

24th APRIL 2018

House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Social Policy and Legal Affairs
Local Adoption Inquiry
PO Box 6021 Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

A LIFE LONG ADOPTION EXPERIENCE LIVED: BY

Dear Committee members,

My name is _____ and I was born on the 2nd August 1948. I am an adoptee.

I was placed in the care of my adopting parents on the _____ 1949.

Information released to me as a result of the 1990 amendments to the adoption act of 1905 indicated I had some serious respiratory health issues and thus there was some time elapsed before I was able to be placed with my adopting parents.

My adopting father was 64(!) and adopting Mother 44.

As I write this on the day before Anzac day 2018 I am sure my adopting mother saw in me some of the brother she adored and lost at Poziers on the 28th August 1916. With my cousins on Mum's side we would, 100 years later to the day, find his grave in the Gordon Dump cemetery. A seminal moment in my life, as I am sure it contributed to my life's journey.

My natural Mother came from impoverished circumstance, little education or opportunity, and ended up married to a man described in my adoption information files as a violent alcoholic and not my natural father and from whom she was separated and remained so. She had my brother _____ at the age of twenty, in 1934. _____ was not adopted, in 1944 another boy who was stillborn, in 1948 I was born and put up for adoption, and in 1955 my sister _____ was born and adopted. We have all met. We all have different biological fathers.

I first met my sister in July 1991. We were both searching for each other at the time and I'm absolutely sure it is the fact that we were both adopted that still binds us together to this day. Between us we have 5 children and _____ and her husband and I and my wife have all seen each other's children married. Who would have ever thought that possible?

Our brother now lives in an aged care facility and I call in on him to talk. During our discovery process we would learn that he had absolutely no idea of our existence. It did however explain the long absences of his mother. He did make the comment 'that _____ and _____ say why them, I say why not me? Powerful stuff. Our turning up was a deeply emotional experience for him. I think _____ suffered the biggest impact of the three of us.

My adopting parents were certainly able to give me a very fortunate life. The very act of adoption is a very giving process. First and foremost you are given their name and their home to live in, then in my case, medical support of the best money could buy followed by opportunity in education sport and all that I could want for. Sound good?

There was however a down side to being adopted by a 64 year old father in that he died in 1958 aged 74 when I was aged 10. I had been placed into boarding school at age of 7 so really did not know my Dad all that well and never really got to know him. Following my dad's death some of the treatment metered out by one boarding master was brutal. He decided to make me eat out of a bowl of food after I had thrown up into it because he was yelling at me for crying a couple of days after my dad's death. This basically led to me shutting down. I was saved only by one of the kitchen staff who threatened to report him and then slammed the door in his face and refused to refill the bowl for a second helping. These were lonely times indeed.

I illustrate the above point to back up a comment from my adoption order file released to me by the Supreme Court which stated "the department would not ordinarily consider adoption by a person of 64 years." They did so because of the Respiratory issue referred to above "which led to several failed attempts to place you" and say that I had two operations for and for which they, the adopting parents paid!

There are no guarantees in life but two fathers, one unknown and one dead by age ten is not a good outcome.

I have given the above information to say that I really have lived the good and the bad from my adoption. It is surprising where bad can come from, it never came from my parents and I so wish I could have turned to my Dad. My parents were wonderful people and gave me what I call my glorious second chance. I have had a lovely time of it as a Cattleman farming a 500 Angus cow closed herd breeding operation between Mudgee and Gulgong NSW. My adopting family on both Mum and Dad's sides could not have been more supporting or loving to me during my life and most especially when I told them I had searched for and found my sibling's and wider family.

My biological family too were a revelation and I have made some lifelong friends of them. They knew nothing of their sister/auntie's torn life. I met the last of my Natural mother's brothers, , not long before he died. He said to me the most powerful thing I have ever had said to me in my life.

"If only we had known we'd have never let you go."

There is much more of course but I wish now to give my thoughts on adoption within the terms of reference of your committee.

