



# CHILDLESS? ADOPTION IN AUSTRALIA SINCE THE 1950s

*The Commonwealth Government's recent Senate Inquiry into forced adoptions is a significant step towards reconciliation for the tens of thousands of single mothers whose babies were forcibly removed, writes academic Dr Samantha Young.*

Tens of thousands of adoptions took place in Australia from the 1950s through to the early 1980s, and although the majority of mothers willingly relinquished their children, many consider that their children were taken by force – that consent was coerced, taken under duress, or not granted at all. The practice of forced adoption can be considered within the paradigms of post-war conservatism and the nuclear family, yet it has also had lifelong consequences for many women and their children. Viewed as a phenomenon of mid-twentieth century Australia, the experience of adoption has been classified as that of a prism with many faces: love, law and morality, charity, but also shame and punishment.<sup>1</sup>

The Inquiry was a long time coming for many people affected by forced adoption, and when convened the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs was informed by submissions from more than 400 individuals and organisations, including archival material, medical records and correspondence. The main contributors to the Inquiry were relinquishing mothers, but evidence was also taken from former hospital staff, adopted children, birth fathers and other family members.

The Inquiry was open to all, with advertisements for submissions placed online and in national newspapers, and requests made to a range of government bodies, community organisations and individuals. Despite this comprehensive call, the scope of the Inquiry was specifically limited to the nature and contribution of the Australian Commonwealth in forced adoptions. Adoption remains the responsibility of state and territory governments, but

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the Inquiry noted early on that although the Commonwealth's role was indirect it was not insignificant, and the Commonwealth still takes primary responsibility for providing social security assistance, such as the Supporting Mother's Benefit. These benefits, when reformed in 1973, made provisions that contributed to the increase in single-parent families and the steady decline in the number of local adoptions from the late 1970s onward. The Commonwealth also took a principal role in the reform of adoption laws in the 1960s, and has led discussions on how the states and territories may address the consequences of past

forced adoption practices. Crucially, and in accordance with the first recommendation made in February's report, the Commonwealth will play a major role in the development of a national framework that addresses the consequences of forced adoption.

The report and all its submissions is so large it could act as a doorstep; and reading many of the testimonies is an emotional journey back to a time where women and girls had little control over their bodies, and societal expectations were conservative and cold. Witness submissions consistently question whether the actions of hospitals and other institutions were ethical or legal, and it is this issue that most participants believe governments and institutions should be apologising for. Whether an apology will be granted is yet to be seen, but it is immediately noticeable when reading the Inquiry that those affected by forced adoptions are grateful just to have their stories heard:

I want to thank you for holding this enquiry, because for 40-odd years I lived with the shame of having a child out of wedlock. I was silenced by my family and by my community. You have made me become a better person, and because you are here I have been able to speak out in public about this for the first time, and you have respected me, when I have never had any respect or felt that I had any respect from my own community. Thank you.<sup>2</sup>

### Women's Liberation?

Acknowledging the practice of forced adoption enhances our understanding of Australian women's experiences during the mid-twentieth century – a period that saw on one hand significant advancements in their civil rights, and on the other an attachment to conservative values and the nuclear family.

The opening decades of the twentieth century saw Australian women gain the vote and enter government for the first time; many women enrolled at university and actively participated in public debate. And whereas the decades following the First World War saw a flurry of economic and industrial prosperity and artistic expression, the post-Second World War era was one of political and social conservatism focussed on rebuilding and regeneration. In this Australia, the primary role for many women was to be a wife and mother. For the tens of thousands of women who had worked during the war, giving up their jobs also meant giving up their economic independence as they turned back to their fathers or husbands for financial security. It wasn't until the mid 1970s that Australian women were granted a home loan, or a car loan, without providing the signature of a male guarantor. The conservative push of the post-war reconstruction period limited opportunities for women outside the domestic environment, as seen in the reduced number of women entering higher education, and the 1961 peak in the national birth rate at 3.5 babies per woman.<sup>3</sup>

This spike in the birth rate was, however, relatively short lived and by 1966 had dropped to an average of 2.9 babies per woman.<sup>4</sup> This fall is attributed to a general shift in social attitudes and the increasing availability of abortion and the contraceptive pill, yet this response extends mainly to married women. As was the case with most women's issues or legislation concerning females in the mid twentieth century, young single women and single mothers especially were routinely ignored.

