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‘Forced Adoption’ in the Australian story of national regret and apology¹

Introduction

On 15th June 2010 Senator Rachel Siewert moved that the Senate:

recognises the grief, pain and anguish suffered by thousands of mothers who were victims of the forced adoption policies implemented by state governments for decades; and acknowledges: (i) this pain and grief is on-going, and (ii) these mothers deserve an apology for the pain and anguish they have suffered and continue to suffer.²

On the vote Siewert’s motion was lost.

Siewert’s motion followed an intense campaign by groups representing mothers separated from their children by adoption. Groups such as the Adoption Alliance and Mothers for Justice³ pushed to persuade the federal government to acknowledge these mothers’ pain with an official apology. This recent phase of political action by these mothers arose in response to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s apology in February 2008 to the ‘Stolen Generations’ of Indigenous Australians, people removed as children from their families and institutionalised, and sometimes adopted. The mothers’ demands were heightened by a second federal apology in November 2009 to two groups of non-Indigenous people also removed as children from their families and institutionalised – the ‘Lost Innocents’ and the ‘Forgotten Australians’⁴. Mothers separated from children through adoption were initially led to believe that their experience would be recognised in this second apology.⁵ The press release by Minister for Families Jenny Macklin announcing the apology in late August 2009 stated

¹ The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of an Australian Research Council Discovery grant for this research; and the comments on earlier drafts by Shurlee Swain and Kate Murphy.

² Senator Rachel Siewert, “Motion, Adoption”. (*Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD)*, Senate, 15 June 2010), pp.3250-1. <http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/hanssen.htm> Accessed 17 February 2011.

³ Christine Cole, “Apology Alliance: Meeting re apology negotiation”, (email to Denise Cuthbert, 31 August 2009). See also the website of the Apology Alliance at <http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/apologyalliance/> Accessed 19 February 2011.

⁴ Senate Community Affairs References Committee, *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record - Report on child migration*, 30 August 2001, (Commonwealth of Australia 2001) http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/completed_inquiries/1999-02/child_migrat/report/index.htm, Accessed 22 March 2011; Senate Community Affairs References Committee, *Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children*, 30 August 2004, (Commonwealth of Australia 2004) , .

⁵ Christine Cole, “Apology Alliance”.

We have also begun a dialogue with mothers and children separated by past adoption practices which were inappropriate or unethical. The Government recognises that the pain and suffering of these women also endures.⁶

In October 2009 Macklin's office circulated a questionnaire on the form that an apology to mothers separated by adoption should take⁷, and activists were initially amongst those invited to Kevin Rudd's delivery of the apology.⁸ As events transpired, there was no apology to the injured mothers. On 16th November the Prime Minister spoke only to those adults who were transported and institutionalised as children. In what he called an "absolute tragedy of childhoods lost", Rudd described the shame of the nation at its failure to offer protection to the "little ones who were entrusted to institutions" and to the "innocent children" robbed of their families when they were shipped to Australia.⁹

This paper examines the politics of inclusion, exclusion and the role of gender in this story of national shame and apology for past practices of child removal. It considers the interrelated histories of the advocacy groups which have received and are still seeking apologies from the Commonwealth, with attention to the mothers separated from their children through adoption. It spans back from the present Senate inquiry to the first public appearance of women speaking from their experience of adoption in the 1970s. With reference to what Olick calls "the politics of regret,"¹⁰ the paper considers the constraints and complications which gender imposes on political action.

Senator Seiwert persisted. In November 2010 she again moved in the Senate on behalf of women separated by adoption. Notably, the second motion omitted mention of "grief, pain and anguish". Rather, it called upon the Senate to recognise the recent apology delivered in the Western Australian parliament "to those mothers whose children were removed and given up for adoption from the late 1940s to the 1980s", and to note that "policies and practices resulting in forced adoptions were widespread throughout Australia" It then asked the Senate

⁶ Jenny Macklin, "Australian Government to apologise to Forgotten Australians and Lost Innocents", (Press Release, 30 August 2009).
<http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22media%2Fpressrel%2FFGNU6%22> Accessed 17 February 2011.

⁷ Barbara Maison circulated a copy of the questionnaire that she had submitted to FAHSCIA to members of the Apology Alliance.

⁸ Evelyn Robinson, a post-adoption activist, reports receiving a notice and invitation to attend the apology in Canberra which was later retracted (interview with Robinson by Denise Cuthbert, September 2010).

