

The role of the Commonwealth Government in relation to Adoption in Australia

Submission to Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee Inquiry into the Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices.

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Preamble

I, Susan Alexandra Bryce, am a citizen of the Commonwealth of Australia resident in Victoria.

As a citizen of the Commonwealth of Australia I have an inalienable right to protection under the Australian Constitution and the Common Law of this country. As an Australian citizen, the Commonwealth affords me protection from the unlawful and harmful actions that threaten my right to life, liberty and justice from those who would deny me these rights, within and without, the borders of Australia.

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This submission addresses the terms of reference of this inquiry.

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

This submission will also include consideration of the long-term effects of my adoption.

- (a) **the role, if any, of the Commonwealth Government, its policies and practices in contributing to forced adoption.**
 - The Commonwealth government did not include unwed mothers in the provisions of social security until 1973. This directive created and contributed to a decision-making environment which lacked alternative options and was not conducive to consent. The Commonwealth government failed to provide for or protect its citizens.
 - Past adoption practices and policies were not child focused; they were focused on the needs of the adoptive parents. In failing to systematically regulate and oversee state government practices the Commonwealth Government failed to protect its children.

- The Commonwealth government contributed to the secrecy and stigma of adoption.
- Through its failure to intervene in state defined adoption policies and practices the Commonwealth government turned a blind eye to systematic and widespread abuse.
- The Commonwealth government failed to demonstrate any form of national leadership.

(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 the children who were subject to forced adoption policies.

- Apology to all those people who have been negatively impacted by past adoption policies and practices.
- Specialised counselling and support services throughout the states.
- Expanded support for birth relatives to reconnect and to maintain their relationships.
- Redress – financial compensation and acknowledgement for the separation
- That the Commonwealth government ensures the processes for discharging adoption orders (because these orders took place illegally), are made easier and more accessible to people. Currently these are required to be processed through the Supreme Court; thereby prolonging the process unduly and incurring incredible financial costs (Court costs & Legal Fees).
- People should be able to use their original birth certificates (naming natural relatives) for all official purposes, reverting back to the truthful document rather than the birth certificate created for adoption.
- Educating health and welfare professionals about the long-term effects of adoption and historical practices which contributed to these.
- Increased support for birth mothers so that they can proceed with their pregnancies and raise their children
- More attention should be given to placements of children within natural families rather than to people outside the family
- Legislative changes which support rather than impede the theme of Open Adoption
- Legislation which is clear and does not allow for interpretation by State Departmental personnel
- Support for the inclusion of “Developmental Disorder” in the DSM V – which would consider the experience of adoption from a developmental trauma perspective.
- Increased research into the long-term effects of adoption, separation and the process of reconnecting
- That the Commonwealth learn from past adoption practices and their long-term impact and apply these learnings to practice frameworks around Inter-country and Local adoptions today; and give specific consideration to cultural and religious implications in Inter-country adoption.

My Adoption

I was born 27 May 1964 at the Royal Women's Hospital, Brisbane. The Adoption Order indicates that my mother gave consent to my adoption on 29 May 1964. I was collected by the adoptive parents on 19 June 1964; the same day they supposedly applied for the adoption. The adoption was actually finalised on 30 June 1964. My question to the Inquiry is why was I released for adoption before the four week period had occurred? This seems like a bizarre practice given that the legislation at the time stipulated that birth mothers had a period of four weeks to revoke their consent. It appears that the underlying assumption behind this practice (which was very common) was that birth mothers would never change their minds. As we now know, this assumption was made into fact by other practices: birth mothers were never informed that they had four weeks to revoke the Order.

I was called Kay. I was adopted by (...) and (...). I spent my early childhood on a grain farm in (...), rural Queensland. I had a brother who was 18 months younger than me who was also adopted. Until the age of 7 I was a sickly child. I had abdominal surgery at that age which rectified my health problems.

I was medicated from approximately the age of 5 to treat mood disorder, depression and anxiety. I was also a bed wetter for most of my childhood and teenage years. My symptoms were clearly related to disrupted early childhood attachments and not the diagnosis which was previously considered. This in itself has caused long-term significant adverse effects on my life. It was stated that it was simply my 'bad behaviour' that caused the problems. (With the introduction of the diagnosis of Developmental Trauma in the DSM V, I welcome an end to the misdiagnosis of children, particularly those in care.) I learned and was told from a very early age, that I was a problem child and that something was wrong with me. This caused incredible stigma for me as a child. And as an adult I continue to carry this stigma and have been diagnosed with complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Depression and Generalised Anxiety Disorders.

As I grew older this stigma and blame and my struggle with it worsened. Medical treatment continued and at the age of approximately nine, I was made to undergo an EEG to find out what was 'wrong' with me. In everyone's eyes I could do no good. At the age of ten I was sent to board at Fairholme College which was a short distance from the adoptive parent's house. I felt very isolated and alone and I developed reactive behaviours. I was suspended after six months. The adoptive parents then placed me at a Co-Ed boarding school located next door to my previous school. I was removed by the adoptive parents from this school after only six months. During the rest of my schooling I felt different from everyone else; I was unable to socialise with anyone. Despite this I always achieved well academically.

At the age of 15 the adoptive parents took me to a house in Toowoomba. There were other children there and the adoptive parents wanted me to stay there. I had no idea what was going on. After the adoptive parents had left, I left the house and went to a friend's place. Either the Toowoomba Home or the adoptive parents called the Police – the next day I spent at the Toowoomba Police Station. At the end of this day I was bundled into a Police van and driven to Wilson Youth Hospital. The next day they drove me back to Toowoomba Children's Court where it was ordered that I was to

undergo a month's assessment at Wilson Youth Hospital. Following this I was returned to the Toowoomba Children's Court where an application was made by the adoptive parents and Children Services for the government to obtain care and control of me. This application was granted.

My entire time at Wilson was absolute horror. The treatment of children at the Wilson Youth Hospital was well documented at your Inquiry: *Forgotten Australians – A Report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children* (2004). I don't believe I need to extend on this in this submission except to state that this experience had devastating and traumatic effects on my life. Unbelievably, once I had survived this experience, I was expected to integrate back into society as though nothing had happened. The adoptive mother's only concern was how it reflected upon her.

At the age of 17 I attempted suicide by overdosing on medication. I was found unconscious and I was hospitalised. My parents took me home only so that they could have me admitted to the psychiatric wing of the Royal Brisbane Hospital. I spent approximately three weeks there. I never returned home.

Throughout my adult life I have self medicated using drugs and alcohol. My whole purpose in life has been to seek out love from anything and anyone. All I ever wanted was to love, be loved, and to feel.

All my life I have internalised the rejection and the blame. Even now when I can rationalise and understand what has happened to me – it is very difficult to heal. I understand that I had early disrupted childhood attachments caused by being removed from my mother and reinforced throughout my life by the inability of the adoptive parents to actually parent a child. I should never have been placed with people who did not have the capacity to parent; people who spent my whole childhood trying to get rid of me, either through medicating me or physically sending me away.

As an Australian citizen my rights to be brought up with own natural family were breached with little or undue consideration given to my future welfare. The Queensland State Government wasn't there; the Commonwealth Government wasn't there; the adoptive parents weren't there. No-one was there.

Susan Alexandra Bryce