

**Submission  
No 8**

**INQUIRY INTO THE CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES AMENDMENT  
(RESTRICTIONS ON THE MAKING OF PROTECTION ORDERS) BILL  
2015**

**Organisation:** Victorian Stakeholders Network Permanent Care and Adoption

**Date Received:** 1 May 2015

## **Submission: Legal and Social Issues**

### **Inquiry into the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Restrictions on the Making of Protection Orders) Bill 2015**

### **Victorian Stakeholders Network Permanent Care and Adoption**

# **Victorian Stakeholder Network on Permanent Care & Adoption (VSNPA)**

## **Submission**

### **Introduction**

The Victorian Stakeholder Network on Permanent Care and Adoption (VSNPA) was established in 2015. Its formation followed concerns regarding the 2014 State Liberal government's changes to the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Permanent Care and Other matters) Bill 2014.

VSNPA welcome the changes Minister Mikakos has introduced to the s276 to the Bill however we are still alarmed because the Prime minister has put on record a promise to Australian People to provide thousands of babies for adoption.

Further to this Minister Wooldridge failed to consult with any of our groups members instead she consulted with mainly pro adoption groups therefore in conjunction with what has and continues to happen in NSW with the huge influx of adoptions being provided through the DOCS system we feel our fears to be well founded.

VSNPA feels compelled to voice our concerns with the veritable possibility of the Children Youth and families (Permanent Care and Other Matters Bill 2014) (other matters being adoption) creating a possibility for a future government, perceiving adoption to be a successful outcome, dovetailing NSW. We feel this Bill encourages adoption by highlighting it over Permanent Care in the hierarchical level it has been placed in the Bill s79

The negative impacts of adoption have been known, however ignored since 1942 (see Florence Clothier)

The 2012 Forced Adoption Inquiry acknowledged this and is endeavouring to provide services to assist people who have been seriously emotionally affected by past adoption. Australia was a vanguard in leading the world to investigate the unethical and illegal practices they can also lead the way to provide a model based on stewardship.

These concerns broadly encompass:

- The government's hierarchy of permanency objectives. As a representative network, the VSNPA strongly believes that adoption should not be included especially given the known negative impact adoption can have on the adopted person. (See attached essay on "The Silencing of Adoptees" while not a research document, it is based on anecdotal feedback from adopted persons over many years).
- Changes to Care by Secretary Order: VSNPA understands that whilst this section mandates the secretary to seek and obtain parental permission for an adoption order, it also presents a loophole that allows the secretary to give a consent to adoption in the event of parental abuse of the child, and in the case of parental abandonment. VSNPA does not condone abuse or abandonment however VSNPA is apprehensive that there should be no ambiguity in interpreting WHAT is in the Childs best interest therefore we feel very strongly that the Secretary should be required to take the

circumstances to the children's court, or an independent body (remove) to evaluate if adoption is in the children's best interest.

- Changes to legislation that minimise the power and duties of the Children's Court.
- What decision makers decide as to what is in the best interests of the child is not always consistent with anecdotal and research information on adoption.
- If guardianship to parents or guardianship to grandparents or kin cannot happen, then it is fundamental that the child's right to maintenance of his or her identity through the court ordered contact be assured and we are not convinced that the current legislation assures this.
- The Ministerial Advisory Committee on Out of Home Care, does not have stakeholder representation such as Adult adopted persons, Mothers and family of origin, Kinship Carers Permanent care or foster care representation which we believe is imperative if informed decisions and policy is to be developed that ensures past mistakes are not repeated.

As a consequence of our concerns, the VSNPA has developed the attached position statement. At the same time, we are seeking meetings with representatives of all political parties to express our concerns.

## **Requirements**

While recognising that the issues concerning vulnerable children is complex and often complicated we believe that a culture of placing the child first is essential not only in developing legislation, policy and practice, but is demonstrated in our everyday activities where realistic and holistic goals are established that are based on the child's needs not on available resources.

Notwithstanding the above, VSNPA also wants recognition in government policy and practice that adoption from an Adopted person's and Mother's point of view can lead to lifelong trauma. As such it is our position that adoption should not be a part of child protection and in the long term adoption practices should cease altogether.

