

# Environment and Public Affairs Committee

## Submission for the inquiry into past forced adoptive policies and practices

DOB [REDACTED]/1970

This submission into the inquiry of past forced adoption policies and practices, is submitted with the intent to provide the committee valuable insights into how these policies and practices have caused long term personal suffering and trauma on forced adoptees.

I wish to highlight recent research and articles published on relinquishment trauma (aka adoption trauma) for the committee's review, information, acknowledgement, and the inquiries record.

I will address the Committee's 4 main focal areas (terms of reference), based on my personal experience and clinical psychologist review sessions from two years ago.

### 1. Understand the lived experiences of those affected by historical forced adoption practices.

#### Background

I was adopted several months after my birth, into a family (mum and dad) who had migrated from Holland in the 1950's. Both parents had English as a second language. Both parents had strong Christian values and were active in their church of origin – the Dutch Reformed churches of Australia (Perth). My adoptive parents were married but had been un-successful in having their own biological children. My mother had suffered several miscarriages and had had one still born child, prior to applying for adoption. My adoptive mother was from a family of 12 – most migrated to Australia after WW2. They settled in Perth. These were my uncles, aunties, and cousins.

My parents were encouraged to apply for adoption whilst living in NSW – and in July 1968 successfully adopted their first child – my older brother (not biologically connected).

#### Personal lived experiences.

To provide an accurate understanding of the impacts that forced adoption has had on me, would require the committee members individually to place themselves as a 6-year-old child, sitting at a dinner table and being told one night that; **mum and dad aren't really your mum and dad...you were adopted.** Think about that for a moment....you've been living your life as a child and looking at your parents as the only mum and dad who ever existed – and then being told one day that they weren't really your mum and dad, that you weren't really their flesh and blood.

The story they told was special (as a child). I was told that they (mum and dad) couldn't have children, but they were allowed to go into a big room full of babies and pick one out....and of course **they chose me.**

And although this made you feel special at that point in time, it also made you feel insecure, scared, lonely, abandoned and lost. It raised questions from within the mind of a 6-year-old....**who are my real parents, where are they, why didn't they want me, there must be something wrong with me, and will I ever find them?**

Although there are too many events to document for the inquiry that have caused long term trauma and anxiety, there are several significant memories that stand out. On one occasion, at the age of 7, I

**asked my parents if I could ever meet my “real” mum and dad.** I was very forcibly told that I should never ask that question again and that I would never be able to find out because nobody knew who they were!

This of course was true as a direct result from the Adopted Childrens Act 1965, which tightened secrecy around adoption and made it impossible for the biological parents and the adoptive parents to find out details as to the origin and background into the child being forcibly removed.

I was also told that **I should be thankful and happy that I was adopted into such a loving home.**

It was from that point in life where that sense of “**not belonging**” of being “**different**” and having been “**abandoned**” became subconsciously - a part of me – an insecurity that has affected me in my life in so many ways.

I recall crying so often in bed at night, wondering who my real mum and dad were, why they had left me, what I’d done wrong, why wasn’t I good enough and why didn’t they love me?

My birthdays as a child were especially emotional, as I’d wander if my real mum and dad were thinking of me...just like I was thinking of them....picturing them and what they would look like....if they remembered me...thinking silently as to where they were and if I would ever find them, wandering why hadn’t they come back for me?

Another specific incident and memory was when my parents decided to “foster” another boy of similar age to myself. I was 10 at the time. His name was [REDACTED].

My father came home with [REDACTED] one Friday afternoon and introduced [REDACTED] to me and my brother. There were a couple of gifts given to [REDACTED] to make him feel welcome and we were to then “play nicely” outside.

[REDACTED] was given my bedroom and bed to sleep in during his stay (2-week school holiday period) and I had a makeshift bed set up under the kitchen table. In hindsight, my parents probably thought that I would enjoy the “camp out”, given that I was very much an outdoor adventure type boy.

