

FORCED ADOPTIONS

Grievance

MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt) [9.38 am]: I thank the Minister for Community Services for taking the grievance on this matter, which I know the minister and a number of members in this chamber are following very closely and are keen to get it right. I acknowledge Ms Jennifer McRae, who I know will be watching from Albany today. Jen has been a tireless advocate on behalf of adoptees and their families.

Nearly 12 years ago, the Western Australian Parliament was the first jurisdiction in Australia to formally apologise for the thousands of forced adoptions that took place between the 1940s and 1980s. Mothers were forcibly separated from their babies, prevented from seeing them after birth, drugged, deceived and shamed. Many of the children who are now adults also experience trauma—a feeling of displacement and a sense of abandonment, conflicting with the connection they have with their adoptive families. It is very complex and difficult. It is very difficult for them to share their story, whether they were someone forced to give up their child or one of those adult adoptees.

The Leader of the Liberal Party, the member for Vasse, and I have spoken on this issue on a number of occasions, as have members on the opposite side. I was very heartened when the Minister for Community Services, the member for Wanneroo, along with the Leader of the Liberal Party, addressed here in Parliament a group of those people impacted by this awful practice to mark the anniversary of the apology. The minister made a commitment to work with this community and to provide them with support and committed to the inquiry that is now underway. It was welcomed by everyone in the room.

The issue I would specifically like to raise with the minister today relates to adoptees and parents accessing their records, and the timeliness of this process in light of the inquiry that is underway. The minister will be aware that submissions close tomorrow, 16 June. I wrote to the minister on 30 May after Jen McRae contacted me, and the letter was pretty short and succinct —

I write on behalf of Jennifer McRae, Adoptee Advocate for Western Australia regarding the issue of record acquisition for adoption records, so they can be used in submissions to the Inquiry into past forced adoptive policies and practices, which close on June 16th, 2023.

I'm advised by Ms McRae that she has been in touch with your office to request a meeting with yourself and has also reached out to the Committee with regards to this issue and is yet to receive any response.

The deadline is impending. The letter continued —

Ms McRea says that record acquisition from welfare organisations, hospitals, baby homes and the Justice Department would assist individuals as they prepare their submissions ensuring they are factual and supportive of the anecdotal claims of negligence, maltreatment, secrecy and injury. These records also assist in pinpointing the people, pathways, policies and practices of the forced adoption era in Western Australia.

Ms McRae would like the Government's support to fast-track record applications, even temporarily for the purposes of the inquiry.

Your support and any comments regarding this matter would be appreciated.

I note that I received a response yesterday advising that the minister's chief of staff became aware of my correspondence only last Friday. I advise the minister that my electorate office called a number of times in the run-up to that. We were persistent because the deadline was fast approaching. The minister may be aware that applicants seeking their records can wait for up to nine months for their documents. It can be less if the applicant agrees to a redacted version that removes the names of any healthcare professionals listed in the paperwork, but the reason these documents are important should be obvious—especially so for those who are preparing submissions for the committee's inquiry.

The minister asked in her letter whether I was aware of any people who were having difficulties obtaining their records. I am advised that there are a number of them, but it is not for Ms McRae to share that information specifically; she is a volunteer, and is also going through the process of preparing her own submission. But I have dealt with her and so has the minister and members of the minister's government, and I have no reason to believe this is not factual. She has asked that if there are people who submit to the committee but do not have their documentation because of this delay, they be allowed to add their documentation at a later date so that it is on the public record. I understand that this was allowed in the Victorian inquiry, and it gave submitters the opportunity to ensure that their story was told accurately and that people understood the fulsome pathway it took them to get there. Given the trauma that some have experienced, there may be issues that they would like to add to their submissions. We just need to make sure that this is also possible. I understand that there is a separation between the minister and the committee process, but I am trying to enlist the minister's assistance in getting the committee to understand that this would be an important outcome for these survivors.

Outside the inquiry process, which is obviously the focus at the moment, I think we can all agree that the length of time taken to receive documentation is unacceptable. To have to wait nine months after having made the decision to pursue their documentation—most of which many of us take for granted, such as birth certificates and healthcare records—would be torturous. We need to further increase resources and support for fast-tracking these applications.

Likewise, I have been made aware that if adoptees approach the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, they are not permitted to have a copy of their birth certificate without the permission of the Department of Communities. I do not think that should be the case; removing that behind-the-scenes requirement could be a practical way of reducing the time taken to provide documentation.

