

APOLOGY

for FORCED ADOPTION PRACTICES

18 July 2012



The South Australian Parliament recognises that the lives of many members of the South Australian community have been adversely affected by adoption practices, which have caused deep distress and hurt, especially for mothers and their children, who are now adults.

We recognise that past adoption practices have profoundly affected the lives of not only these people, but also fathers, grandparents, siblings, partners and other family members.

We accept with profound sorrow that many mothers did not give informed consent to the adoption of their children.

To those mothers who were denied the opportunity to love and care for their children, we are deeply sorry.

We recognise that practices of our past mean that there are some members of our community today who remain disconnected from their families of origin.

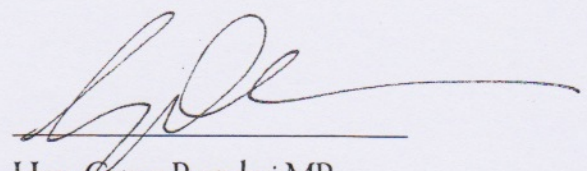
To those people adopted as children who were denied the opportunity to be loved and cared for by their families of origin, we are deeply sorry.

To those people who were disbelieved for so long, we hear you now; we acknowledge your pain, and we offer you our unreserved and sincere regret and sorrow for those injustices.

To all those hurt, we say sorry.



Hon. Jay Weatherill MP
Premier of South Australia



Hon. Grace Portolesi MP
Minister for Education and Child Development



The Hon Grace Portolesi MP
EXTRACT FROM HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY HANSARD

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PAST ADOPTION PRACTICES

The Hon. J.W. WEATHERILL (Cheltenham—Premier, Minister for State Development) (11:03): I move:

That this house recognises that the lives of many members of the South Australian community have been adversely affected by adoption practices which have caused deep distress and hurt, especially for mothers and their children, who are now adults.

We recognise that past adoption practices have profoundly affected the lives of not only these people but also fathers, grandparents, siblings, partners and other family members.

We accept with profound sorrow that many mothers did not give informed consent to the adoption of their children.

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To those people who were disbelieved for so long, we hear you now; we acknowledge your pain, and we offer you our unreserved and sincere regret and sorrow for those injustices.

To all those hurt, we say sorry.

We meet here today in this special sitting for two principal purposes: first, to recognise that forcible adoption practices caused deep distress and hurt to many South Australian mothers, their children and families; second, to apologise for those practices which we cannot condone. In formal terms, this will become a resolution of the House of Assembly but, in terms of what everybody can see here today, members of both sides of the houses of parliament are gathered here today to be part of this event. We can be sure that when the Legislative Council sits later it will join in formally adopting this apology. The apology will then be in all ways an expression of the whole parliament—formal as well as visible.

We should pause for a moment to remind ourselves that not everyone who has been separated from a family member by adoption feels that an apology is necessary in their circumstances. We acknowledge their experience and the validity of their feelings. We also know that, in offering this apology, we may be reviving for some people old and half-forgotten memories and emotions from a past time, but we hope that what we are doing here today will in time provide a release from the need to keep these things buried.

The immediate stimulus for the apology has, of course, been the report provided earlier this year of the Senate's Community Affairs References Committee's inquiry into former forced adoption policies and practices, but that committee inquiry was itself preceded by many years of dedicated advocacy on behalf of all of those who had been wronged.

The committee mostly examined people's experiences of forced adoptions which happened between the 1950s and the late 1970s, and this plainly affects many South Australian families. It is estimated that in South Australia 17,000 children were adopted between 1950 and 1980. Some

adoptions were conducted within the state welfare department as well as in state hospitals, such as the Queen Victoria Hospital. We also know that many adoptions occurred with the involvement of churches and non-government agencies.

It is not clear how many of the adoptions during this period may have involved coercion or forced removal of a child; what is clear is that many families were deeply affected by the past practices of that kind. It would be fanciful to imagine that the practices of forced adoption revealed by the Senate committee were confined to the precise period covered by the information it was able to gather, so our apology today is not in any sense restricted to the period for which the Senate committee gathered its details. Our apology today extends to all past forced adoptions, whenever they may have occurred.

That said, the committee's report makes harrowing reading. The report tells us that often mothers were rushed into signing adoption consent forms before they had time to recover from the immediate effects of giving birth. Some women were never even given adoption consent forms to sign. In some cases, women's signatures on adoption consent forms were simply forged. Mothers were told that their babies had died when in fact they had already been placed for adoption.