Unknowingly to my parents though – the introduction of [REDACTED] into our family made me feel like I was being tested and that my parents were “deciding” whether to keep [REDACTED] and replace me....which was logical thinking for a 10-year-old, given that I was already aware of being adopted and “given away” once before. It also heightened my anxiety knowing that [REDACTED] - didn’t have parents that wanted him (as through the mind of a 10-year-old).

In an effort to sway the decision of keeping me or [REDACTED], I would go into my bedroom as soon as [REDACTED] was awake and out of the bed and pour water on my mattress to indicate that [REDACTED] had wet the bed and therefore wasn’t as good a boy as I was for them. **It still saddens me to this day** that those were the actions that I took and that that is what I believed needed to be done, so as not be given away again.

My teenage years were focused on sport, adventure, and off course girls. I was very competitive at a young age but especially through my teenage years. I was champion boy at many sporting competitions (swimming, athletics, football etc) but in my mind - none of these achievements ever seemed good enough for my parents, nor the school nor the church community that I was raised in. I always felt an obligation or a duty to be the best....because I knew I was different, and I always felt different. I felt that I had to prove my worthiness to be included and belong to this “group”. It was like my life depended on it.

In 1987 at the age of 17, I met the love of my life and in 1990 was blessed when she became my wife. It's fair to say that our early years of marriage were a struggle, partly as a result of our young age, parental/church expectations and differences (my wife wasn't from a religious background), partly as a result of me wanting to "rebel" against an upbringing that didn't provide me with the answers I needed in life (**who am I and where do I belong – am I of Aboriginal decent**) but more so due to the subconscious belief that **I wasn't worthy enough** to be married to such a beautiful girl and it's inevitable that one day she'll also "get rid of me".

It was also around this timeframe (90's) that I was told my class mate and school friend had committed suicide – he was also adopted, and I knew he struggled with life as an adoptee.

In 1991 I **was adopted into a Yolngu family** while I was living and working on Elcho Island, Arnhem Land. This adoption, the ceremony, the giving of my skin name and clan name, was so deeply moving and surreal for me, as I felt for the first time in my life – that I finally belonged somewhere, that I "fitted in"...that I belonged to a people that understood me and my loss of connection to my biological family and my ancestry. To this day I am still in contact with my Yolngu family – so strong and powerful was that adoption ceremony and that sense of family.

At the age of 24 – my wife fell pregnant with our first daughter. This single event in itself was the trigger to begin the journey to search for my biological parents.....because once again....**there were no answers to the questions I would get asked from a GP regarding my family medical history, ancestry or anything in between.**

Picture that if you will for a moment – you do not know anything about your own medical history your origins/ancestry, and you're about to have a child of your own.

After what was an incredibly difficult puzzle to unravel due to the "contact veto's", I was finally provided with my original birth certificate. Unfortunately, the certificate I opened had a different person's name on it. **I was filled with anger at the incompetence of the government agency who sent this to me.....**only for my wife to then calm me down and highlight the fact that **the name on the birth certificate was the name that my biological mother must have given me** before being forced to sign the adoption papers. [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

After more personal research and many many phone calls – we (my wife and I) finally located my birth mother. She was living in London at the time. In an effort to reach her and make contact – my wife called many individuals with the surname ([REDACTED]) that was listed on my original birth certificate. My wife would speak to these people and state that she was an old friend of [REDACTED] (my birthmother' Christian name) and was trying to get in contact with her (small white lie). When we were finally provided a direct phone number to my birth mother by her own husband – my wife handed me the phone (think old school dial up phone booth along the street) and said "this may be the only chance you get to hear your mothers voice". We didn't know if she would want to talk, we didn't know if her husband knew about the adoption, we didn't know if she had other children now, we didn't know if this was even right...all we knew was the fact that I was adopted and going of the records – this was my birth mother.