In the short term stewardship models such as permanent care where a child is not stripped of its legal identity should be treated as the last resort in place of adoption, a stewardship model such as this maintains the possibility of family reunification rather than separation in the long-term. For this reason adoption practices should cease. Adoption is permanent and therefore precludes the incentive to rehabilitate; it has been the experience of VSNPA members that adoption compounds an existing problem to both the mother and her child.

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## **Victorian Stakeholder Network on Permanency and Adoption**

### **Position Paper: Legislative changes around permanency for children**

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to request:

- That we respectfully request that the VSNPA be invited to discuss our concerns with the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee (SARC).
- Legislative changes around permanency for children.
- Given the long term negative impact on natural mothers and adopted children, that a long-term objective of government should be to eventually establish legislation that bans adoption within Victoria and Australia and replaces it with a stewardship model such as permanent care or guardianship options.

#### **Introduction**

The Victorian Stakeholder Network on Permanency and Adoption (VSNPA) comprises:

- Individuals with personal experience of separation from a child, adoption and permanent care;
- Representatives of Origins, Council of the Single Mother and her Child (CSMC) ARMS and Connecting Homes
- Professionals with relevant expertise. VANISH as observers

#### **Philosophy**

The philosophy which informs all aspects of this paper and its recommendations is:

- Minimisation of harm to Victorian children and families.
- Upholding the child's universal rights in day-to-day practice.
- Building a cultural environment that ensures ethical practices are required in all dealings concerning children and other interested parties.
- Ensuring factual, comprehensive and accurate original birth certificates for all children.

#### **Issues**

Adoption, as it is currently practised, creates a situation in which children are legally implied, through their new birth certificates, to have been born to the adoptive parents. This has profound lifelong consequences for adopted people, most importantly in terms of the central issue of identity – where did I come from, who am I and where do I belong? This is a child's rights issue.

Wherever possible, children, and the adults they become, have the right to maintain relationships, and feel connected to, both their families. We refer particularly in this regard to UNCROC Article 8, which states:

1. *Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity,*

*including nationality, name and family relations as recognised by law without unlawful interference.*

*2. Where a child is illegally deprived of some or all of the elements of his or her identity, States Parties shall provide appropriate assistance and protection, with a view to re-establishing speedily his or her identity.*

With adoption, a child's identity is significantly undermined and the opportunity for that child throughout life to reconcile the fracturing of his or her identity, is extremely limited, particularly when birth certificates give false information.

We, the stakeholders, are therefore concerned that the amendments to the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, which create a hierarchy of permanency objectives lists adoption as the third placement option after family preservation and family reunification. While adoption exists, it should be the option of last resort, as has been the case in Victoria since the implementation of Permanent Care Orders in 1992.

### **Recommendations**

We make the following recommendations regarding the Children Youth & Families (Permanent Care and other matters) Amendment Act 2014 and the apparent policies which have underpinned such legislation:

1. This Act should immediately be reviewed and amended.
2. To ensure the views of stakeholders are given the same consideration as that of agency representatives, we urge that the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Out of Home Care, be expanded to include at least one representative from each stakeholder group.
3. A long-term objective of government should be to eventually establish legislation that bans adoption within Victoria and Australia and replaces it with a stewardship model such as permanent care or guardianship options.
4. It is not in a child's best interest to be removed from his or her family unless it is completely unavoidable and subject to judicial scrutiny. Families in danger of losing their children therefore need to be fully and expertly supported to care for their own children. Parents should have access to child-friendly drug and alcohol, mental health and housing services.
5. Permanent care should be the next alternative option for children who cannot be cared for by their parents and/or extended biological family.
6. The Children's Court of Victoria should again be empowered (powers having been significantly reduced by the aforementioned legislation), to make protection orders where custody and guardianship in favour of the Department of Health and Human Services is a matter of last resort. That is, by continuing Interim Protection Orders, Supervised Custody Orders and Custody to Secretary Orders, pursuant to which the Children's Court can attach conditions in relation to the frequency and nature of contact between a child and his or her parent and where the parent remains the guardian, not

the Department of Health and Human Services. The Court's ability to make an Interim Accommodation Order must immediately be reinstated, so that the Court may conduct the proceedings in the best interests of the child. If the state of Victoria, through the Department of Health and Human Services, is to have the power to remove children from their parents, this should always be subject to judicial scrutiny by an independent and specialist Court. As set out in Article 1 of UNCROC, the power to remove a child from his or her family, violates the child's basic right to be cared for by his or her parents.