I thank the minister for her consideration. I really hope there is an opportunity for us to ensure that the committee does what we know is required for this inquiry to work appropriately, and that is to provide trauma-informed support to those giving evidence. In Victoria there was someone on hand to take verbal submissions because there are elderly people who have been impacted by this issue who are not tech savvy. We should also make sure that all those who would like to make a submission have an opportunity to put their submission on the record, right up to the point at which the committee starts writing its report.

The conversations I have had with a number of people involved in this have revealed that it is as much about making sure that someone in authority has their story and that it is deposited somewhere as it is about securing the government's response. That will be a part of the healing process. I know the minister understands that, but submissions are just about to close. There are adoptees who cannot access their records. There are processes that the government can intervene in, and I seek to enlist the minister's support to work with the committee to be able to access any further documents that need to be added or to find other ways of accessing that information.

MS S.E. WINTON (Wanneroo — Minister for Community Services) [9.44 am]: I thank the member for Central Wheatbelt for this grievance and for her ongoing support for survivors of forced adoption in this state. I also acknowledge the support of many members of Parliament, both in this place and in the upper house, over a number of years. This has not been a slow process; it has been an ongoing process for victims, over many, many years, to get to the stage at which we actually have an inquiry.

I want to reaffirm the commitments I have made since becoming Minister for Community Services to those victims and the people who advocate for them. At the outset, I want to express my disappointment at the timeliness of the responses the member received. I appreciate that her endeavours were well intentioned, given the impending deadline, and I respect that greatly. I also concur with her comments about Jenny McRae, who is a long-term soldier and advocate for victims. Having been a community advocate in my local area, although not on a subject so sensitive and traumatic for so many people, I know that it is people like her who actually create change. I recognise the efforts she makes and the personal impact her work has on her, in respect of her own experiences and trauma.

Since becoming minister I have had the fortunate experience of meeting with a number of survivors of forced adoption and hearing their stories, to better understand the impacts it has made on their lives. Likewise, it was a pleasure to participate in a morning tea with the member and many other parliamentary colleagues in March, when we acknowledged the tenth anniversary of the national apology for survivors of forced adoptions. I think it is really important for members in this place, and people in the community, to understand that this is a bipartisan issue that is supported across both chambers and on all sides of politics. It is so, so important for victim survivors to know that this is valued by all members of Parliament, and it is. I will continue with that approach.

I also understand how important it is for survivors to have an opportunity to share their experiences and to have them recorded. It is not just about telling those stories to implement change; it is also about their healing processes and being able to tell their stories in a safe environment and, as the member said, to have them put on the public record.

In that regard, my ministerial predecessor last year wrote to the committee to ask it to consider holding the inquiry into historical forced adoption practices. I was really pleased when Hon Peter Foster announced that the committee would conduct an inquiry into past adoptive policies and practices. After spending some time with survivors, during which they gave me feedback about the inquiry time frames, the need for trauma-informed practices and the issue around timely access to adoptive records, I was very pleased to write to the committee after it had made the decision to extend the inquiry until 16 June. It is really disappointing to learn that some survivors have had difficulties accessing the records they need to make their submissions. Providing past adoptions records can be a complex and lengthy process due to the research involved to locate information from so many applicants from a variety of sources in the time frames needed for accessing that relevant information. I expect Communities—I repeat—I expect Communities to progress requests for documentation as quickly as it can. To support this, Communities undertook to engage additional temporary staff to enhance access to adoption records, and has recently done so to improve the time frame in which applicants receive their information. In fact, I advised the Parliament of the plans for additional resources in a document tabled in the other place. Those staff have now been employed. Communities has advised that it is currently aware of one survivor who is still seeking access to their records to support a submission to the inquiry. As the member for Central Wheatbelt says, other survivors may still be waiting to get access to their

records to be able to make a full and proper submission. In that regard, I am buoyed by reading the information provided by the committee about making a submission in that it acknowledges the traumatic experiences of doing so and provides support for people wanting to make a submission or verbalise it. I also quote from the section about making a submission on the committee's website. It states —

However, your experience matters and is important to our work. We want to make sure that as many people as possible have the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry ...

The sooner you can provide your submission, the more we can use it to inform our work. But the Committee will be considering late submissions. If you want to make a submission and cannot meet the submission deadline, please contact the staff ... using the contact details below.

I urge everyone to make contact with the committee and lodge their intent to submit. Even though it is an independent process, I will also undertake to write to the committee to urge it to consider those late submissions.