The drop in birth rate is aligned with a period of great social change in the West, and the 1960s are remembered as a time of youth rebellion and protest, reaching its pinnacle with the peace movements and student demonstrations of 1968. These protests coincided with the civil rights movement and were above all concerned with the inequities in racial participation, education for women and with other liberal causes such as free speech, the death penalty and protesting the Vietnam War. As teens and young adults began to turn away from their parents' traditions, an alternative lifestyle of 'Hippie

Culture' emerged that was in direct contrast to the affluent, consumer-driven lifestyles of post-war Baby Boomers.

Social attitudes were changing, the Pill was introduced and women gained more control over their fertility. But motherhood and women's liberation were quite separate issues, and the many gains made in areas like employment, education and marriage law stood distinct to attitudes towards a woman's right to mother. Of course, many single women raised children during this

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period, but in some circles single motherhood remained taboo and community expectations were that the children of young, unmarried mothers should be available for adoption, and that married couples who wished to adopt a child would be able to do so.<sup>5</sup>

Such attitudes made widespread adoption a phenomenon confined to the mid twentieth century, and perceptions of the practice are located within the value systems of Australian society during that period – a time that saw 'a general intolerance of individuals and families who did not fit the idealised family unit'<sup>6</sup> characterised by white married couples with secure incomes. The Senate Inquiry noted that there was a certain sense of entitlement felt by 'ideal' couples that they should be able to have children, and that the potent combination of ignorance and entitlement manifested into the questionable adoption practices of the era. The pressure on an unwed mother would have been intense, as common views espoused in magazines and newspapers at the time detailed scorn and disdain being directed at single mothers as demand for babies for infertile couples far surpassed those being relinquished. Despite gains made by the women's liberation and civil rights movements, prejudice directed towards single mothers was felt as late as 1973, where a doctor at Sydney's Prince of Wales Hospital deemed most unmarried mothers as 'more likely to be poor, undernourished and of low intelligence, if not actually retarded.'<sup>7</sup>

#### **'If you love your baby you'll give it up for adoption'**

**T**he practice of forced adoption can be explained by the Western Australian Parliament's apology of 2010 that a mother may not have 'been given the

**...one mother was told her birth pains were punishment for getting pregnant before marriage. Others described being tied to a bed while delivering, or that a sheet was placed over the bed to prevent them from seeing their child at birth.**

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mother, or on any basis other than her status – she was unworthy and unable to provide for the child; she had perhaps also shamed her family. The Inquiry notes how the feeling of being unworthy has permeated mothers' adult lives:

It was just horrid. How people can do that to other people is beyond me – beyond me, I swear, and with such a demeanour that you were such a low-life. It takes you a long time to get over it. I was in my forties before my two daughters made me feel like I was worth something ... We have had to live with that for decades. Decades later it still destroys you because you have to live with what happened to you when they took your baby.<sup>11</sup>

opportunity to make an informed decision at a time of [her] life when [she was] particularly vulnerable'.<sup>8</sup> Other, more confronting explanations come from mothers who report being shackled to beds, drugged, or held against their will at hospitals or birthing centres. Many women reported that consent was given under duress, others revoked consent and were not given their baby, and in some cases, mothers reported not giving consent at all.<sup>9</sup>

She did not warn me of 'dire future regret' if adoption is being considered. She withheld information about alternative options or available government assistance. Her menacing and aggressive manner escalated until she achieved her goal of forcing me to sign the form. The adoption consent was not voluntary or informed.<sup>10</sup>

