

Re-writing Australia's history of forced adoption



The victims of forced adoption want an apology from the Commonwealth government. Nikkirk

[Susan Gair, James Cook University](#)

A long-awaited [Senate Committee report](#) will tomorrow reveal whether the Commonwealth's policies and practices played a role in coercing young, unwed Australian women to give up their newborn babies for adoption.

The practice, known more recently as forced adoption, was reportedly common in Australia between the 1950s and 1980s, with authorities failing to gain free and informed consent from thousands of young, unwed mothers before their newborns were removed.

The Senate Inquiry received [hundreds of submissions](#), including many personal accounts of coercion, trauma and ongoing mental health problems associated with forced adoption.

Long and painful history

Legally, adoption was a confidential, irrevocable process where “unwanted” babies were placed predominantly with childless couples, relieving the state of the burden of their care. Close to 200,000 children have been adopted since the first Australian legislation facilitating adoption was enacted in 1896.

By mid-20th century, adoption was increasingly seen as western society's answer to several emerging social problems – illegitimate children, single motherhood and infertility.

From the 1950s, babies of unmarried women were labelled illegitimate and, as such, the women were deemed “unfit” to mother. These young women could best serve society and themselves, they were told, if they relinquished their child for adoption. Then they could “get on” with their lives.

It seems that religious and welfare bodies agreed that the solution to illegitimate babies was adoption by a married woman who was “fit” to mother. From the 1950s to the 1970s, these organisations established homes across Australia to support and protect young, single pregnant women. But many of these women now have [revealed the suffering](#) they experienced at the hands of these institutions.

In many cases, the signed legal paperwork appears to show the birth mother's consent for adoption. However, it's common for women whose children were lost to them through closed adoptions between the 1940s and 1980s to [recount](#) traumatic stories of immense emotional pressure and coercion to sign.

Birth mothers were silenced when it came to speaking out about their hidden pregnancies, their treatment during the birth – which was frightening and traumatic – and their grief after losing their child. Their pain was seen as punishment for their immorality because of falling pregnant.



‘Illegitimate’ children were adopted by wedded or widowed women who were deemed ‘fit’ to mother. Junoic

Many of the women were young, vulnerable and experiencing personal crises. They were not informed of any legal rights to keep the child, and were made to feel inadequate, immoral and undeserving when it came to raising their own babies. Birth fathers were generally disregarded and blamed for corrupting innocent girls.

In some cases, single mothers may have been deliberately denied access to counselling services prior to giving consent. Adoption was upheld as the only option for these women because of a lack of financial and other support, and the stigma associated with illegitimacy and motherhood out of wedlock.

Adoptive parents were encouraged to raise the child as if it was born to them. The family was legally complete when the adoptive parents were named on birth certificates as the parents to whom the child was born.

Many adoptees say they experienced positive family relationships with their adoptive families. But many others have reported severe emotional disturbances and significant feelings of loss.

For adopted people, the grief associated with “not knowing who they are” is common and relates to the loss of identity, the loss of information about their origins, the loss of both birth parents, and for many, including Indigenous children, a loss of their culture of origin.

Research shows a high incidence of grief among birth mothers after the loss of their baby to adoption, and these feelings often intensify over time. Some of the women who experienced this grief following forced adoption practices in Australia told their stories in the Four Corner's documentary, [Given or Taken](#), which screened last night on ABC1.

The Commonwealth's role

[Submissions](#) to the Inquiry suggest the Commonwealth government has a case to answer in supporting forced adoption. This is based on the denial of the same financial support to unwed mothers that was available to other women who were widows, deserted wives and divorcees.

This was the case until the early days of the Labor Whitlam Government, when a universal single mothers' benefit was introduced to support all mothers in need, including unmarried women.

By withholding financial support until the 1970s, the submissions argue, the Commonwealth can be seen as condoning forced adoptions and contributing to the coercive policies and practices of state welfare, church and charity organisations.

Equally, up until the 1970s, reliable birth control was difficult to access and was disallowed by some religious groups. Termination of pregnancy was illegal under Commonwealth and state legislation. So while state legislation governed adoptions, some submissions to the Inquiry argued that the Commonwealth's public and social policies endorsed a moral stance that enforced marriage or adoption to secure care for children.

Time for an apology?

Many [submissions](#) to the Inquiry argue the Commonwealth should play a leadership role in helping to heal the wounds of past wrongs in forced adoption. This would include publicly acknowledging the many stories of distress, trauma and violations of mother-child relationships as a result of forced, coerced, or unethical adoptions. Compensation could then be sought for the resulting trauma.

Evidence has been submitted to the Inquiry that some professionals involved in past adoptions might have acted unprofessionally, inappropriately, unethically and without informed consent to facilitate the adoption of children. While not wanting to find scapegoats for past wrongs, these actions should be acknowledged in an apology.

But not all those involved want an apology. Many just want the truth to be heard, acknowledged and accepted.

More practically, the Inquiry is likely to recommend a nationally funded framework of counselling, specifically tailored to support the well-being of those affected by forced adoption. This would be developed in consultation with the key stakeholders – birth parents, their extended families and adopted people – to provide ongoing emotional support.

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