Before I do I want to acknowledge the then NSW Government Family and Community Services Minister, Robert Webster for his stewardship of the 1990 adoption information legislation changes through the NSW Parliament. Those changes have given me and my "families" untold pleasure.

STABILITY AND PERMAENCY:I struggle to see how involving both parties, natural and adopting parents, gives the adoptee stability. To me it's neither one thing nor the other. From my example above I could not have coped had my natural mother arrived on the doorstep. Throw in drugs,

alcohol and or violence if remembered and it would be truly traumatic for the child. Quite simply the child is torn between the two situations and does not have the life skills to deal with it.

Also and quite simply my parents would not have adopted if they had had to share. They would have demand complete anonymity. I think many may feel that way today and may well be a contributing factor to the low national adoption take up.

To me shared or open adoption is not a good idea.

How many times in the past have we seen the most beautiful foster parents who have bonded with a child and that child bond with them only to see them whipped away to be returned to the despair from which they came, where it inevitably fails the child again. Then off to someone else at the hands of a stalled bureaucracy.

No stability there. Only heartbreak for the child and angst for the foster parents and ultimately despair all round. In those circumstances if a desire by the foster parents to adopt that child is present and the foster parents meet the guidelines then get it done!

Children need a FOREVER family. I am so glad I still have mine even at this stage of my life.

Any foster parent who chooses to adopt should be given some form of financial support if that would help that particular situation.

GAY ADOPTION:

Yes and it already happens anyway. However my preference is for the conventional Mum and Dad family as, due to the above example of my story, a child who has already been traumatised once, and we adoptees are traumatised even if we don't know it at the time, needs as much conventional stability as it can get. I firmly believe in that.

There are plenty of couples seeking to adopt and if the figure you quote of 46,448 children in out of home care is correct it would be interesting to know how many applications there are from couples willing wanting and waiting to adopt to match that figure if there was a more fluid system in place.

I willing to bet it's more than 278.

That said, there was an excellent episode on Australian Story that went to air just before the Gay Marriage plebiscite vote in which I think four girls were being beautifully fostered by a gay male couple in Melbourne. My comments are in no way intended to be homophobic or anti-gay adoption but based on my lived experience I would preference a conventional couple. That may offend some in the gay community but adoption to me is not about rights but about the best passage for the child. That said I'm sure it's already happening and I support it but where the conventional family is available that would be my preference.

OUT OF HOME CARE CHILDREN.

I have a little life observation of this through my involvement with and support for the charity Stepping Stone House, . Within the two privately funded houses we take in 13/14 young people AGED FROM 12 TO 18 who are at risk, homeless or living

away from home with an aim to develop their self-esteem, resilience, confidence and good health. You can Google SSH.

What always strikes me when I see and hear these lovely children is what a pity they never had the adoption option. They may never have ended up at SSH in the first place. My point being that the back log of children who could have been placed with willing full time parents seems to be growing, sadly, as does the list of willing and would be parents whose needs are not being fulfilled either. There is nothing wrong with inter country adoption but it appears there are plenty of local candidates. The process needs an upgrade!

STREAMLINING THE PROCESS:

The requirement to engage all parties seems to be a real stumbling block especially where the biological parents can't or won't respond, engage or consult, acknowledge or even be located. There must be a process enabled where by that recalcitrance can be circumvented. I don't have the legal background for that discussion however, I note there has been some discussion in NSW about moving the legal process from the Supreme Court to the Children's Court and have adoption orders made by SPECIALIST Children's Magistrates. That may well be a useful tool in expediting the process. It may also look to clearly define a short time line, no longer than 6 months, before the child can be removed. That process may require some direct court ordered intervention.

In a situation where a child over 12 gives consent or desire to go to another family member or willing foster parent or anyone else for that matter, then the adoption should proceed immediately. Once the order has been made if there is later intervention by any biological parent they should be told their adopted child's name, location and details will be available after the child turns 21, under the same laws as the current adoption information access laws as exist in NSW now which includes Mutual Agreement by both parties.