Forced adoptions arose from the prejudgment that unwed women were unfit to be mothers. This judgement was not based on medical reports or the character of the

The public shaming of unwed mothers was consistent within adoption practices of the 1950s and 60s that reflected the 'clean break' theory. This theory holds that the best outcome for both mother and child is for contact to be severed at birth and to allow early bonding with a child's adoptive parents. Supporters of the clean break theory cited the social stigma and disgrace of single motherhood – a clean break would supposedly allow a woman to forget about the past and forge a life free from stigma.<sup>12</sup> This theory, contested today by modern psychotherapy and deemed to cause ongoing trauma, contributed to further feelings of worthlessness and also led many women to keep their pregnancies secret, even from close friends and family, or subsequent children:

I was 19 when I found out about my brother. That was only seven years ago. For 19 years, my mother kept her first-born child a secret from her subsequent children. For 19 years I thought I was her eldest ...

I also suffer from the knowledge of a brother lost (I always wished for an elder brother growing up) who I will probably never meet (I have his photo on my desk), and of course the pain that has come from being raised by someone who has been psychologically and emotionally traumatised from having her baby removed from her and going through the mistreatment that it entailed.<sup>13</sup>

The promise of a life free from stigma was certainly little recompense for the treatment many endured when a pregnancy was revealed. Louise Greenup describes being verbally abused in the street and shunned; Marilyn Murphy's mother became hysterical and was bereft about neighbours, relatives, and church members finding out; Margaret McGrath tells of a pall of shame and disapproval covering those at a Christian maternity home where it was common to hear girls called 'stupid', 'foolish', 'wicked' and 'sinful'; while another remembers being banished from home and immediate family members and put at the mercy of social criticism and ridicule. She recalls that 'at a time when the mother most needed love, compassion and emotional support, she and her child were cast aside by society in general, and manipulated by the adoption system.'<sup>14</sup>

This manipulation most commonly occurred if a woman gave birth in a large city hospital or birthing centre, where upon admission her medical

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record was marked BFA: baby for adoption. This note was made without consultation with the patient and was not removed even if a mother declared an intention to keep her child – the institution had made the decision for her. Unwed mothers received counselling from social workers, almoners or religious sisters who recommended adoption and gave little to no detail of alternative options, including legal rights or government financial support. An emphasis was placed on the needs of the child; young expectant mothers were rarely asked of their plans for the future and many felt emotional and physical pressure to sign consent forms, as if it was a foregone conclusion that adoption would go ahead.

Feelings of disempowerment were amplified when the 'BFA' mark of an unmarried mother's file influenced her treatment while giving birth as well as during post-natal care. Many submissions to the Inquiry emphasised an attitude of derision and judgement from nursing staff, including one mother who was told her birth pains were punishment for getting pregnant before marriage.<sup>15</sup> Others described being tied to a bed while delivering, or that a sheet was placed over the bed to prevent them from seeing their child at birth. Some women were able to see or hold their babies, while others were restricted access, often forcibly, and further pain was endured by women who were put in post-natal wards with married mothers who were able to hold and feed their babies. The Senate Inquiry received evidence from former midwives who revealed restricting access was seen as an act of kindness: in keeping with the idea of a 'clean break', it would be worse for a mother to bond with her child only to have it taken from her a few days later. Often such acts of kindness were administered before consent to adoption had been granted. Lactation suppressants and breast binding were also administered on the belief that they would aid a mother's physical recovery – yet in several cases these measures were also dispensed before consent had been given.