⁹ Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, "Transcript of address at the apology to the Forgotten Australians and former child migrants, Great Hall, Parliament House, 16 November 2009",
<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/110625/20091116-1801/www.pm.gov.au/node/6321.html> Accessed 17 February 2011.

¹⁰ Jeffrey K Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York, 2007), especially p.14.

to authorise the Community Affairs References Committee to inquire into the following issues:

(a) the role, if any, of the Commonwealth Government, its policies and practices in contributing to forced adoptions; and (b) the potential role of the Commonwealth in developing a national framework to assist states and territories to address the consequences for the mothers, their families and children who were subject to forced adoption policies.¹¹

This motion was passed.

Seiwert chairs the Community Affairs References Committee. It was this committee which revisited the 'Lost Innocents' and 'Forgotten Australians' reports in 2009, recommending "a formal statement of acknowledgement and apology" from the Commonwealth government.¹² This committee, chaired by Seiwert, is currently receiving submissions on the role of the Commonwealth Government in contributing to "forced adoption" in Australia. Submissions received are expressions of "grief, pain and anguish": testifying to babies never seen or torn from their mothers' arms; signatures fraudulently obtained on consent forms; and never-ending searches for stolen children.¹³

The politics of regret and apology

Jeffrey Olick locates the global epidemic of public apology in a "transformation in our modes of apprehending and processing our temporality".¹⁴ "Collective memory" for Olick is the well-spring of political legitimation, "but this collective memory is now often one disgusted with itself, a matter of 'learning the lessons of history' more than of fulfilling its promise or remaining faithful to its legacy."¹⁵ Citing Arendt, he understands this process as one in which "pity is elevated to the level of political principle"¹⁶ and suffering becomes a key criterion for inclusion in the national polity.

¹¹ Senator Rachel Siewert, "Motion, Community Affairs Reference Committee", (CPD, Senate, 1 November 2010), p.1173. <http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/hanssen.htm> Accessed 17 February 2011.

¹² Senate Community Affairs References Committee, "Recommendations", *Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians Revisited: Report on the progress with the implementation of the recommendations of the Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians Reports, June 2009*, (Commonwealth of Australia 2001), p. ix. http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/recs_lost_innocents_forgotten_aust_rpts/report/report.pdf Accessed 17 February 2011.

¹³ Senate Community Affairs References Committee, "Submissions received", *Contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices*, (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/comm_contrib_former_forced_adoption/index.htm Accessed 27 March 2011.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid p.16.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.14.

Scholars of the ‘politics of apology’ follow Olick in understanding its action as occurring within and formulating new paradigms of citizenship. Michael Cunningham, who documents 25 public and political apologies globally in 1999, argues that “a greater emphasis on the concepts of community or cultural identity ... can reflect a recognition of, and sensitivity towards, both past wrongs and their contemporary resonances”.¹⁷ Melissa Nobles’ recent study of the politics of official apology in settler societies concludes that “organised groups and state actors demand and provide apologies in order to help change the terms and meanings of national membership”.¹⁸ Nobles’ postcolonial analysis focuses on the apologies demanded and received by Indigenous groups. The application of her framework to other groups – in the Australian situation institutionalised and immigrant children, and mothers separated by adoption – is perhaps less clear, but certainly claims to political legitimisation shape the public identities presented by all of these groups.

Rudd’s two national apologies – to “stolen” Indigenous children and transported and institutionalised children – are products of prolonged agitation and public inquiry. The apology to the “Stolen Generations” can be traced to the 1920s, when Indigenous activists called for an end to the practice of child removal.¹⁹ Private wrongs were not initially the focus of the movement; its energies were firstly directed towards claims for equal citizenship rights and increasingly for Indigenous rights and self-determination. From 1976 this included Indigenous control of adoption. The First Australian Adoption Conference provided a platform to Indigenous speakers, and produced recommendations calling for ‘an end to the placement of Aboriginal children with white families by white adoption officers’, and the establishment of ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adoption and fostering agencies controlled and staffed by Aboriginal people’.²⁰

Further impetus for Indigenous activism on child removal came with the foundation in 1982 of Link-Up, an organisation assisting removed Indigenous people to trace their families and communities. It facilitated over a thousand reunions during the next fifteen years.²¹ It also brought Indigenous adoptees together as a political force. *The Stolen Generations*, a compilation of the experiences of those who had been removed from their families in New South Wales helped shape the self-understandings of adoptee activists, their discourse and public reception of their stories. This was a story of the personal shame and sorrow and

¹⁷ Michael Cunningham “Saying Sorry: The Politics of Apology”, *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 70, 3 (1999), pp. 285-293, here pp. 292-3.