7. That a Care by Secretary Order must retain the guardianship to parents, or grandparents or kin such as an aunty or uncle so that a natural person has the legal capacity to represent the interests of the child and the interests of the family.

Kinship Care is a proven better option with far better outcomes for Children than Foster Care and Residential Units and should be fully supported by the Parliament, the Department and the Courts. Reference Kinship Care Victoria Federal Senate Inquiry Submission, Kinship Care Victoria Survey 2014.

8. That a Care by Secretary Order should not extinguish any right of the child to be heard by any Court of Victoria.  
That a Care by Secretary Order should not extinguish the right of a parent, grandparent or current Carer of the Child to be heard by any Court of Victoria.
9. It is imperative that the cap of four contacts per year in the first year of operation of a Permanent Care Order, be repealed and the frequency and manner in which contact should occur be determined freely by the Children's Court.
10. Professionals working in the sector should be adequately resourced to access regular, independent attitudinal assessments, together with on-going training, to avoid a culture of unnecessary removals.  
The Department should not provide financial incentive to Welfare Agencies to place children outside of their Kinship Care group larger than the financial support available to the Kinship Group for the Child. There shouldn't be a financial imperative for a Welfare Agency to 'place' a child in Foster Care or Adoption, as opposed to being 'placed' within their Extended Families.  
The criteria for Foster Care and Adoption must not be more lenient than the criteria for Kinship Care.  
At present the criteria for Foster Carer is up to age 80.  
The criteria for Kinship Carer is up to age 60.
11. In order to recruit and keep permanent families for these troubled children, expert child-focussed practical, psychological and peer support and training needs to be provided for all parties from the time of placement until well beyond 18 years.

12. Risk reduction is a primary driver of Child Protection and Children's Court.

However, prevention of future harm should include maximising the Child's support from within their existing extended family, child care facilities, school, religious, cultural and sporting activities and their existing health care providers.

So local placement and local support to minimise the disruption in a Child's life should be implemented.

"There is often a strident and simplistic critique from some sections of the press if a child is harmed when a child protection agency already had an unfavourable report of the family. In the absence of being able to reliably predict adverse events, government and agency decisions can lean towards risk avoidance rather than weighing up all relevant factors regarding the child's welfare. Public discussion neglects or underestimates the negative emotional effects of the removal of a child from their parents. This also tends to pressure the child protection decisions to remove without giving enough weight to the long term effects of loss of belonging, personal identity, and therefore overall mental health. The other negative consequence of removal is the probability that multiple placements will follow for the child." See AASW submission Out of Home Care Inquiry

#### References:

Kinship Carers Victoria Survey 2014 <http://kinshipcarersvictoria.org/>

Kinship Carers Victoria Submission to the Federal Senate Inquiry into Out of Home Care  
download from <http://kinshipcarersvictoria.org/> front page or

Australian Association of Social Workers Submission Out of Home Care Senate Inquiry.

Florence Clothier, "The Psychology of the Adopted Child," *Mental Hygiene* 27 (April 1943):222-226. <http://pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/archive/ClothierPAC.htm>

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## The Silencing of Adoptees

The views expressed in this essay are based on many years of listening to adopted people.

The emotional side of adoption is an assortment of very complicated and deep feelings on the part of all members of the adoption triangle. In recent years some natural mothers have been relatively assertive about articulating the impact of losing a child to adoption, and this assertiveness has resulted in a community that is better informed about the issue from their perspective. In contrast, adoptees have remained relatively silent about the negative impact of adoption on them.

Indeed, it appears that most members of the general community as well as other members of the adoption triangle remain quite ignorant of the negative impact adoption can have on adoptees. Part of the reason for this ignorance is that many adoptees do not feel confident in expressing their views, in particular their most deeply held views.