During the 1960s, all states legislated to give mothers up to 30 days to revoke their consent to adoption. Even then, the committee found, this right was disregarded. Sometimes mothers were not even told about it; other times they were told lies. If a mother discussed her wish to change her mind, she might be told it was too late. Mothers were told their children had already been adopted when this was not true.

More subtle coercion was also used in a variety of ways. Mothers were made to feel that consenting to their child's adoption was the only responsible and unselfish thing to do. After being separated from her child in these ways, a mother might be advised to forget what had happened, to never speak of it again, to 'go home and get on with your life'.

Later, I was told yesterday, a mother might be criticised for having, in the eyes of her critic, let her child go. So these mothers were held to be wrong to have become pregnant, then wrong to want to keep their own child, and then wrong for having given way in the face of all of the forces pressing for them to be separated. We reflect sadly on the burden these women have carried, the silence they have endured.

These adoption practices were the product of multiple failures. They failed to meet a basic standard, whether or not they were in accordance with the law at the time. They reflected a failure to apply a simple test of human conduct—a test which we should all try to apply to ourselves every day. They reflected a failure to ask what has become a famous question: how would I feel if this were done to me? For those failures, and for everything they led to, we are sorry.

When I announced our commitment to making this apology, I asked that the Minister for Education and Child Development engage with community groups and the people most affected by these past practices. We knew that our task was to gain an understanding from them about what form this apology should take to have true meaning for those to whom it was to be given. Many mothers, sons and daughters stepped forward, sharing their personal histories. They generously gave us a window into their hearts to understand the effect of forced adoption—the pain of their loss, their grief for what had been, their grief for what was, and their grief for what should and might have been the wonderful relationship.

Mothers revealed their birth experience was often frightening and lonely. Sometimes, as I was told yesterday, people whose job it was to assist at the birth were, in fact, openly hostile and disapproving. Many mothers told of being immediately pressured to place their child for adoption. They remembered being deprived of any opportunity to determine what was in their and their child's best interests. Some were denied what one might regard as a simple decency—simply to say goodbye.

Children who are separated from their mothers and placed for adoption have, as adults, shared their experiences of being separated from their family of origin and of learning that this had not been voluntary. This wrong practice denied them the opportunity to be cared for by the parents who brought them into the world—and the opportunity to be loved by them and attached to them. Some have had to grow up believing that they were rejected by their mothers. They were denied

access which they might otherwise have had to their identity and their history. They were deprived of contact with their heritage. Indigenous children were denied their relationship with culture and country.

Many fathers were denied access to their children. Too often, as a result of pressure, the father was not even recognised on the child's birth certificate. This is a source of anger for children who now know their fathers and want their heritage acknowledged. But some fathers will perhaps never know the son or daughter who was adopted. We acknowledge the wrongs that led to the loss of these relationships. We recognise that fathers also lost their children.

There are countless others—siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents—whose lives have been profoundly affected by these past practices. They, too, have lost relationships. Then there are some, no longer with us, for whom this apology comes too late. We know that some mothers took their own lives as a result of the grief of forced separation. Others also died without ever knowing anything about the child they had lost to forced adoption. I hope this day, this recognition of their hurts, provides some comfort for those who mourn them.

So we apologise, and we do more than that: we recognise, too, the great fortitude of many of those who were most painfully affected. I think particularly of the women who, when young, were separated from their children in these wrong ways. Many of them have skilfully and lovingly built and maintained important relationships in their lives despite all of this. They have done this while living with the painful knowledge of what they have gone through. Often, they have kept this knowledge private. We applaud their resilience and their moral courage.

We also express our determination to ensure that such things never happen again. Our present laws and practices are far removed from those which give rise to this apology. Even so, we remain open to continuing suggestions for ways in which things can be further improved. We also commit to maintaining government financial support for the Post Adoption Support Services provided by Relationships Australia. People are entitled to this continuing support.

We apologise for the lies, the fear, the silence, the deceptions. We apologise for the lack of respect, the disbelief, the grief, the trauma and loss. We offer this unreserved apology not just as an act of atonement but as an expression of open-hearted admiration and support for those to whom it is owed. I commend the motion to the house.

Honourable members: Hear, hear!



The Hon Grace Portolesi MP
EXTRACT FROM HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY HANSARD

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PAST ADOPTION PRACTICES

The Hon. G. PORTOLESI (Hartley—Minister for Education and Child Development) (11:21): It is with deep respect that I rise in this house today to express my enormous sorrow to each one of the women and men who have been affected by forced adoption practices from our past and, in doing so, I very gladly set aside the normal politicking that goes on in this place.

