



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

COMMITTEES

Community Affairs References Committee

Report

SPEECH

Wednesday, 29 February 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

<p>Date Wednesday, 29 February 2012 Page 1258 Questioner Speaker McKenzie, Sen Bridget</p>	<p>Source Senate Proof No Responder Question No.</p>
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Senator McKENZIE (Victoria) (16:34): Between the 1930s and the 1970s, there were about 10,000 babies adopted in Australia each year. In 1971 there were 9,798 adoptions. Twenty years later, by 1991, this had declined to a little over 1,000, and in 2006 a little over 500. Today the average is about three per every 100 live births. Something just does not add up.

The Senate Community Affairs References Committee report, *Common wealth contribution to former forced adoption policie s and practice s*, is a massive report. The issues have been complex and we have worked with a large volume of evidence—and it has been a privilege. The committee heard 418 submissions, many from individuals and others from organisations. The accounts received by the committee dated from the 1950s to as recently as 1987. The reports were very detailed, including a large number of accounts that clearly outlined that babies were taken for adoption against their mother's will.

Many women told us they were pressured, deceived or threatened in order to secure signatures on adoption consent forms—actions that were likely in breach of the policies and laws of the time. For many mothers, their experiences were harrowing. The accounts were very personal and traumatic for the mothers and the children involved. According to the Royal Women's Hospital, up to 45 per cent of Victorian unmarried mothers relinquished their babies for adoption between 1945 and 1975, a period often referred to as the 'heyday of adoption'—and many of these were forced. The dilemma facing the single mother was exacerbated by community attitudes and social values that embraced adoption as the solution to illegitimacy and infertility, and failed to provide viable alternatives.

As a result of the strong community interest and media coverage in this story and the number of submissions, we have taken 18 months to get today. I particularly thank the committee members, who worked extremely hard. Some of them cannot be with us today—and I think particularly of Senator Judith Adams and Senator Coonan, who both contributed to the production of this report. We also considered archival material from the 1950s to the 1970s and worked to shed more light on the Commonwealth's role in past adoption practices. We investigated the roles of the states and territories and the adoption information laws.

Nobody has the right to take a child from its mother. What happened in hospitals throughout Australia was wrong. Most of the 400 or more submissions heard by the committee were harrowing tales of regret, abuse, neglect and loss. People out there may be thinking, 'Not all children who were adopted had a harrowing experience,' and they are right. Given the thousands of babies who were adopted, the committee was not looking for and did not get submissions from happy families. We had a clear reference to look at, talk about and expose forced adoptions. Still, the practice was and remains misguided. Thousands of babies were taken from their mothers, and while there were probably many who had very ordinary childhoods, when you take a child by force or coercion you change a life journey. In many cases you take a part of the mother's soul, and you take the child's heritage. There is loss. I would like to briefly tell two stories of women who had their children taken without consent. Both women were from regional towns in New South Wales, just over the border from Victoria where I am from.

About 45 years ago, Joan discovered she was expecting a baby. She had not realised how babies were made, and when she told her boyfriend he ended the relationship. This was not unusual. In fear and trepidation, she gave her parents the news and asked if, with their help, she might keep the baby. They quickly organised a hospital appointment in Melbourne and she was very clearly told that it would not be possible for her to keep the baby. By the time the baby was born, Joan had a new boyfriend who was courageously prepared to accept the baby as his own. Sadly, the grandparents and the hospital refused to allow it. The baby arrived; the boyfriend held her for a few minutes and the mother was given the forms to sign before the little girl was taken away. The couple were married and had two children of their own. No-one knew, including the couple's children.

Thirty years later, the child sent her mother a letter. She had been part of a loving family but her adopted parents had died and she was ready to learn about her own family history. After searching in Victoria for nearly 10 years, she thought to search the New South Wales registry and, with luck, the two names were connected. Sadly, Joan was very ill with cancer and she died just six months later. And I can tell you that there were some shocked whisperings in the Catholic Church that

day when three children, rather than two, gave the eulogy.

In this case, the little girl could easily have been raised by her mother. Before she died, Joan explained that the hospital forced her to sign the adoption documents. The social workers were of the belief that the obstacles facing single mothers were insurmountable and that she could not be sure the young man would marry her now that she had delivered a baby. She was told that adoption was the best possible solution and that it would allow her to 'get on with her life' and 'pretend it hadn't happened'. This position was supported by the nurses and unanimously upheld by her parents. Joan felt enormous pressure to 'do the right thing'. Explaining this to her daughter so many years later and with only months to live, she felt enormous regret. The loss had been so great that she had not known how to explain it to her other children, who were now adults.

The daughter has been closely following the committee inquiry. She might even be here today. I know that she feels an enormous sense of loss for the life she might have led. She wanted more time with her natural mother. She expected the adoption system would keep the details of her birth and make them accessible when she needed them. She felt let down that the details about her arrival were so difficult to find. She is devastated that the system did not support her request to find her mother sooner than she did.

She still does not know anything about her natural father. There is nothing on the record. She does, however, have a brother and sister and a second chance to get to know the man who held her during those first few minutes of life.

The second mother had a relationship with a pilot towards the end of the Second World War. She was more determined than the first. She and the baby's grandmother travelled to Victoria to visit an ageing aunt, and they stayed for six months. When the baby was born, the mother flatly refused to sign the adoption documents. After much coercion, she finally agreed to sign a form that allowed the baby girl to be fostered—with an option to collect her later. The little girl was given to a foster family in Melbourne. They indulged her with love and kindness, opportunities and education until the natural grandmother decided it was time the child was returned to her mother. Sadly, the child was six.

At 65, she often talks about the trauma, confusion and loss of losing her foster family and being handed to the nuns in black on a train at Southern Cross Station on a Sunday afternoon. She was taken to a small country town and given to a mother who was humiliated and a

grandfather who would not own her. She would argue that she should have stayed where she was.

I expect that these stories are similar to many thousands of stories where the outcome was not as harrowing or as despicable as the tales we heard during the committee inquiry. Many are contained within the report. Each and every one of these Australians needs our sincere apologies and our acknowledgement. We need to acknowledge that, whatever the intentions and beliefs of the time, past adoption practices caused lasting consequences for many relinquishing mothers, and sometimes also for their children and their extended families. Irrespective of the mores of the time, the committee does not accept that it was legal or ethical to take a child from its mother for the purpose of adoption.

Today we recognise that this action was both illegal and unethical. I understand that many relinquishing mothers experienced, and continue to experience, feelings of grief, pain, anger, helplessness and loss, and for this I apologise unreservedly.

I would like to thank all the women and their children and all the professionals involved for telling us their stories. As the newest member of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee, I would like to thank the committee for its track record in bringing to light the issues of our nation, putting them on the table and exposing the things that we need to take a good, hard look at if we want to be serious about being true to ourselves as a forward-looking nation. It is a testament to the women involved on the committee. I commend the report to the Senate.