¹⁸ Melissa Nobles *The Politics of Official Apologies* (New York, 2008) p. 2.

¹⁹ Peter Read, *A Rape of the Soul so Profound: The Return of the Stolen Generations*. (Sydney, 1999), p. 167.

²⁰ Committee of the First Australian Conference on Adoption, *Proceedings of First Australian Conference on Adoption 15th-20th February, 1976*, ed. C. Picton, (Melbourne, 1976), p.170.

²¹ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families 1997*, (Canberra, 1997), ch.17. www.hreoc.gov.au/pdf/social_justice/bringing_them_home_report.pdf Accessed 4 March 2011.

community loss. It was also a story of “attempted genocide”.²² In Olick’s terms, national memory was redirected to embrace past sufferings, invoking pity and national guilt.

In August 1991, the national umbrella organisation of Aboriginal Child Care agencies, (SNAICC), issued a media release demanding a national inquiry into the removal of Aboriginal children and the long-term consequences of removal, pointing to the recent Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody finding that half of the deaths investigated were members of the Stolen Generations.²³ In 1994, the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia published its own investigation into Indigenous child removals. Titled *Telling Our Story*, it was based on the testimonies of six hundred individuals removed from their families as children. The report called on the Western Australian government to acknowledge the impact that the practice continued to have on individuals and communities by expressing regret and apologising on behalf of the people of Western Australia.²⁴ Also in 1994, the Going Home Conference in Darwin brought together hundreds of members of the Stolen Generations to demand increased funding for family reunions.²⁵

In 1992, the issue received explicit acknowledgement when Prime Minister Paul Keating made a now-famous speech conceding that European society had brought little more than “devastation and demoralisation” to Indigenous Australia – taking the lands, destroying the original ways of life, and taking the children from their mothers.²⁶ But it was the findings of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s investigation into Indigenous child removals in 1995-7 that galvanised community demands for an apology. When the final report of the inquiry, *Bringing Them Home*, was tabled in parliament in 1997, it recommended that all Australian parliaments “officially acknowledge the responsibility of their predecessors for the laws, policies and practices of forcible removal” and offer “official apologies to Indigenous individuals, families and communities and extend those apologies with wide and culturally appropriate publicity”.²⁷

The response from the Australian public was almost overwhelming. Hundreds of thousands of White Australians signed ‘Sorry Books’, and over a million people took to the streets on

²² Peter Read *The Stolen Generations: The Removal of Aboriginal Children in New South Wales 1883 to 1969*. (Sydney, 1982), p. 3.

²³ Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, *Remember Me: Commemorating the Tenth Anniversary of the Bringing Them Home Report*, (Melbourne 2007), p. 27.

²⁴ Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia, *Telling Our Story: A Report by the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia on the removal of Aboriginal Children from their Families in Western Australia*. (Perth, 1995). http://www.als.org.au/images/stories/publications/ALSWA_Telling_Our_Story.pdf Accessed 4 March 2011

²⁵ *Bringing Them Home*, ch. 17.

²⁶ The text of this speech is available at: <http://www.australianpolitics.com/executive/keating/92-12-10redfern-speech.shtml> Accessed 27 March 2011.

²⁷ *Bringing Them Home*, Appendix 9.

national 'Sorry Day' marches and events held on the first anniversary of the report's publication.²⁸ By the end of 1997, every state and territory government had made their apologies to Indigenous people. After a delay of eleven years, in February 2008, the newly-elected federal government did the same, apologising "especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country."