Put simply, being adopted is like being separated from everyone else by a picket fence. You can see people, talk, laugh and cry with them, but no matter how much you want to be on the same side of the picket fence with them, something stops that from happening. You are relegated to walk on the other side of the picket fence on your own. As one adoptee once stated, **“being adopted can be one of the loneliest experiences on earth.”** The loneliness can stem from the sense of being alone in the world, the feelings of being given away, the lack of understanding from those not adopted, the assumption that being adopted is a positive thing, the constant reminders of your lack of biological identity, knowing that your adoptive family is not your biological family, knowing and feeling that you are different from most others, etc.

Why do most of us remain silent? From an adoptee point of view, if you express your true feelings, you run the risk of hurting and angering the people you simply do not want to hurt or anger. The fear of rejection at a conscious and unconscious level also contributes to keeping the adopted person silent. Additionally, having your views dismissed because they do not fit in with the community's positive perception of adoption is a further impediment. Finally, there is the strongly voiced agenda of those who think they know what is best for children. All these impediments contribute to the adopted person's reluctance and lack of confidence to speak out about the negative side of adoption.

It is wrong that adoptees should feel silenced because of the above risks. When you consider the research regarding the impact adoption can have on adopted people our silence becomes very misplaced. For example, the rate of adoptees attempting suicide and/or suiciding is four times higher than the population rate. A higher proportion of adoptees experience mental health issues and drug and alcohol problems, all of which can lead to other issues such as homelessness and incarceration within the justice system. Given these issues, there does come a time when adoptees have to consider being more open about their adoption experiences, and particularly about the feelings that the adoption experience so often invokes for adoptees. Adoptees need to do this not only for themselves, but to enable the broader community to develop a more informed understanding that adoption is not as positive an experience for adoptees as some people would have you believe. It may also assist in educating natural mothers and adoptive parents about the feeling side of adoption from the perspective of the adoptee. Additionally, being more open may help reduce the distress of adoptees and the sense of isolation and aloneness that many feel. More broadly, ensuring that health professionals and the general community are well informed about the effects of adoption on adoptees will hopefully result in a more informed community, which can in turn transpose to respectful adoption and IVF legislation and practices that genuinely put the child first and prevent repetitions of past mistakes.

In 2012, the Victorian government apologised to natural mothers for past adoption practices. Adoptees were mentioned in the apology, but it was clear that the day was for mothers. In speaking with other adoptees following the apology, many of us felt unsettled and angry, but unable to clearly articulate what it is that was so upsetting. It may have had something to do with the point that part of the apology voiced the fact that the natural mother had lost a child. In “tossing around” with other adoptees why we felt so unsettled and angry, we concluded that while clearly deeply painful for the mothers, as adoptees we lost our biological mother, father, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents and the right to really feel we belong anywhere. With the exception of those who are adopted, no one seems to understand this and how deeply it can impact the lives of adoptees. But again, to express this view runs the risk of minimising the pain of natural mothers and adoptive parents and hurting the people you simply do not want to hurt. Most adoptees love members of both their adoptive family and their biological family, and to express these feelings of loss can lead to misunderstandings, hurt and possible rejection. So most remain silent until they are only in a room with other adoptees.

Regarding the government’s apology to natural mothers, there is no doubt that many natural mothers were not treated well by the health system or adoption agencies, and for many the adoption of their son or daughter may not have been legal. It is however the view of many adopted people that the majority of natural mothers knew that their child was going to be placed for adoption by the time they were due to deliver. Put simply, the decision to place their child for adoption was made prior to the mother being admitted to hospital. It may be that the mother would have preferred (desperately) to keep her child, but she would have been well aware that her personal circumstances were going to prevent this.

Having listened to many natural mothers, the stories may differ, but the themes are very similar. They were young (often teenagers), single, the child's father was unsupportive as were her parents and there was no single mother's pension that would allow her to raise her child independent of family support. Alternatively, in some cases, the father of the child did want to provide support to the natural mother, but was kept away from the mother by their parents. We also know now that some mothers were heavily coerced to the point that some were told their baby had died at birth.

Additional to this, the community view of the day (and still today, in the minds of many people) was that children are better off being raised in an environment that includes a mother and a father. Many natural mothers were told their child would be better off. While there can be no denying that many natural mothers endured dreadful pressures, were these pressures only the fault of government, or was the government of the day just mirroring the view of the community?