When I called the number, and she answered the phone – I said that I was **phoning on behalf of a friend who wanted to know about an event that had occurred on the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] 1970.** The voice on the other side of the phone said softly – "yes I'd be happy to talk to you about this". I said that the friend only wanted to know his family medical history as he was about to have a child of his own.

Again, the voice on the other side of the phone said – "yes, I'd be happy to talk about this".

I then said to her – **“it’s me – I’m your son”**.

Her words to me over the phone that instant were **“you have made my life”** ....and then broke down crying. Two weeks later she had flown out from London to meet me and my wife face to face - after her painful years of “never knowing”. Never knowing if I was alive, never knowing if I was abused, never knowing if I could walk, talk, see, or hear...those were her questions throughout her life that never stopped eating away at her...the “never knowing”.

My biological mother was under 18 at the time of pregnancy. Single, living with her biological mother and step father (senior NSW police force member) and was sent away to sit out the pregnancy in a convent until my birth. My biological mother was heavily medicated/sedated to sign the adoption papers – and when refusing to do so after several attempts was threatened to be made a ward of the state. Under strong medication she was **forced/coerced to sign my adoption**.

It’s unfortunate that although I was provided the name of my biological father (through my birth mother) and contacted him very discreetly at the same time as contact with my biological mother, his denial of being the birth father culminated to the point where DNA testing was required and eventually was agreed upon. On the [REDACTED]/2010 (my birthday - aged 40 years) it was finally confirmed through DNA results - that he was my biological father.

**It took 40 years since my birth** – to finally get the answers and truth about who my biological parents were and what my ancestry was. To say that forced adoption children have similar, if not deeper traumatic experiences to that of the “Stolen Generation”, is respectfully acknowledging and aligning that same pain and separation from family for Aboriginal people that have suffered similarly.

I have shared many stories and shed many tears of similar pain and inner unrest with senior Aboriginal elders and close Aboriginal family friends.

Unfortunately, though after finally knowing, talking and meeting my biological parents and getting answers to so many unanswered questions that I had over all those years, I encountered **new feelings of betrayal, guilt and shame for my adoptive parents**...for going behind their backs to finding out who my real parents were.

Feeling that I betrayed the love that they freely gave, feeling that I dishonoured them by searching for my biological parents and feeling that I was duty bound to keep the truth about the fact that I discovered my biological parents a secret....so I wouldn’t hurt them....regardless of the fact that I was hurting and had been deeply hurting for so long.

Those feelings became overwhelming – even to this day where both parents have now passed away.

Not being able to find out, to know or to be able to freely talk about one of the most basic of human rights - who are your biological parents – has caused so much trauma (anger, frustration, mistrust, guilt, and confusion) that it has inadvertently been carried throughout my life.

At the passing of my father 6 years ago and more specifically with my mother last year, I knew that I needed professional help to deal with this “adoption stuff” and the feelings of guilt and duty!

Because, although to others looking in from the outside, my life, my self-confidence, my career achievements, my marriage and my 4 children all seemed very normal, stable and even successful; the reality and fact of the matter was that inside I was self-destructing (behaviours and thoughts) and deteriorating (mentally).

In essence I was losing and had lost total self-respect for myself as a person – because when you don't feel “worthy” and when you've constantly failed in life (through my own eyes) and feel that you don't belong or fit in anywhere from such an early age – it becomes part of your blueprint, your hardwiring. To re-route that blueprint and hard wiring is a very deep and dark place to venture....but one that I had to do - or risk giving in to the darker thoughts that often plague the adoptive person's mind – **that it would be easier if I didn't wake up.**