I express my sorrow to those of you here in this parliament on this day, to those who are watching this apology online through the live stream broadcast, in our regional communities, at home, at the Post Adoption Support Services at Relationships Australia here in Adelaide, and elsewhere in our state and beyond our borders. I express my sadness for those who have since passed away before they could hear these words of apology.

It has been harrowing to hear of the lasting effect that those practices from our past have had on each of you: the pain, the grief, the loss, the anger, the hurt. I believe that it is a fundamental human right of mothers and fathers to be parents to their children and that children have the fundamental right to be cared for and loved by their parents.

This respect for family, the nurture of children and the preservation of family goes right to the heart of our society and our government's beliefs about what matters most. In that respect, that is why this day of apology to those affected by forced adoption is so important for everyone in our community, and yet if we look at the distress caused by forced adoption practices of the past, especially to mothers and to the women and men who were adopted as children, we see that those basic rights were overlooked or simply not considered. That has left a legacy of loss and pain.

I would like to speak briefly about what mothers have told me of their experiences and that legacy of loss and pain because in listening to those experiences—and I have to say I feel enormously privileged to hear these stories—we gain a little insight into the terrible circumstances and the lack of choices that mothers faced at that time in our past: that sense of being trapped in a no-win situation where mothers felt that they were forced to place their child for adoption at a time in our history when mothers struggled with blame and shame; that sense of living with a secret which had to be borne in silence and, for some, still is even after all these years; and that sense of not feeling like you belong, the legacy of loss and pain and emptiness has cast a long shadow, a yearning for what could have been and should have been.

Mothers told me of their feelings of shame and loss. I recall one mother who told me, 'I had an unwanted pregnancy, not an unwanted child.' Some were sent far away to have their child and then returned to their homes and families after giving birth and going on with life as if nothing ever happened. The sense of loss and of grief as a result of these practices has been experienced both here in South Australia and across our nation. As one woman is quoted as saying in the Australian government Senate report, which brought this tragedy into the light more formally:

A mother whose child has been stolen does not only remember that child in her mind, she remembers with every fibre of her being.

This legacy of loss and of grief has been felt by mothers, fathers and their children, and the shock waves of these adoptions, those forced adoptions that were carried out in our suburbs, our towns, our neighbourhoods, our churches and hospitals, have been deeply felt by mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, grandparents, brothers and sisters over the years, and they are still being felt

today. There is a sense of women and men struggling to reconcile the past and the present, of what should have been, of what could have been and of what is.

It is no excuse to sit back and say that these forced adoption practices were from a time in our history when people talked in hushed tones about girls 'getting into trouble', when the children were described as 'illegitimate'. There was a sense of shame in being an unmarried mother—the blame and shame of being told, 'You have got yourself into trouble.' Mothers were made to feel that blame and that shame profoundly because this was a time when mothers in these circumstances were caught in a trap, mothers whose first instinct was to say to themselves, 'I want to keep my baby.' A daughter who was adopted wrote to me and asked of me—and I use her words:

Please apologise for all the pain the secrets have caused, the separation of family. We all lost in this. There were no winners.

And it was a time of secrets and shame. Mothers have told how their particular circumstances have been a secret they have lived with all their life. Mothers have told how they felt they were backed into a corner by the subtle and no so subtle insistence was that the only thing to do was to give up your child—words like, 'You would be denying a lovely couple a child. The baby needs a proper mother,' or, 'If you loved your child you would give her up; it would be selfish not to.' Having a baby under these circumstances was a taboo subject, a situation that was not talked about even within families. As one mum said, 'It's the silence that makes you sick.' Another said, 'You don't have a voice,' and another, 'You feel invisible, like an alien.' Mothers became invisible and fathers sometimes more so.

Today's apology says we cannot and we will not hide behind our history. There were no excuses for these forced adoption practices then, and there is no excuse now, because those practices from our past did hurt and did leave a legacy of loss and of grief. They did leave people living with secrets and without a sense of belonging. All of these painful experiences created a ripple effect which has touched the lives of so many members of our community.

I have been deeply moved by the experiences of mothers and the men and women who were taken away from their mothers when they were babies. I have seen the heartbreak, the pain and, yes, at times the anger. This connection with families and individuals, especially mothers, led me to the stories of many, many people, to learn of the grief and the pain and to also learn of the joy and the anguish of people who were reunited over the years. I would like to briefly recount a little of just one mother's experiences, Jane's story, as told to me by her daughter. Their stories are typical.

