

Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia



Dear Committee

Re: Submission for inquiry Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices

Please find attached my submission for the above inquiry.

Terms of Reference

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

- Unmarried mothers were not made aware of existing financial assistance by the Commonwealth govt.
- The Commonwealth Government should have ensured that welfare practices throughout its states and territories were child focused rather than the needs and desires of adopting parents.
- The Commonwealth Government should have ensured that illegal and criminal practices did not take place in the pursuit to a child being placed for adoption.
- The Commonwealth Government should have provided a national framework policy and clear guidelines that protected the child from harm by potential adoptive parents ensuring that checks and screening processes were enacted and adhered to.
- The Commonwealth Government played a pivotal role in allowing the adoption process to flourish unchecked and without accountability. Not ensuring that the best interest of the child was served and thereby directly contributed to the secrecy and stigma of adoption.
- The Commonwealth continued to ignore warnings that adoption was harmful to mother and child and had life devastating impacts.

Summary:

Secrecy, illegal practises, lack of screening and no accountability led me to being placed as a baby a few weeks old, in a family that was totally unfit for this responsibility. I was taken away from a loving mother and siblings and abandoned by the system and government.

Having to deal with years of being told I wasn't wanted and that my mother was dead because of me. To comprehend that she was so afraid of threats by the department she would rather abort me than experience the pain of adoption again and was forced to relinquish me.

My life as an adoptee has been a living hell. Experiencing horrendous abuse, torture and child labour by the very family touted to be better than my own mother. I have been able to survive years of torment by blocking it all out until 27 years old and every year I remember more. The perpetrated abuse has had a

profound and life lasting impact on every aspect of my health, wellbeing and capacity to participate in society.

As a little girl standing out my back door of the fibro shed after a long hard day of labour, a wealthy sister in-law to my adoptive father towered over me, speaking these words that I will never forget, "You must feel so grateful to be taken from the gutter and adopted by such wonderful people, mustn't you'?"

I was too afraid to answer then, I just stood in silence. For 48 years I have lived in the shadow of what others have thought of me unlovable, unwanted, gutter child, not deserving of truth, love and protection. My whole life has been enshrouded in lies, secrecy, deceit and abuse.

Today I break the silence and speak the truth of my adoption. It was and still is a living nightmare and now that you know my truth I ask you, "What are you going to do about it'?"

(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.

My Adoption

I was born 16/11/1962 at the Royal Women's & Children Hospital in Brisbane and named by my mother (...). My mother was 35 and a widow with four other children whose ages ranged between 7 and 12. She resided with her children in Townsville and travelled to Brisbane for my birth. 43 years later my birth mother explained that she had also been forced to adopt out a son 4 years previous to my birth. She explained that Child welfare had threatened to take her four other children as well as the baby if she didn't adopt it out. When she fell pregnant with me she was terrified that the welfare workers would return and threaten her again. She was so fearful that she turned to her doctor to seek an abortion, but was refused. My mother felt she could not bear to lose another child to adoption and be treated with such scorn and contempt. In one letter she tells me that she was made to feel "dirty and ashamed" and that the nurses and social workers told her "that this sort of behaviour had to stop". My mother clearly states, that she wished to keep us both but was prevented in doing so. Her ability to cope with such loss was to cling to the belief that we would be loved and provided for beyond her capabilities. In fact it was the strongest argument raised by social workers and hospital staff at the time.

My Adoption Order states that I was adopted 26/11/1962 to (...) and (...) and renamed Kerri Anne Saint. My adoption took place under "The Adoption of Children Acts, 1935 to 1952". At the time (...) were residing in a housing commission property at (...). I lived at (...) with my adoptive parents and two adopted siblings, a boy (2 years older) a boy (2 years younger). When I was 12 years old they fostered and later adopted an aboriginal girl with disabilities.

Up to the age of 12 I lived at (...). Whilst my adoptive brothers and I were very young we were taken to (...) so our adoptive father could learn how to burn and produce charcoal from one of his brother in laws. Whilst working week days as a (...) he owned and operated charcoal pits a (...).