Another issue from the natural mother's point of view is their age at the time of the birth of their child. Given the "age of majority" was 21 up until 1972, it could be argued that many were too young to be making such an important decision. They were certainly legally too young to be signing adoption papers. Many natural mothers may have an argument that the adoption of their child was not legal according to the law of the day as to what constituted the legal age to be able to sign contracts including adoption papers.

Because every person's experience is an individual one, no one deserves to be placed into a category; however, it is important for the purposes of this piece of writing to be honest about the range of experiences people have had. Clearly, there were some mothers who did not want their child. They relinquished their child at birth, and made it clear when their son or daughter sought a reunion that their position had not changed. The realisation of this for the adoptee seeking reunification with their natural mother is overwhelmingly painful. There are also those mothers who did want their child and fought for the right to keep and raise them. These mothers often had the support of the father of the child and/or their parents. Some also seemed to have a strong sense of self and were therefore more confident in their decision-making. The third group is the mothers who wanted to keep their child, but signed the adoption papers because of the pressure(s) from their parents, friends, church, or others. Succumbing to pressure is always a risk when one feels hopeless and helpless and the sense of self is not strong. Many of these mothers are the ones who now appear to be stuck in an unresolved form of dreadfully painful grief and regret. However, from an adoptee point of view, we know that if our mothers had not signed the adoption papers, the adoption would not have happened.

Often the “elephant in the room” for the adoptee is that the natural mothers and others more often than not talk about the loss of their child and the impact of this on them. Rarely do you hear people talk about **the loss for the child** or for adoptees in general. Indeed, when adoptees do try to articulate their feelings on the subject, they are often interrupted mid-sentence with comments like “There was no choice,” “We were told you would be better off,” “But you are clearly loved by your adoptive family,” etc. These interruptions often leave adoptees with the impression that there is much less interest in our feelings and the consequences on our lives and far more interest in what the mothers experienced. Sadly, this sort of behaviour helps to enforce the view of some adoptees that we were not and still are not a priority. Those adoptees who refuse to be silenced and persist in articulating their views often experience rationalisations that conclude that we hate natural mothers, that we are taking out on natural mothers generally what we can’t take out on our own mothers, or that we have not had a positive reunion, or that we had an unhappy adoption and are just angry about that. These rationalisations, while false and very hurtful, also contribute to the “silencing of adoptees.” A message is sent that the views of adoptees only hold worth so long as they are acceptable to others within the adoption triangle and the general community. It also needs to be stated that our hurt and grief is not related in any way to our relationships and love for our adoptive family.

As indicated previously, adoptees often feel unable to express their deeply held views and feelings for fear of hurting others, in particular natural mothers and adoptive parents. While most adoptees accept the expressions of natural mothers that they had no choice, there was no single mother’s pension, their parents and the father of their child were unsupportive, etc., these articulations rarely impact on the **feeling side** of adoption for the adoptee. For most adoptees, the feeling side of adoption more often than not developed during childhood, when our ability to think things through was severely hampered by our age and by the lack of proactive conversations with adults who were in a position to correct the views of the child. As a consequence, by the time the adoptee reaches adulthood, their feelings about their adoption are usually firmly entrenched and difficult to change, even with more informed explanations. While the feeling side of adoption can shift, it takes time and lots of empathetic conversation, including conversations that other members of the triangle commonly try to avoid because of their own unresolved issues of grief.

Another issue that prevents adoptees from speaking out is the fear of rejection. This is very commonly a paramount consideration for adoptees. While the research suggests that adoptees feel rejection more deeply than others, it’s also fair to say that many adoptees are very cautious about placing themselves in positions where they will be rejected. The implications of this on adoptees’ relationships with others throughout their lives can be severe.

