be life-long. As a direct result of adoption I have found difficulties with trust of others, self-esteem, confidence, relationships and being a mother myself. I have sought counselling or therapy at six times though my adult life, roughly once in each decade. However there is no counselling available specifically for adoptees, to assist them with the issues of adoption which involves more than loss. The damage done by the institution and the regime practised there I believe are responsible for the nightly nightmares I have suffered all my life, my reactions to extreme stress when I become catatonic and the difficulties I sometimes have with insight into the behaviour of others. This has led me into two abusive adult relationships, the first with a badly psychologically damaged man and the other with a sociopath.

Many adoptees have difficulty in describing their experiences of adoption, because the trauma of loss of attachment and adoption happened before they had words to voice their feelings. It takes decades sometimes for adoptees brought up to be “good, happy, grateful adoptees” to recognise that their adoption was abusive, the act of forced removal and forced adoption abusive and to begin to speak about it. It takes time to recognise the feelings and find the words to describe them. This happens with victims of sexual, emotional and physical abuse. For victims of adoption who may have experienced all of those abuses and the abuse of adoption itself, it is sometimes doubly difficult and impossible to make a recovery. Many adoptees recognise and use the expression “the adoption fog” to describe some of the effects of adoption they experience quite regularly and commonly. They use it to describe being stuck in a painful place they don’t understand; somewhere frightening and inexplicable, which sometimes never makes sense, or sometimes makes sense after decades, therapy and support.

Following the changes in the law in South Australia, I was able to be reunited with my mother when I was 50 years of age and she was 74 years of age. Sadly far too late to have time to form the sort of relationship either of us would have liked before her death. The damage of forced adoption left its scars on both of us and we were not able to heal that. My scars will never heal, just as hers did not.

My father was unknown to me, he was informed of my birth and died before the law changed. He never spoke of my existence to his family and whether his wife knew will not now ever be known. Some would argue that he never suffered the consequences of what he did and that the full brunt of unmarried pregnancy was taken by my mother. My youngest sister was born five months after I was.

I welcome this Senate Inquiry and the opportunity to make this submission in memory of my mother

(...) , so badly wronged in what will never be put right. I am heartened by the steady decrease in domestic adoption and hope to see adoption die out in Australia in my lifetime. Adoption is not a cure for infertility; it is a cruel and destructive practice, which forces children to live lives in which they have no choice. At the time of my forced adoption it was never expected I would see my mother again, a cruel and unethical treatment of those once branded 'illegitimate' and of lesser worth than others.

While this country no longer carries out the type of adoption practised between 1940 and 1970, transnational adoption is popular, with its particular type of losses and traumas for adoptees. While adoptees are seen as having no rights and no choices, along with their mothers, adoption will continue to be forced, unethical and damaging.

I trust that this Inquiry will recommend continued support and counselling for mothers and adoptees for their lifetimes. Counselling carried out by skilled, experienced counsellors who understand the particular requirements of the counselling of those affected by adoption. There needs to be specialist training both in University Degree Courses, Graduate Courses and in Counselling Diplomas. Those working in professions such as Social Work, Psychology, Psychiatry, Medicine need to be made aware of the special needs of adoptees and mothers and they need to be trained to acquire those special skills. This support needs to be made available to mothers and adoptees, at no cost in light of the damage done by Institutions, Government Agencies, Hospitals and Church Agencies.

I hope also, that the Inquiry will acknowledge in a resulting Report that the process of making an admission has, for some adoptees and mothers, been a difficult and painful one, in which they have had to go back into a traumatic time of their lives, with the possibility this will re-traumatise, re-emphasise their pain and suffering and re-activate aspects of that trauma and suffering. This has been done, in my case, willingly in order to see justice done for my mother, myself and for the other mothers and adoptees who are no longer here for whom justice will never be done, but who lived in suffering. I hope to see a recommendation that apology be made by all institutions involved in forced adoption to those who suffered and continue to suffer. In my case the Uniting Church, once the Methodist Church.

Adoption has been cruel and created so many problems of identity, acceptance of self, separation of families and has created emotional abuse, sometimes physical and sexual abuse on a large scale. There is no way to take that away, to make it right or wipe it out. Acknowledgment, acceptance and apology may help some, when what they suffered is recognised, believed and brought into accounts of our history.

I do not believe that anything will ever compensate for the damage done by forced adoption, but that an Apology by the Federal Government could help those affected, to accept that our country-folk do know the damage that was done, what it was and how it affected the thousands of mothers and babies of the era. All of us live with that damage for life. Forced adoption has been a life sentence for the innocent and one from which there is no reprieve.