It's easy to say that the struggles or trauma faced by children who were adopted would be similar or akin to children who have lived with families where there might have been some form of dysfunction, alcohol or drug abuse, neglect, separation of one or both parents – and all these adversities do have impacts on children and how they mature and grow as adults, but there is one fundamental difference when you look through the lens of an adoptive child....the adoptive child was placed in a family where the adoptive parents are often grief stricken and mourning the loss off or inability too, have their own biological children. The infant/child/teenager/adult is then given the impossible lifelong task to undertake, a task so impossible to fulfill – to be the son (or daughter) to parents who could not have their own son(s) or daughter(s) – **and to be thankful for the rest of their lives that they were taken from their own biological parents and placed in a family where there are no genetic links or characteristics and in fact – there is nothing in common at all.**

To finalise this focal point, its important to acknowledge the sincere and deep love, nurture, and best intentions that my adoptive parents had at the commencement of adopting me. There is no denying that the love and care they had for me as the adopted child – was real – as if I was their own child.

My parents were very much “proud” of who I became and for what I achieved in life – they were proud of their grandchildren, and they were very proud and deeply loved the woman that became my wife and the mother to my own children – their grandchildren. This I know without any doubt.

They did the best they could, based on their own upbringing and past traumas, with the information and resources that were only available to them at the time but with the overwhelming added sadness that they couldn't bear children of their own. I deeply love my mum and dad and the incredible brave and loving decision that they made – to adopt me as their own!

My journey and discovery of who I am – continues. I'm thankful that both my biological parents are now openly and freely providing family medical history, family ancestry and stories....but most importantly – accepting that I am one of them and that I do have a right to know my family origins.

The links below are to provide the committee with one of the most factual lectures by Paul Sunderland “Adoption and Addition”: Remembered Not Recalled” which describes relinquishment's impact on a child's brain and their view of the world. It reveals and discusses certain behaviours of adoptees being the result of an adoptee trying to soothe the imbalance of brain chemistry caused by relinquishment.

*\*I encourage the committee to take a moment to listen and watch this lecture to gain some insight into the traumas associated with adoption.*

<https://mariedolfi.com/adoption-resource/relinquishment-trauma-the-forgotten-trauma/>

<https://www.thehealthyjournal.com/frequently-asked-questions/are-adopted-children-more-like-their-biological-parents>

## **2. Examine the role of the State Government, health services and private institutions in these practices.**

It's difficult to determine from the terms of reference if the committee is seeking input into the current and/or future role of various bodies involved with adoption; or if it's reviewing the broader past policy and practices associated with forced adoption and impacts on adoptees – or both.

It goes without saying that past forced adoption policies and practices were and continue to be the sole responsibility of the State Government and equally so the institutes that facilitated these practices. Denying such responsibility would be akin to denying that the "Stolen Generation" was not the Government's policy or practice of the time – it was.

Although state legislation governed adoptions, there is a strong argument to suggest that the Commonwealth's public and social policies endorsed a moral stance that enforced marriage or adoption to secure care for children.

The Adoption of Children Act 1965 (23/1965) was 'An Act to make provisions with respect to and consequential upon the adoption of children; to amend the Child Welfare Act, 1939, the Registration of Births Deaths and Marriages Act 1899, and certain other Acts'.

It was a model Act for other laws in Australia. The Act required courts making orders in matters relating to the child to regard the child's welfare as the paramount consideration. It banned people from arranging their own adoptions, and it tightened secrecy around adoption, enabling adopted children to assume an entirely new identity (and birth certificate) that was tied to their adoptive parents.

In fact, the most important element of this Act was the tightening of secrecy provisions to ensure members of the birth family and the adoptive family would not discover each other's identity, and that the records of the adoption would be kept confidential.

Indeed, the new birth certificate issued for the adopted child (the 'amended birth certificate') was intended to disguise the fact that the child had even been adopted.

The Adoption of Children Act banned privately arranged adoptions, making it an offence to advertise a child for adoption or seek adoptive parents. Birth parents were not allowed to choose who their child went to - they could only give consent to the child being adopted. In practice, this meant adoptions were arranged by adoption agencies and approved by the court. Exceptions were made for relatives or stepparents.