These feelings of adoptees, while not always logical, factual or fair and often potentially hurtful to others, are very real to the majority of adoptees and very deeply engrained. The feeling side of

adoption is often impossible to change, or will take some robust work to move. The feelings many adoptees have include:

- My mother gave me away to strangers, did not want me and did not fight for me;
- I must be unlovable;
- I was not good enough to keep;
- Other mothers kept their child, why didn't mine;
- There must have been something wrong with me;
- If my own mother can give me away so too can my adoptive parents;
- A feeling that you straddle both families (adoptive and biological), never really feeling like you belong to either;
- A sense that, no matter how hard they (the biological family) try, you are always alert to the potential for rejection and how you are the "odd one out" in the family because you can never "catch up" with what has gone on in the family in your absence;
- Any baby would have done for my adoptive family, I just happened to be available;
- If I don't behave myself, you will give me away again, or reject me;
- You (adoptive family) cannot possibly care about me when I am nothing like you in looks or personality;
- While I want to meet my natural relatives you (adoptive family) may be angry and reject me if I go through with a reunion;
- Everyone knows I am not really yours, as I don't look anything like you (a particular issue for adoptees from a different ethnic background);
- I know you would have preferred to have a child of your own and I was your last choice;
- Children subject to open adoptions can often fear that if they demonstrate enthusiasm to meet or have a relationship with their natural mother, their adoptive parents may be hurt or angry.

Experiences that accentuate the adopted person's fears and hurt include:

- Not including the child given up for adoption in natural family speeches when talking about their children;
- Not inviting or allowing their natural/adopted child to attend family functions such as Christmas, weddings or birthdays. This is a particular occurrence after the natural or adoptive parent/s have died;
- Leaving the adoptee off the family tree, sending a powerful message that the adoptee is not accepted as a member of the family;
- Leaving the adoptee off the death certificate of the parents (all children are listed on death certificates), sending the message that they were not really accepted as a child of the deceased parent or a legitimate member of the broader family;
- Excluding the adoptee from the Will of the parents (reasons as above);
- Introducing the adoptee to others as your adopted child, or letting other members of the family do so, which serves as a continual reminder to the child that they are not accepted as your own;
- If the adoptee makes a mistake, suggesting it's the "bad blood" coming out;

- Referring to the adoptee as a bastard or allowing other family members to do so. The dictionary definition of a bastard is very clear, but society tends to use the term loosely to describe the “rogues” of society and a child can take the use of the word to believe they are being told they are bad or have bad blood;
- Telling the adoptive child they were chosen, because when they find out they weren’t they will be devastated and feel like “any child would have done.” It is better (if true) to say to the child, “While you were not chosen, as you have grown, so has my love for you and it is as strong as it can possibly be,” or “The first moment I laid eyes on you I wanted you,” etc.
- Having the adopted child become a victim of the adoptive parents’ own unresolved grief about not being able to have a biological child;
- Telling lies about anything to do with the adoption. Adopted children are completely reliant on others for information and giving misinformation will erode trust and confidence;
- Telling the child that if they seek a reunion with their natural family the adoptive parents will end the relationship, write the child out of the will, etc.
- Sending the child to bed with an unresolved issue with the adoptive parents. Much thinking can go on in bed and a child’s fears of rejection can overtake;
- Undervaluing the grief an adoptee feels when an adoptive or natural parent dies with such comments as, “she or he was not really your mother or father,” or “they did not raise you, so why are you so upset?”

Below are some ways to assist in reducing the adopted person’s fears and hurt.

- Encouraging conversation about adoption, the child’s natural mother, etc., asking the child questions about what they think and feel, explaining why you are doing so. The reasons have been articulated above, but the conversations should not be forced;
- Never suggesting to the child that their natural mother did not want them;
- Always being transparent;
- If there is unresolved grief about not being able to become pregnant, seeking counselling to minimise the grief and the impact on both the adoptive mother and the child;
- Encouraging and supporting the adoptee to have contact with their natural family if access has been agreed to at the time of the adoption. When the child becomes an adult and finds out that their adoptive family interfered with their contact with their natural family, they will feel that the love of the adoptive family was selfish.
- Where a natural or adoptive parent dies, treating the adoptee’s grief the same as any other person’s grief on losing a parent; that is, with empathy, sending a sympathy card, flowers, etc.

