

Council of Single Mothers and their Children

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
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Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

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25th May 2011

Dear Secretary,

Re: Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices

The Council of Single Mothers and their Children (Vic) (CSMC) is a state-wide community organisation run for and by single mothers and their children, providing telephone support and counselling, referral, advice and emergency relief to single mothers throughout Victoria. CSMC is well recognised as a source of expert advice on issues of relevance to single mothers. Our expertise is grounded in the concerns expressed to us by single mothers calling our telephone contact line.

CSMC was founded over 40 years ago by a group of courageous women who were determined that women having children outside of marriage were just as capable of raising their children as married women. This inquiry has received many distressing submissions that detail the trauma and loss experienced by those who were compelled to relinquish their child/ren for adoption. These submissions provide eloquent accounts of the role of the Commonwealth government and institutions in the continuance of this practice.

Terms of Reference:

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

A key role the Commonwealth government played in forced adoption policies and practices was its refusal to extend income support to 'unwed mothers' until the early 1970's. Women involved with CSMC in the late 1960's and early 1970's have described their astonishment when they discovered that they were ineligible to receive the income support available to other women raising children alone. As CSMC founder Rosemary West describes:

*'For me, the penny dropped when I was pregnant in 1962 and asked the hospital social worker about social security benefits. She told me that I had broken the rules, and there was nothing for me. Girls like me were threatening the institution of marriage, she said, and if I cared for my child I would give her up.'*¹

¹ West, Rosemary 'How Single Mothers Overcame Discrimination' in Baldry, E. and Vinson, T. eds (1991) *Actions Speak: Strategies and Lessons from Australian Social and Community Action*.

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Inaugural Treasurer of CSMC, Brenda Richards describes being informed of being ineligible for income support:

*'I went to the Welfare Department [to apply for a pension]. I was told I was not eligible as I was not married. I hid my fear with anger. "Show me where it says that", I demanded. The young man picked up a book. "It's in here". "That will have to change" I said in a burst of bravado.'*²

Recognizing that if mothers had an adequate level of income they would be able to support themselves and their children, one of the first aims of CSMC was to 'win social security parity with widows'³. As a result of the tireless lobbying and advocacy of the women of CSMC, the later formed National Council of Single Mothers and their Children, and their supporters, in 1973 the Supporting Mothers Benefit was introduced, 'bringing an unprecedented standard of social security to single mothers, who would now receive the same level of benefits on the same terms as other supporting mothers in all States.'⁴

Within a couple of years of the introduction of this payment, the rates of adoption plummeted. There has continued to be a steady decline in adoption rates, from nearly 10,000 in 1971-2 to 1,052 in 1991-2. In 2009-10 there were only 412 adoptions, of which 'local adoptions' made up only 15%⁵.

There can be no doubt that once women were in a position to support themselves and their child they did so eagerly, putting paid to the prevailing myth that children were adopted because they were 'unwanted' or that their mothers did not love them.

The belief that they were unwanted by their mothers has led many adoptees to experience a sense of loss and pain over their entire lives which mirrors the loss and pain experienced by their relinquishing mothers. This is well-documented in literature, anecdotal evidence from organizations representing adoptees and the many submissions to this inquiry.

The denial to single mothers of the financial support available to other women raising children alone (widows, deserted wives and divorcees) by the Commonwealth was a direct contributor to the forced adoption policies and practices of health, church and charity organizations.

(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.

Other submissions to this Inquiry offer a range of valuable options for the Commonwealth to consider to address the consequences for mothers, their families and children who were subject to forced adoption policies.

² CSMC Ruby Anniversary booklet (2009). Available at: www.csmc.org.au

³ West, Rosemary 'How Single Mothers Overcame Discrimination' in Baldry, E. and Vinson, T. eds (1991) *Actions Speak: Strategies and Lessons from Australian Social and Community Action*.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2010) 'Adoptions Australia 2009-10' accessed at: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publication-detail/?id=6442472452&libID=6442472433&tab=2>

In the 1960s and 1970s, with birth control more difficult to access, there were more unplanned pregnancies. Abortion was illegal or at least difficult to arrange, so adoption of babies was more commonplace.

Single mothers were viewed as having no rights. Indeed they were seen as a resource to meet the demand for couples wanting to adopt babies. They were just the supply line to meet the demand of infertile couples for children to adopt. They were just a useful resource, not mothers with normal maternal feelings.

There was a clear assumption that a single mother's baby would be 'better off' with a couple wishing to adopt, that the mother had nothing to offer to her baby and that the best outcome was for her to give the baby up for adoption.

The increasing success of IVF practices has led to a somewhat lesser demand for babies for adoption. However, sole parents, and particularly very young sole parents are still often the target for blame and judgment, rather than support and understanding.

CSMC considers that a critical role for the Commonwealth is to ensure that women raising children have the financial support available to do so. As discussed above this was a crucial factor in reducing the numbers of adoptions, and allowing women to raise their own children. CSMC is extremely concerned that the ongoing erosion of the level of payments to single mothers may lead women to a point where they are unable to financially support their children.