The Act was changed over time to consider new ideas about marriage and parenthood. In 1979, after the Domicile Act 1979 abolished the legal principle that married women lived wherever their husbands did, the Act was Amended. In 1980-1982, under various Amendments, an Adoption Tribunal was created.

In 1984 the Act was Amended to allow adoption by a man and a woman in a de facto relationship, and to require permission for adoption to be sought from the fathers of ex-nuptial children.

The Community Welfare Act 1983 also resulted in Amendments to the Adoption of Children Act 1965. In 1987 the Act was further Amended to allow adoptions from other states and countries, to recognise various forms of de facto and married relationships and change some of the rules about

children's input into their own adoptions, including the age at which they could consent to be adopted.

In 1991 the Adoption Information Act gave adoptive children and birth parents the right to information about their adoptions, including their original birth certificates. The Adoption of Children Act was repealed in 2003 when the Adoption Act 2000 came into effect.

Adoption and child welfare legislation in Australia is made at the state government level, and each jurisdiction has their own department and often a number of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) who are commissioned to provide out-of-home care (OOHC) and adoption services.

Each jurisdiction, department and NGO has their own process including setting the criteria for prospective adoptive parents and carrying out the training and assessment process. While the processes and criteria in each state are similar, they are not the same.

It goes without question, that State Government legislation must provide the ruleset to ensure adoptive children have the necessary support and access to, necessary information throughout their life, no matter what the age.

Examining the role of the State Government, health services and private institutions is fundamental to getting things right for the future, but it does not unwind the impacts that have been caused to those deeply affected by past forced adoption practices. So much of what has occurred from forced adoption practices cannot be ignored or brushed aside as something that “just happened” during that period of time, nor should a single source of blame be sought.

**Forced adoption practices were in essence, systemic failure.** Systematic failure that has caused long term trauma ( a form of PTSD) and suffering for forced adoptees, with the fall out of emotional and abandonment pain and insecurity from these practices extending to partners and children in ways that are so deep and profound – an inquiry may not be able to capture nor relate.

“The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.” – Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

*\*The following links summarise the text above and provide relevant background into the committee's inquiry – most likely aware of the research reports.*

<https://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=795f4c9f-5c7d-4a65-ac14-42413445ea0f>

<https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/forced-adoption-national-practice-principles#:~:text=%22Forced%20adoption%22%20or%20%22forced,illegal%20separation%20from%20their%20children.>

### **3. Identify what measures are currently available to assist persons experiencing distress, their effectiveness, and how those persons may be supported further.**

Throughout life as an adopted person, it was always difficult to find someone that could provide answers to the multitude of questions that were festering inside the mind. (Refer back to the lecture by Paul Sunderland – the hardwiring, the chemical imbalance of the brain, the blueprint).

Obviously with advanced technology and www search engines available in today's society, the past obstacles and lack of information on adoption faced by my generation or younger is no longer an

issue. There are numerous resources available, and some are beneficial for those suffering from forced adoption practices.

Organisations such as Jigsaw - an Australian organisation that provides information, counselling, search and intermediary services for adopted persons and other organisations such as Relationships Australia with a Forced Adoption Support Service, are necessary and have a place in the reconciliation process.

However, the extent to which these services are able to effectively “reach” those impacted by forced adoption or assist in the psychological impacts on forced adopted persons is in my view, limited.

Although the intent of the services are genuine, there is a lack of clinical understanding (in my view) of the traumas that have been experienced and remain ongoing, for forced adoptees. I would also go as far to say that most medical practitioners would not be aware of the psychological traumas encountered and lived by victims of forced adoption. Cognisant of the fact that as an adopted person (child) there may be no knowledge of one’s medical history or background, most medical practitioners have no concept of these realities for adoptees.