For an adoptee, grief following the loss of an adoptive family member or natural relatives, in particular the natural mother or father, can be somewhat difficult. The adoptee often not only has to deal with the loss, but the attitudes that some members of their family, friends or work colleagues can have that minimise their grief. For example, if an adoptee’s adoptive mother or father dies such comments as, “well she or he was not really your mother or father” can be extremely hurtful and distressing. Likewise, if an adoptee’s natural mother dies, they may be subject to such comments as, “well it’s not as if she raised you.” These statements suggest that the adopted person’s grief is somehow less, and less valid,

than that of others. The attitudes can lead to solitude and silence in grief for the adoptee, and a reinforcement of the belief that they are on their own in the world. The experience can certainly leave the adoptee wondering when their grief will be recognised as normal and no different than non-adoptees who experience the loss of a loved one.

Another experience that reinforces the adoptee's feelings of not really belonging is the need of some members of an adoptive family to introduce the child as the adopted child, rather than "this is my son or daughter." The media also frequently contributes to this differentiation of the adopted child by consistently referring to a famous person's adopted children in this way. Adopted people are acutely aware of their adoption; they do not need to be reminded.

Non-adopted people often refer to some adoptions as "successful adoptions." One assumes this means that the adoptive parents loved the adoptee. While most adopted people are loved by their adoptive parents, successful adoption is not a term that should be encouraged. From an adoptee's point of view, it is saying that being given away at birth was a successful process. I believe that if you asked every adoptee if they would have preferred to not be adopted 100 per cent would agree. It may be that many would choose their adoptive parents as their parents, but they would all prefer not to have been adopted. Removing a person from their biological roots should never be seen as successful as there has been too much loss for the adoptee. To stress this point, the only people who undervalue the importance of biological roots are those that have always had them.

The articulation of why an adoptee seeks out their natural mother is a difficult one, but it is definitely **not** a rejection of the adoptive parents or other members of the adopting family. It also has nothing to do with whether the adoptee feels loved or unloved by their adoptive family. Some members of the non-adopted community will say that it is only natural for the adoptee to be curious. But again, this statement grossly underestimates the emotions that drive adoptees to seek a reunion with their natural mother or biological relatives. Adoptees will often talk about this feeling they have that just sits there. A feeling that is unsettling, a feeling that something is missing, something is not quite right; a feeling of emptiness. At other times this feeling is much stronger, to the point of being overwhelming. Our whole society is based on genes. Family conversation is often about who takes after who, who looks like who. You cannot go to the doctor without being asked if there is a family history of a health condition. The adoptee is constantly surrounded by people who take their biological identity for granted. But it is much deeper than biological identity. It is a strong, consistent sense that there is something very important missing in your life.

While a large volume of research has outlined the impact adoption can have on adoptees, it is disappointing that this research has not been transposed into decision making when it comes to adults seeking to adopt. Currently, overseas adoptions and IVF continue with little consideration of the opinions or feelings of adoptees or the research that has demonstrated the real harm caused. To be blunt, the need of adults to be able to raise a child at the expense of the needs of the child continues. While there should be no issue with heterosexual or homosexual couples using IVF in order to have children, we do have a major issue when the identity and/or contact with the biological parent/s is denied to the child. It sends a very clear message that the child's needs are a secondary consideration. To labour the point, I firmly believe that legislation should exist that makes it compulsory that the identity of both the biological mother and father (where known) has to exist on all birth certificates. No child should have to be a victim of identity bewilderment due to their parents' insecurities or selfishness.

Given the recent push to introduce changes to legislation to make it much easier for people to adopt, one has to ask, when will children **genuinely** become the priority? Very few children are unwanted, and to use this as an argument to change legislation not only creates a false premise, but is overtly cruel to the affected children. Circumstances sometimes make it very difficult for mothers to raise their children. If we are genuine in our desire to put children first, then the biological mother ought to be provided with the assistance necessary to keep and raise her child.

Finally, one has to ask, at what point will the research on the impact of adoption on adoptees be respected and used to develop informed conversation, policy, and legislation? While the grief for those families who are unable to conceive a child of their own must be dreadful, removing a child from its family of origin in order to relieve the grief of another adult is not and should never be seen as the solution. Arguing that the children being adopted are not wanted is not only taking us back to the "bad old days" of rationalising the need for adoption, it is also causing deep hurt to the children who are supposedly the priority. Adoption levels need to be reduced, not increased, if we genuinely care about the children.

Isabell Collins

Adoptee