The second apology, childhood suffering and national inclusion

The history of the second national apology, to forced child migrants and institutionalised children, runs in parallel to that of the "Stolen Generations". Former child migrants began meeting in Western Australia in 1982 as the Child Migrant Friendship Association of Western Australia to provide "help and relief from suffering, helplessness, distress, misfortune, poverty, destitution and emotional disturbance". From 1988 the Child Migrants' Trust, a British-based welfare agency, provided tracing and counselling services for former child migrants across Australia, and like Link-Up this agency offered both personal resolution and a sense of group identity to many hundreds of people. The Trust provides a base for the more political International Association of Former Child Migrants and their Families, which works "to express and promote the common interests of former child migrants worldwide"; and "to educate and raise issues relating to the needs of former child migrants and their families with governments, state agencies and non-governmental agencies".²⁹

Children institutionalised in Australian orphanages – the "Forgotten Australians" – were first nationally represented in 2000, with the formation of CLAN (Care-Leavers Australia Network). CLAN specifically modelled itself on already established activist groups, aiming

to raise public consciousness of our past situation and its effects, so that what happened to us as state wards and Home children becomes as well known as the experiences of the 'stolen generations', child migrants and adoptees.³⁰

And with a clear recognition of what other groups representing those removed as children were already achieving, CLAN aimed to lobby governments for recognition of past suffering and to provide "care-leavers" with a chance to share their experiences, knowing "that many people who grew up in 'care' feel isolated and alone, believing the traumas of their childhood years were somehow their own fault".

²⁸ National Sorry Day Committee, "History of Sorry Day", http://www.nsdcc.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=20&Itemid=51 Accessed 24 March 2011.

²⁹ *The Lost Innocents*, p.61, p.69; pp. 129-135.

³⁰ Care Leavers Australia Network. "About CLAN: Our History and Objectives" <http://www.clan.org.au/page.php?pageID=1> Accessed 22 March 2011.

Without in denying the energy and commitment of this wave of non-Indigenous activists, it is clear that the shift in the national “collective memory” generated by the *Bringing Them Home* report prepared the ground for further historical reconsideration. The inquiry into Indigenous child removal was not only a signal moment in Australian Indigenous-settler relations but also proved a watershed moment for a more general reckoning with the history of child welfare policies and the removal and placement of children. At least five further inquiries and reports followed in quick succession between 1997 and 2004. The *Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions* (1999); the Tasmanian report on *Adoption and Related Services* in Tasmania report (1999); the New South Wales *Releasing the Past: Adoption Practices Report* (2000); *The Lost Innocents* (2001) and *The Forgotten Australians* report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children (2004) all examined cases of children removed from their families via adoption or institutionalisation. Each report documented harrowing testimony of abuse and betrayal of both children and families. Collectively, these reports amount to a ghastly millennial public reckoning of the compounded failure of the modernising, progressivist social vision of twentieth-century Australia.

In making his second national apology in November 2009 Rudd stressed more strongly than in his words to the “Stolen Generations” the pain and trauma suffered by institutionalised children, “the physical suffering [...] the cold absence of love, of tenderness, of care”. To the litany “we are sorry”, Rudd added the refrain “we look back with shame”.

We look back with shame that many of these little ones who were entrusted to institutions and foster homes instead, were abused physically, humiliated cruelly, violated sexually.

He stressed the fault of the nation: “You were in no way to blame for what happened to you because it was the nation who failed you. The institutions the nation created for your care, failed you.” He re-iterated both past and continuing pain.

We recognise the pain you have suffered.

Pain is so very, very personal.

Pain is so profoundly disabling.

So, let us together, as a nation, allow this apology to begin to heal this pain.³¹

For mothers excluded from this second moment of national reconciliation their unacknowledged pain became more acute.

Mothers separated from their children by adoption

³¹ Kevin Rudd, “Transcript of address at the apology to the Forgotten Australians and former child migrants, Great Hall, Parliament House, 16 November 2009”. <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/110625/20091116-1801/www.pm.gov.au/node/6321.html>, Accessed 17 February 2011.

Legal adoption – the action of the state and its agencies permanently to change the identity of adopted individuals and to impose legally constructed ties of kinship over blood ties – was a more common practice in Australia in the 1960s and early 1970s than ever before or since.³² The annual number of adoptions peaked in 1971-71, with some 9,798 adoptions.³³ This followed steep annual increases in adoptions across the 1960s, with a parallel rise in non-marital pregnancies.³⁴ It seems that the great majority of the babies adopted in the 1950s and 1960s were the children of white unmarried mothers, often teenagers.³⁵ In Victoria more than 75% of children separated from their mothers between 1940 and 1975 were separated by adoption.³⁶ From this cohort of mothers come the women currently seeking national action to condemn forced adoptions. The degrees of illegality involved in this process are still a matter for debate – and presumably a question for investigation by the current Senate inquiry.³⁷ There can be no doubt that many women experienced and still experience the loss of a child to adoption as a heart-breaking catastrophe, an agonising memory they cannot forget.³⁸