Our founding members – who remember all too well the times of forced adoption and lack of choice - in particular are seriously concerned about provisions announced in the 2011-12 Federal Budget. Under these provisions teenage mothers will be forced into compulsory participation requirements when their babies are as young as 6 months or face having income support payments withheld. While the commitment of additional support and services to assist teenage mothers to complete or further their education is welcomed, the threat to withhold their payments should they not provide a *reasonable excuse*, as deemed by Centrelink, appears harsh, is not supported by evidence and is counterintuitive to the principle of support and assistance.

The financial circumstances of single mother led households and the increased risk of poverty and deprivation is well documented. The Social Policy Research Centre identified certain population groups that consistently face higher than average risk of poverty and stated that among family types, single people and lone parents were at the highest risk. Despite this the Federal Government is continuing the move started by the Howard government's Welfare to Work scheme – moving increasing numbers of single mothers off the Parenting Payment Single (PPS) and onto the much lower Newstart Allowance.

The deficiencies of the Newstart Allowance in supporting a family are clear: the basic rate of the Allowance is \$56 per week lower than PPS; the 'earnings threshold' is significantly lower, meaning that payments reduce at a much lower level of earnings (and there is no allowance for the number of dependent children); payments cut out at a lower level; and a liquid assets test applies to Newstart Allowance.

If, as a society we believe that the period of forced adoption was a blight on our history, and that we do not wish to return to a time when women feel they are unable to support their children, it is beholden

on the community, via the Commonwealth, to ensure that families have sufficient income to support themselves. It remains a disappointment that income support for single mother claimants was not included in the Harmer Review and therefore there is not a contemporary understanding, within government, as to what constitutes an adequate level of payment.

By this exclusion from the Harmer Review, there is also an implication that one-parent families are in some way not legitimate welfare recipients. Government accepts responsibility for assisting certain groups: the aged, disabled people, and children. This is appropriate, but it is also appropriate in a modern society, just as it was after the Second World War when Widow's Pension was introduced, to recognize that one-parent families, just by their nature, have a particular need for adequate income support.

With only half of the parental (and grand-parental) resources, it is short-sighted and narrow-minded to see the problems of sole parents as 'temporary unemployment'. Sole parents would be targeted by State community and human services departments if they 'neglected' their children. Yet this is the outcome of federal government policy, which forces sole parents into:

- (a) reduced financial circumstances, by the loss of the higher rate of pension when their children reach school age; and
- (b) expectations of Centrelink, job network providers and employers that sole parents' first responsibilities should be to them, rather than to their children.

This effectively forces sole parents into a three-way bind: they are and should be parents first, state governments do not condone neglect, but Commonwealth Government expectations run contrary to these responsibilities of parenthood. Neither do Governments, at either state or federal level, expect people to remain in unhappy or abusive relationships. The large majority of one-parent families are the result of the ending of relationships. It does not benefit mothers or children to be forced, by financial necessity, to remain in abusive relationships.

CSMC recommends that:

1. The government acknowledges the damage done to relinquishing mothers, and also to adoptees, as a result of the practices of forced adoptions.
2. The government funds free information, counselling and support services for mothers who have relinquished their children, and to adoptees.
3. The government acknowledges that the capacity of birth mothers to raise their own children is an important human right, benefiting both the child and the parent.
4. The government supports parents' rights to raise their own children as a fundamental principle. This principle should underpin all Centrelink and job network practices, instead of being undermined by them.
5. There is an immediate review into the adequacy of income support payments for sole parents, in the light of changes over the last decade which have seen payments for one-parent families significantly reduced.

6. In the light of the above principles, the government reinstates full pension status, with equivalence with Age and Disability Support pensions, including the Pension Supplement, for all one-parent families.
7. The government rename this payment to reflect its status as a pension, and cease its negative and judgmental approach to this group. Children in one-parent families should not bear the burden of poverty in order to balance the federal budget.
8. In the context of the inadequacy of income support payments, the government make a commitment to:
 - (a) immediately introduce full indexation of all Newstart, Austudy and other payments which are not presently fully indexed; and
 - (b) make a commitment to progressively make 'catch up' increases to these payments, so that parity between pensions and benefits is eventually restored.
9. The government support parents who wish to work, train or study, part-time or full-time, without threats of loss of pension if their own wishes do not fit in exactly with Government guidelines. Guidelines should be flexible enough to allow parents some choice in their study or work arrangements, especially while their children are very young, but also recognizing other individual circumstances, such as living in a remote area, having more than one child, having a disabled child and other situations.
10. The government adequately recognise the workforce barriers faced by one-parent families, by virtue of there being only one parent available to do the work of two, and support parents in either part-time work, or other arrangements, such as more flexibility in employment practices for sole parents in either part-time or full-time work.

Yours faithfully,

Jane Stanley
Executive Officer