The Senate Inquiry also heard about instances of 'rapid adoption', where a married woman whose child had been stillborn was offered a child for adoption in its place. We do not know whether these cases were known adoptions, but the committee noted that there was a corollary between 'rapid adoptions' and single mothers who were informed that their baby had died.<sup>17</sup> These cases are probably not recorded among the estimated 200,000 forced and consented adoptions that took place within Australia's states and territories between the 1950s and early 1980s.<sup>18</sup>

### **'Just get on with your life and forget it'**

The experience of forced adoption has had long-term implications for the lives of affected mothers and on their later relationships with partners and subsequent children. Many contributors noted that the secrecy surrounding adoption had the effect of compounding the difficulties they experienced, and postponing the recognition and treatment of trauma. The Inquiry heard that secrecy continued after a woman had given birth, and in many cases mothers were told to 'go home and forget about it'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, secrecy was the main priority of adoption law prior to the 1980s, as an Australian Institute of Family Studies report noted that legislation operated 'from the incorrect assumption that the relinquishing mother want[ed] her identity to remain a secret to her child'.<sup>20</sup>

Very few mothers could 'just forget it', and instances of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression are common in the stories and experiences submitted to the Senate Inquiry. A recurring theme identifies an unresolved trauma many mothers attribute to never knowing where their babies grew up, to wondering if they were safe and happy, and wondering if a reunion may one day happen. I have included three of those stories here to illuminate the impact of forced adoption practices, including evidence from fathers whose then-girlfriends were compelled to have their children adopted, but who themselves were denied a choice. Telling the story, revealing the secret, and acknowledging their grief has allowed many birth parents the opportunity to relieve some of the anguish associated with forced removal.

Barbara Maison was sceptical the Inquiry would result in any Commonwealth action given the lack of response to previous studies. She was also upset by the low number of submissions, but understands the emotional stress of reliving the past:

It was a trauma. It was an injury to us; it was not just feeling sad and: go home; you will forget about it. You did not forget. You could not forget. I found, as I got older and older it has got worse, even though I have met my son. I know him. I have a good relationship with him. He looks just like the first son of my marriage, but it is like loving a familiar stranger.

She discloses the struggle many relinquishing mothers have had in making contact with adopted children, and calls on the government to acknowledge

the suffering many have experienced:

Adoption, in theory, was regarded as the answer to a social problem; infertile couples and children who for some reason or another were unable to remain with their family of origin, but due to the secrets and lies adoption has engendered in the past, sadly for many it has not provided the solution, but a lifetime of regret and grief ... I sincerely hope that despite the small number of submissions the Government will take our issues seriously and not disregard us this time – for many of us it is the absolutely last opportunity for our children to learn the truth.<sup>21</sup>

John Hughes was threatened with police action when his then 16-year-old girlfriend became pregnant. He was denied any involvement in the pregnancy and was not listed on the child's birth certificate:

I was going to visit her but was ... warned never to go near her again by her father and a male friend who threatened assault should I see her, so naturally I kept my distance so as not to cause any more trouble than I had already brought on [her]. I was never at any time asked what I would like to do in regards to marriage or parenthood ... never given any documents to sign or authorise any actions which I thought was strange as I was the girl's father, and felt very disappointed that maybe she would never know that.

This predicament caused me great stress and anxiety in future years and I went through a bad time with alcohol abuse and generally did not take care of myself ... but I'm sure this would be nothing compared to what [the mother] went through.<sup>22</sup>

June Smith's experience reinforces the attitudes and stigma associated with single motherhood as contrasted to single, divorced mothers:

I had my beautiful baby boy ... in 1961 when I was 19 years old ... The joy and love I felt for my tiny boy was unimaginable. My baby was pulled from my arms by a nun and placed all alone in a nursery ... I was then left for several days sitting on a bed in a ward full of married mothers who were allowed to have their tiny babies next to their beds. They were able to hold their babies, cuddle them and feed them whilst I sat and watched and cried.