Jane was described in an adoptions branch report as a 'good average-type girl'. In the labour ward at the hospital her neonatal record was marked with the words 'illegitimate' and 'for adoption'. Jane told her daughter many years later that when she gave birth to her beautiful little girl the nursing staff placed a pillow on her chest so she could not see her baby as she was delivered. She was denied even seeing her baby at the moment of her birth. She was not told by the medical team if she had a boy or girl. She was not asked if she would like to hold her baby. Her child was simply whisked away. A few days' later, social workers did come to see Jane and told her she had given birth to a little girl with blonde hair and blue eyes. Years later, Jane reflected upon that day in a letter to her daughter, saying:

I was advised not to go down to see you in the nursery. That would be too traumatic. I would have held you and never let you go.

In some of those traumatic family situations, fathers were in the background neither acknowledged nor considered to have been hurt or to have felt the loss, but Jane told her daughter, and I quote these words to show that so many fathers also share that legacy of loss:

We loved each other very much. He still has all the letters and photos I gave him nearly 18 years ago. He said he gets very emotional on your birthdays and really wants to meet you.

So many mothers and fathers cried on their children's birthdays and no doubt many, many other days over the years they were apart from their children. There have been many, many tears shed. There were enormous expectations placed upon women during those times. In another letter to her daughter, Jane saw her own circumstances in the broader context of our society at that time, that sense of being trapped in a no-win situation. She recalled:

...a woman was expected to be virtuous and not get pregnant when she was still single. Married couples were expected to have children. If they didn't, society believed unmarried mothers should give their children to married couples who were childless. The secret adoption laws were cruel for both sides.

Jane's words echo the words of many of the courageous women and men who have contacted me to share their stories of being disconnected from their children and families. In another letter, a mother tells her daughter:

I was denied your childhood. It still hurts.

And why wouldn't it? I am sure this statement resonates with so many women and men whose lives have been forever changed by their past adoption experience; yet, Jane's story, as she termed it, was a success story because mother and daughter were eventually reunited. Jane's daughter found it was the most magical day of her life. Sadly, very sadly, many people do not have that ending. It is often a never-ending story of struggle to reconcile the past, the present and a future where that sense of loss is always there and very deeply and profoundly felt. Many mothers have never seen their child again. Sadly, Jane died before we, in this place, could tell her of our sorrow and apologise.

The ripple effect is felt over generations of children, brothers and sisters and grandparents and throughout families who know there is a child somewhere out there who belongs with them and yet does not belong because of those past forced adoption policies and practices. For some mothers, those policies even took away their right to be called a mother. One mother told me how she refused to give up her child and so she was classified as an unlicensed foster mother. When she married some years later, she had to adopt her own child. As she said:

Apart from all the indignity and being frowned on by many, I was not classed as a 'mother'.

Today, we also acknowledge, with great respect, the women who were denied that recognition, the fundamental right of being recognised as a mum. So, today, what do we want from this day of apology? It is true, we cannot undo the past. We cannot rewrite these stories. We cannot restore that moment when a child was born and what should have been and could have been a moment of great joy as a mother held her child for the first time.

We cannot change those real experiences and real feelings that so profoundly shaped lives: the relationships, the sense of belonging, the loss and grief that is being felt today. At a practical level, we do offer the support of our Post Adoption Support Services through Relationships SA, support that may help to heal. For me personally, I offer my deep respect for the courage and the struggle that so many mothers, fathers, children and families have endured. I also offer my most sincere thanks to those who have told their personal stories, who have stepped forward to be a part of this occasion even if it has meant you have had to relive those experiences. Your bravery and courage is to be respected and is absolutely inspiring.

For our part, we want this day of apology to be a day of respect. We want to let each and every one of you who has suffered know that we are sorry. I offer you my own sincere, deeply felt sorrow, for what was done. We are sorry for what should never have been done. I am sorry. I hope this is also a day for looking beyond the sorrow and the grief. One person has told us:

You're always having to confront it and explain it. They say time heals but I'm still waiting.

Today, I hope this apology brings that time for healing a little closer for that person, and for many mothers and fathers, for all the women and men affected by forced adoption practices.

I hope this day will help you on your journey of healing and recovery and assist you to look to the future with a sense of hope and a stronger sense of belonging, because each and every one of the people affected by forced adoption practices and policies does belong. You are deeply valued members of our community. I believe very strongly that our community must always uphold, preserve and value the fundamental rights of mothers and fathers and every child.

Honourable members: Hear, hear!