Every weekend we were packed up on a Friday evening and travelled to his friend's property where we slept and ate in a tent. We were forced to do hard labour for many years in these pits whilst eventually clearing land and building a fibro shed on a nearby property, which my adoptive father had purchased. At the age of 12 in 1974 my adoptive family moved to this property, (...) which was an isolated underdeveloped rural area. The Fibro shed at (...) which we lived in at weekends and holidays then became my home for another 6 years. There was no electricity, no running water, no bathroom, no flooring (cement) no door on my bedroom and no privacy. Often when it rained it leaked under the poorly built structure, my bedroom would flood, leaving cold damp cement to walk on. The property was well hidden from the road and was surrounded by many acres of thick dense bushland. The roads were not sealed and there were no street lights or public transport except for the school bus that collected us 2 kms away. By living at the property my adoptive father could work us longer and certain jobs had to be fulfilled after school. As I grew older I often rebelled against my adoptive parent's treatment of us. I can remember many abusive fights, yelling and screaming matches. The first time I ran from my adoptive father I was so scared of him that I ran into a barb wire fence. When he reached me he kicked into my back with his army boots and dragged me to my feet by my hair, continuing to kick me until we reached a pit and then he threw me in demanding I get back to work. At the age of 17 my adoptive father again threw me by my hair, this time I was flung into a fridge, I finally retaliated with a broom. This final act of violence prompted me to leave home.

My adoptive mother had always told me that my mother had been only 16 when she died giving birth to me. She elaborated that my mother had tried to abort me and that was why she had died. She also used to refer to her as a whore and a slut. My adoptive parents would frequently threaten that they would get rid of me and send me to a children's home if I didn't conform. They told me I would be stripped naked and chained to the bed, no mattress, fed bread and water, have rats crawl all over me and be strapped everyday with a belt. I even recall them stopping the car outside a large building with wire around it one day to point out that "that's where you go". My adoptive father constantly complained about having to feed and clothe us. The adoptive mother often had to steal money from him in order to feed us. He drank heavily and fought often with the adoptive mother. He also frequently called me stupid and dumb. He used a form of torture occurring weekly to twice weekly up until I was 16 years old. This abuse contained sexual inferences. The abuse also included being set alight and suffocated.

My adoptive Mother often told me you're not my daughter, get out and don't come back.

My adoptive mother never mixed with any friends or acquaintances and would frequently shut down and not speak; sometimes disappearing (the longest period being 3 months). She also often set the children off against each other and our adoptive father (the latter ending in abuse). She was prone to frequent irrational outbursts of anger which resulted in physical punishment of the children and would often use a belt against you before locking you in a room. The mother always insisted on dressing me even as I got older; she would pull my hair, smack me, and use rough behaviour if I was too slow. As I reached puberty she would make fun of my body and imply that I was sleeping with boys. When I was 16 years old I discovered the adoptive mother drowning 11 adult cats which were family pets. The adoptive mother often watched when I was being abused by the adoptive father or turned her back and ignored my cries for help. She never tried to stop him. I can remember many times my adoptive mother instigating my adoptive father to hit and

hurt me. She frequently faked self-harming and suicidal attempts to manipulate and control me.

Her abuse to me has lasted all my life even into my adulthood; I have had to shield my children from her so much so I never left them alone with them. I have also had to rescue my adoptive sister from harmful and life threatening situations caused by our adoptive parents continued abuse.

When my adoptive sister was 17 years old I reported the abuses done to her and the department did nothing.

During the last 10 years I haven't had contact with my adoptive parents. My adoptive father died in (...) years ago, I did not attend the funeral.