In 1965 I was a married, deserted wife with a six-month old son. I did not get maintenance from his father for 18 months. I did not claim any benefit or pension from social services ever. I worked ... I will not say that it was easy but it was easy to love my boy and care for him as any mother would. The irony was that most people believed me to be an unmarried mother. I faced no obstacles. Yet during 1965, the same year I was a deserted wife and left solely responsible for my son, and for nearly a decade after, thousands upon thousands of young, single mothers across Australia were still having their newborn babies forcibly removed from them for no other reason than that those with absolute power had the nefarious will and ability to do so. Our children now have children of their own and gaze at them and wonder in anger how we could have given them away for no-one would make them give away their child. This is part of the ongoing trauma for many mothers. We have lost so much.<sup>23</sup>

**Many women who experienced forced adoption found it difficult to form meaningful relationships and many did not go on to have subsequent children. These women would not regard themselves to be childless, yet they are commonly viewed so by society.**

The Inquiry notes that most adopted people who submitted evidence did not have positive experiences: many suffered abuse or could not connect with their adoptive parents. However, it must be recognised that this sample is limited, and that a great number of successful, happy family relationships were formed. Monash University in Melbourne recently completed an Australian Research Council grant into the history of adoption in Australia, which includes an online portal where people can upload their experiences. Entries range from local to intra-country adoptions, including stories from many children who reveal their adoptive parents gave them 'every opportunity to experience life and the best of everything possible'.<sup>24</sup>

### Childless?

Together with trauma and feelings of disempowerment, the perception of childlessness permeates many women's experiences of adoption. Aligned with contemporary debates of feminism and motherhood, women who appear childless often receive sentiments of pity or scorn from sections of society on the assumption that childlessness is an active, intended choice.

Critics of Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard or Deputy Opposition Leader Julie Bishop often opine that their childless status raise doubts over their ability to understand the needs of families, thus limiting their aptitude to govern. The feebleness of such jibes is that they are obvious politicking, yet outside of politics such comments allude to dated prejudices that assume childlessness is a matter of choice; that women who do not have children are selfish and have ignored their biological responsibility. Recent studies that have examined Western women who do not mother children hint that issues of social exclusion or connectedness exist, that while those women are most likely to be tertiary educated and hold down good jobs, they are nonetheless socially disadvantaged and negatively stereotyped.<sup>25</sup>

Many women who experienced forced adoption found it difficult to form meaningful relationships and many did not go on to have subsequent children. These women would not regard themselves to be childless, yet they are commonly viewed so by society. Contemporary debates about 'womanhood' are limited and need to recognise the multitude of experiences, beyond those of the most stereotypical and immediate. As part of the Senate Inquiry's recommendations, any Commonwealth apology is to be presented in a range of forms and be published widely to ensure 'greater public awareness and an opportunity for women to finally have their voice heard by the government and their experience publically validated.'<sup>26</sup>

Adoption laws were made uniform across Australia's states and territories during the 1960s, with the aim of recognising interstate and overseas adoptions as well as securing inheritance rights for adopted children. The Commonwealth promoted model legislation in which consent would only be taken from a mother in a fit condition, not under duress, and that she would have up to 30 days to revoke her decision. These laws were intended to extend the rights of adoptive parents and relinquishing mothers, yet the Senate Inquiry learned forced adoptions continued into the early 1980s. The denial of information regarding social security benefits further undermined

a mother's position, as the Australian Government has provided various forms of financial assistance to mothers from as early as 1912. Withholding such information deliberately misled new mothers of options available to them, and breached state and territory laws.

Dominant social attitudes of mid-twentieth century Australia disregarded legislation, and the stigma of unwed motherhood led to the breakdown of many family relationships. Yet since the late 1960s the rights of women and single mothers have advanced, and the ongoing influence of organisations such as the National Council for the Single Mother and her Child have been able to challenge that stigma and empower women to make informed decisions and to better support themselves and their child.