I know that during my life there have been many occasions where I would consult a GP for an ailment or injury and be asked by the practitioner if there was any family history to the ailment, I was seeking medical attention for. When answering a practitioner that I had no idea of my family medical history as I was an adopted person, it was always evident that there was no understanding by the practitioner on how to approach such an answer, what advice to give someone in this situation or where and who to turn to, in order to obtain such information. I guess it’s fair to say that patients (children from forced adoption practices) where family medical history is unknown, was not and is not part of the medical curriculum for medical practitioners – let alone an awareness within the medical profession of such cases necessitating professional and specialist support.

Previous studies have identified priority actions for responding to the needs of those affected by forced adoption. They include but are not limited to: recognition of past practices (including the role of apologies and financial resources to address current service and support needs); community awareness of, and education about, past adoption practices and their subsequent effects; specialised workforce training and development for mental health carers, mental and broader health and welfare professionals; improvements to services for helping search/make contact with family; addressing accessibility and cost of mental, behavioural and physical health services; and ensuring that lessons from the past are learned from and translated where appropriate into current child welfare policies – particularly in relation to current adoption services.

Noting that previous studies and associated priority actions have been around for some time now, its imperative that the government act upon these and put into action similar resources as are available to those of the “Solen Generations”.

#### **4. Consider any other matter that arises during the course of the inquiry deemed to be relevant by the Committee.**

I would like to further raise the notion that in the evidence given to the New South Wales Parliamentary Inquiry into Adoption, Centrecare's (Catholic Adoption Agency Sydney) Chief Social Researcher was quoted as admitting to forced adoption policies and practices as being a "**Stolen White Generation.**"



As such, forced adoption policies and practices are parallel to those that were placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

When one reviews the history in Australia, between 1910 and the 1970s, governments, churches and welfare bodies forcibly removed many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. These children became known as the Stolen Generations. Their removal was sanctioned by various government policies, which have left a legacy of trauma and loss that continues to affect First Nations communities, families and individuals today. The forcible removal of First Nations children from their families was based on assimilation policies, which claimed that the lives of **“First Nations people would be improved if they became part of white society”**.

Similarly, adoption had two key features: the application of 'clean break theory', and the framework of 'closed adoption'. Clean break theory involved the removal of a baby from the mother immediately after birth, often with no contact taking place between parent and child, followed by permanent placement of the baby with an adopting family.

Closed adoption involved the sealing of the record of adoption. Records were thus closed, so that the parties to the adoption remained permanently unaware of the identity of others. There are no precise estimates of the number of adoptions that took place in Australia, with estimates of around 200,000 being feasible.

An unknown proportion of these adoptions involved the placement of the babies of **single mothers**.

Because of the stigma attached to being born out of wedlock, and the absence of any financial support for single mothers, there was a widespread view and policy at the time that adopting out the babies of unmarried mothers was in the **“best interests of the child”**.

In closing this submission – I’m 53 years of age, married for 33 years, have 4 children aged 29(F), 27(M), 18(F) and 16(F) and have been meaningfully employed since the age of 15 (when it was suggested that I leave school as I wouldn’t amount to anything significant.)

There needs to be more focus and professional support for not only those children removed through forced adoption practices – **but also for their spouses and their own children** – who have stood by them, who have suffered so often in silence but essentially have been the anchors and the pillars to some very emotionally unstable and insecure human beings – as a direct result of forced adoption practices.

Their mental health, their story, their hurt and their pain is as much a part of these issues as it is for the adopted individual themselves. They are the heroes – they are the ones that we love, they are the ones that suffer in silence as so often we build up our walls, so we don’t get hurt. Sometimes those walls are too high to bring down and sometimes if they do come down – there’s no one left on the other side - because there’s been too much hurt and pain from the someone that they simply wanted to love.

I still don’t know my full ancestry (but I’m getting closer)... and maybe, just maybe, my adoption and my experiences, the insights I’ve relayed through this submission, will go some way into ensuring that no Australian will need to suffer the way that so many adoptees, their spouses and children have suffered through the policies and practices of forced adoption.

Sincerely

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