The Consequences of my adoption

Short-term:

- I was denied medical treatments as a child.
- The abusive environment I was raised in meant that my hyper vigilant state caused cognitive disruptions to my ability to learn and concentrate in a classroom. I had to repeat grade three and teachers thought that I couldn't learn properly. I left school early only so that I could get a job in order to leave home.
- I was made to work from the age of 5 doing hard labour in charcoal pits owned and operated by my adoptive father. We often worked from six am until 9 pm every day on the weekends and during the school holidays. My job was to carry and weigh the charcoal into 25kilo bags– I would frequently stack hundreds of bags of charcoal and logs to burn in a pit in a day. I had no shoes or a hat and I was not allowed to drink or go to the toilet if I needed nor could I sit to rest. If I did I would have a lump of coal thrown at me or my hair pulled (frequent). I was there every weekend and every holiday's until I was about 16.
- I was never allowed to go anywhere and I could never have friends over. The only kids who visited were the children of my adoptive father's alcoholic friends. When I became a teenager I was afraid to have friends visit as I was ashamed and fearful to have others see my home life. I recall one friend asking her mother if I could come and live with them. The adoptive mother often called my friends 'sluts'. The adoptive mother would tell lies about me to their adult friends that were of a bizarre nature which often resulted in their abusing me.
- I was suffocated most mornings before work in the pits as I slept in my bed at 5 am. My adoptive father would sit on my chest and place my pillow over my face. One time in particular I thought I was going to die. I then decided to wake before my adoptive father and jump outside my window to escape being suffocated.
- As I got older I would try to refuse to work but my adoptive father would chase me, swear at me and become violent towards me, I often complied as I felt guilty that my brothers had to do more work. If I did run and hide to escape work or punishment I was locked out of the house/shed unable to have access to food, water, or bedding and forced to sleep in the bush. One time my older adopted brother received a beating from the adoptive father with a hose. We both fled and hid in the bush. Being locked out we walked about 6 kms to

steal some food and find a place to sleep, which was under some old burnt tin to protect us from the rain that fell that night.

- I often felt unsafe around the men my adoptive father brought into the home. One man stalked me and would stare at me. I complained to my father but he just made fun at me or yelled at me.
- I was often farmed off to another property, (a (...) farm) to work. I was sent to finish the work of a friend of the adoptive fathers so that he could finish earlier and go drinking with the adoptive father.

Long-term:

- Throughout my life I have suffered from issues of rejection and abandonment which has had significant impact on my relationships.
- I started drinking at the age of 13 years and escalated into my twenties, by the time I was 18 my stomach lining had already been damaged.
- The abusive role modelling I received as a child from my adoptive parents resulted in subconscious patterns of abusive relationships.
- The brutality and the nature of the child labour I was forced to endure as a child have left chronic physical problems which require ongoing medical care and treatment. I suffer from a fractured back, (caused from abuse) which is progressively worsening with age. I am also under the care of a pain specialist with daily pain management.
- I also experience debilitating migraines at least five per month. The migraines also regularly follow a flash back.
- I am unable to sleep without a window open and suffer from claustrophobia due to the frequent experiences of being suffocated during my childhood.
- The pain, suffering, torment and grief that I have experienced as a direct consequence of being adopted and abused has at times almost destroyed me. I have had to constantly seek support and assistance by way of counselling, to help remind me that I am of worth and have the same value as everyone else. There are some abuses I still cannot speak of.
- I experience a constant state of grief at losing my family of origin and never knowing the true love of a mother and the protection of a father.
- My current family consists of only my 3 children and 2 grandchildren. I have no other family as a direct result of being adopted. I have been forced to endure a life of detachment and aloneness as all attempts to reconnect with my natural family has failed.
- I believe that the government is directly responsible for what has happened to me. They failed to provide appropriate screening of potential adoptive parents which resulted in me and my adopted siblings being abused and exploited.

Recommendations for Framework for assistance:

- The Commonwealth Government should contribute to and expand upon existing state run counselling programs for people affected by forced adoptions.
- The Commonwealth Government should undertake to educate the public, in particular key service providers who may come into contact with people affected by adoption. In the past, public perception has been to view adoption as a positive thing (ie. you went to a good family).
- Specialised counselling for torture and trauma victims.

- Specialised mental health teams skilled and trained in dealing with such victims.
- More research and funding into the issues of those affected.
- More independent community based organisations to help support clients affected by adoption.
- Financial assistance for housing, education, medical, and mental health
- Financial compensation paid to those adults who as children were wrongly placed in homes where they were abused.

If you have any questions concerning this submission please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely
(...)

Kerri Saint
(...)

(...)