Mothers separated from their children by adoption are publicly identified by a range of names reflecting community discomfort at their very existence: “single mothers”, “natural mothers”, “birth mothers”, “relinquishing mothers” and most recently the self-chosen “mothers separated by forced adoption” or “mothers of the white stolen generation.” In 2011, activists look back to 1969 and the foundation the Council for the Single Mother and her Child (CMSC) as the beginning of their struggle for recognition. A submission to the Senate inquiry celebrates the establishment of that inquiry and of the CMSC:

³² During the 1960s all the Australian states passed legislation bringing adoption under state control and effectively outlawing private adoption. See Audrey Marshall and Margaret McDonald, *The Many-sided Triangle* (Melbourne, 2001), p. 32.

³³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, “Table 2: Adoptions by State and Territory, 1968-69 to 1998-99”, *Adoptions Australia 1998-99* (Canberra, 2000), p.6.

³⁴ L.T. Ruzicka, “Non-Marital Pregnancies in Australia since 1947”, *Journal of Biosocial Science*, Vol. 7, 2 (1975), pp.113-132.

³⁵ In Queensland between 1966 and 1974 nine out of ten children adopted were recorded as the product of a ‘extra-nuptial birth’. Our thanks to an anonymous researcher who collected these figures from the Annual Reports of the Director of the State Children’s Department, held at the Queensland State Library.

³⁶ Shurlee Swain, *Single Mothers and Their Children: Disposal, Punishment and Survival in Australia* (Melbourne, 1995), p.146.

³⁷ NSW Parliament. Legislative Council. Standing Committee on Social Issues, *Releasing the Past: Adoption Practices 1950-1998*, (Sydney 2000). This reported judiciously that ‘This inquiry has found that past practices were in many cases misguided, sometimes unethical and on occasions unlawful.’ (clause 10.118, page 186). <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/committee.nsf/0/56E4E53DFA16A023CA256CFD002A63BC>, Accessed 4 March 2011.

³⁸ See for example Appendix 1 ‘Submissions Received’, *Releasing the Past*, pp.105-201. For a fuller discussion see Swain, *Single Mothers and Their Children*, especially chapter 6, “Separation”.

It has taken 41 years for this historic moment to arrive and firstly, I would like to pay tribute to the mothers like Pat Harper who formed the “National Council for Single Mothers and her Child” in 1969 and their members who became active in the pursuit of Single parents rights. They stood up for the right of every child to know, be acknowledged by and have the financial support of both parents.³⁹

The NCSMC can stand proudly as the first group to make a public presentation on behalf of parents separated by adoption. In December 1975 the Royal Commission on Human Relationships asked representatives of the Council for information on adoption, noting that “there have been a number of women on your council who have had children adopted...and that this has created some stress and trauma”.⁴⁰ “Adoption procedures” entered into the Commission’s detailed terms of reference in relationship to its originating concern, abortion – as one of “the social, economic, psychological and medical pressures on women in determining whether to proceed with unplanned or unwanted pregnancies”.⁴¹ Adoption had already emerged as a factor in this decision-making in an “unwanted pregnancy phone-in” conducted by the Commission earlier in the year.⁴² Barbara Murray for the NCSMC confirmed the Commissioners’ sense of the trauma of adoption: “to give up a child for adoption is an unnatural thing for a mother to do [...] the grief associated with it is very similar to the grief associated with the death of a child”.⁴³ Murray admitted to being “rather angry” at “the general attitude [...] that a person has a baby, she has it adopted and then she can forget about it – something like having an appendix out”. However, Murray also stressed that adoption was not always the wrong decision. She called for greater public understanding of the grief associated with adoption, more post-adoptive counselling and some relaxation on legal impediments to searching and reunion – requests which helped shape the final recommendations of the Commission.⁴⁴

A few months later the Council for the Single Mother and her Child made another public presentation – to the First Australian Conference on Adoption, held in Sydney in February

³⁹ Submission no. 19, “Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices” Submissions received.

http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/comm_contrib_former_forced_adoption/index.htm Accessed 19 February 2011.