In acknowledging their grief and lifting the veil on decades of secrecy and regret, the Senate Inquiry has allowed many women the feeling of catharsis and reconciliation. Apologies from the federal, state and territory governments and non-government institutions will further contribute to the healing process; they will provide necessary recognition that although no one story of adoption is the same, the chapter of forced adoption has affected the experiences of many Australian women.<sup>27</sup> ■

### NOTES

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- 2 Ms Robin Turner as cited in The Senate, Community Affairs References Committee, Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices Enquiry, Section 3.10, p 31
- 3 Australian Bureau of Statistics, Yearbook Australia, Dataset on Births, [www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/C5F935614146DE94CA2572360000E3D4?opendocument](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/C5F935614146DE94CA2572360000E3D4?opendocument), accessed 5 April 2012.
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- 5 Senate Inquiry, Section 1.46, p 11.
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- 7 F. Grunseit, 'The adoption of infants and the role of an adoption advisory clinic in New South Wales', *The Medical Journal of Australia*, vol. 1, 1973, p. 854, as cited in Senate Inquiry, Section 2.22, p. 25.
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- 9 Senate Inquiry, Section 3.74, p. 54.

- 10 Ms Rosemary Harbison, as cited in Senate Inquiry, Section 3.84, p. 58.
- 11 Ms June Smith, Private Capacity, Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 20 April 2011.
- 12 Senate Enquiry, Section 1.48, p. 12.
- 13 Ms Emily Wolfinger, as cited in Senate Inquiry, Section 4.54, pp. 92–93.
- 14 As cited in Senate Inquiry, Section 3.33, 3.12, 3.29 and 3.37, pp. 32–41.
- 15 Ms Linda Eve, as cited in Senate Inquiry, Section 3.51, p. 47.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Senate Inquiry, Section 3.106, p. 66.
- 18 Senate Inquiry, Section 1.30, p. 7.
- 19 Senate Inquiry, Section 4.27 – 4.28, p. 82.
- 20 Australian Institute of Family Studies Impact of Past Adoption Practices, Summary of key issues from Australian Research. Final Report March 2010, p. 16.
- 21 Barbara Maison, submission to Public Hearing, Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 20 April 2011.
- 22 Senate Inquiry, Section 4.49, Mr John Hughes, p. 91.
- 23 June Smith, submission in Public Hearing, Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 20 April 2011, p. CA33–34.
- 24 Stories about the history of adoption in Australia, viewed online at Monash e-Research Centre, <https://confluence/vre.its.monash.edu.au/display/hoa/Stories+about+the+adoption+experience+in+Australia>
- 25 See 'Discourse, Power and Exclusion: The Experiences of Childless Women' in Ann R. Taket (ed.), *Theorising Social Exclusion*, Routledge, 2009, p. 128.
- 26 National Council of Single Mothers and their Children, cited in Senate Inquiry, Section 9.83, p. 213.

## A PARTICULARLY NASTY THING

That's the way it was back then. They had these high sentences handed down to counter the increase in crime. But ten years feels like a hundred when all the time you're lost inside of days and the brute habit of them bending you to their shape. So giving hundred-year sentences instead of ten like they was handing down is not likely to deter anybody from doing anything they probably wouldn't have done in the first place if they was straight in the head when they was doing it. I've heard people on the radio talking about such deterrence and I've heard other people talking about how an increase in cops and courts takes funds away from benefits and handouts that stop people from needing to commit crimes in the first place. That's just another kind of deterrence. But no man acts under the knowledge that he will get caught, I do know that. For each man considers himself the exception or else weighs up the prospect with the immediate gain and judges the gain as more pressing or they themselves as more deserving of it. Those people on the radio must all think they have the light of truth shining down on them. I don't know about that but I do know that kind of light keeps out of places like this where there is another kind of truth and one born out of a godawful rawness of individual experience. For there is an understanding that doesn't come from thinking but through doing. But it comes at a cost and carries with it a certain guilt that cannot be offloaded and which cannot be known prior to the doing nor misremembered through thinking afterward.

There are men from back then still inside here today with sentences of a hundred years or more and no parole. It's supposed to make you think. But there is no use listening to what the people on the radio are saying, I do know that. And I know when you are lost inside the narrow routine of days and each day is the same as the next then thinking is the last thing you should be doing. And a man will do anything to get out of doing that. One man I remember from back then had two life sentences to serve consecutively