I have not heard of any child from SSH, see above, seeking to reunite with their parents.

Where a child is at immediate risk of serious harm, it should be removed from the place of risk immediately, permanently and steps taken to find that child a permanent, safe and loving home. No enquiries, counselling for the perpetrators or courts of appeal. It's all about the child.

I instance the case of the father who threw his three children off the Westgate Bridge some years ago. I discussed this matter with a councillor from Sydney's Benevolent society and suggested the children might have been better off had they been removed and adopted.

At least they would have had a chance at life.

'Oh no' the councillor said, the mother wanted them. Now that unfortunate soul has nothing. The system failed her. That councillor also bought up the subject of forced adoption saying we can't go back to the indigenous situation. I couldn't agree more and it's not what I'm advocating but there is certainly room to improve the current system and perhaps having a nationally consistent framework with one set of guidelines instead of separate state systems with 6 different sets of rules.

As for indigenous adoption that should only be done in full consultation with that community only, to see what if anything is acceptable to them.

Past indigenous practices must not however be allowed to stymie a wider debate and discussion and the search for better Adoption outcomes. There will be people who will seek to do exactly that. Many of the advocacy groups would be better off concentrating on getting needy children into a positive, permanent and loving environment than concentrating on lost cause parent's rights.

NATIONAL ADOPTION, A GREAT IDEA:

When NSW adoption information laws were amended I remember one person I met who lived in NSW who was trying to access her information but because she was born in QLD could not do so. The QLD government at the time was having none of it and had no intention of changing its out of date laws. People move and therefor a national code is needed and laws that affect people personally should be streamlined and not subjected to one government with one view and another playing politics with an opposite view. It would also help the adoptee "down the track" should that person wish to access their information.

It should be mandated into law that all adoption records are kept for 100 years and the grandchildren of an adoptee be given access to those records on the death of their parents, should they need or want to and most importantly should they not discover the adoption of their parent until after their parent's death. This situation has occurred.

That in 2015-16 there were 46,448 children in Out Of HOME CARE and only 278 adoptions says it all. The system is well and truly broken. To me it's also a disgrace. How is it so?

THE ADOPTION OPTION:

I would preference those 46,448 Australian children, of all backgrounds, before overseas adoption.

Amend the States Adoption practices into one national set of guidelines under the Federal Attorney Generals department. Applications, interviews et al could still be done within the applicant's state. Place the access to an adoptees information records under national jurisdiction and legislate for an adoptees records be kept for 100 years and include access for grandchildren as discussed above.

I would preference a conventional Mum and Dad family as adopting parent for the reasons I have stated but not preclude gay adoption.

I would implement a timeline of much shorter duration than currently exists before an executive decision to intervene on behalf of the child or a frustrated adopting applicant can be made.
If you you've got them, match them!

I am not in favour of this shared or "open" adoption thing. If you're going to do it that way why not

just keep on fostering and shuffling them around as we do now and getting nowhere. It stifles the initiative to adopt in my view. Death by a thousand cuts. Some of these social work experiments have not always had successful outcomes.

Curb the so called rights of diminished and incapable parents and pay less attention to the Civil Libertarian mob.

I'm yet to see them benefit a child.

Recognise that a child needs a FOREVER family.

Where there are grandparents applying to adopt and despite my experience and reservations over the age gap I would still support it as I know of cases where it is happening.

Adoption will always be a vexatious issue. 46,000 kids in OOHC more so.

Streamlining the process to a national code for local adoption can only help.

If it had to be then I'm glad I was adopted to this day notwithstanding some of the trauma that was.

Thank you the Committee for the chance to submit my thoughts and experience on adoption.

Let's hope some real efficiencies' can be found to reduce that awful waiting list of whom many of our youngest and potentially our best can be given that "glorious second chance" I was given.

Yours Sincerely