⁴⁰ Royal Commission on Human Relationships, “Evidence of Patricia Harper, Josephine Murray, and Rosemary Keily. At Melbourne on Thursday 11 December 1975”, *Transcript of Proceedings*, (Commonwealth of Australia, 1977), p.2980.

⁴¹ Royal Commission on Human Relationships, “Terms of Reference”, *Final Report, Volume 1*, (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1977), p.ix.

⁴² Royal Commission on Human Relationships, *Final Report, volume 4, Part V The Family*, (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1977), pp.106-7, pp.228-231.

⁴³ Royal Commission on Human Relationships, *Transcript of Proceedings*, p. 2981.

⁴⁴ Royal Commission on Human Relationships, “Summary of the Report, Part V”, and “Recommendations”, *Final Report, volume 1*, pp.69-72; pp.113-14.

1976. The social workers and welfare administrators planning the conference were critical of the standards and assumptions of the profession, and intent on identifying “where inadequate policies and services and poor interpretations of adoption philosophy acts against the interests of a child”.⁴⁵ A subsidiary aim was to provide a platform where providers and advocates of adoption could meet on equal ground. Empowering the recipients of social welfare had been practiced from the late 1960s by a cohort of radical social workers who believed that social welfare work should transform society.⁴⁶ Some set about achieving this by working with their “clients” to form action groups to demand better services.⁴⁷ Three advocacy groups were represented on the platform at the First Australian Conference on adoption: two adopting parents’ groups, and the Council for the Single Mother and her Child. The Council’s contribution was directed at the social workers, focussing on their struggle for recognition.

Many professional workers were appalled at the idea of single mothers getting together to help themselves and worse still, to try to change their status. The single mother, after all, was by definition immoral, unbalanced and/or stupid. To have her actually standing up and talking about her rights was not at all a good thing.

These “single mothers” justified their right to speak not in terms of the wrongs they suffered, but rather by borrowing a paradigm from the radical social workers which positioned them as active citizens, not passive clients.

The important point about our existence is that we are consumers and we claim certain rights, as do other consumers [...] we do claim the particular right to speak from experience of ‘how it feels’.⁴⁸

The conference and the publicity it generated encouraged private grief to become public testimony. The organisers sought broad publicity for the conference, and the *Australian Women’s Weekly* in particular responded. Before the conference, the AWW promoted it both in its editorial pages⁴⁹ and in an article by Kay Keavney, “Adoption: Secrecy or Not?”⁵⁰. Keavney’s article called for input from all sides of “the adoption triangle”: “the real experts [...] are the people involved in the adoption situation themselves: adopting parents, people who have been adopted, people who have given their children for adoption”. Keavney authorised public discussion of the grief of giving up a child, reporting a recent “phone-in for

⁴⁵ *Proceedings of First Conference on Adoption*, pp.1-2

⁴⁶ Philip Mendes, *Inside the Welfare Lobby: A History of the Australian Council of Social Service* (Portland, Oregon, 2006), chapter 2.

⁴⁷ For the case of Eric Benjamin and the CSMC, see Rosemary West. “How Single Mothers Overcame Discrimination”, in eds.Eileen Baldry and Tony Vinson, *Actions Speak: Strategies and Lessons from Australian Social and Community Action* (Melbourne, 1991), pp.168-188.

⁴⁸ Jo Murray, “Role of Advocacy and Citizen Groups” in *Proceedings of First Conference*, pp.154-5.

⁴⁹ Ita Buttrose ‘At my desk’, AWW 4 February, 1976, p.3.

⁵⁰ Kay Keavney “Adoption: Secrecy or Not?”, AWW 4 February 1976, pp.36-8.

women who had unwanted pregnancies”. She reports a researcher “was shaken by the number of mothers who have never ceased to grieve for the child they gave away”: “[T]hey said they kept searching for the faces of young people [...] wondering, “Is that my child?””.⁵¹

Keavney concluded by calling on “the real experts ... those of you who live with the adoption situation” to give testimony: “What do YOU think”.⁵² A month later she wrote of “the great flood of letters” evoked by this appeal. Keavney did not reveal how many of these letters came from grieving mothers, but their “despair and heartbreak” were prominent in her account.⁵³

The conference organisers also received a “flood” of letters – 51 in all – from people testifying to their experience of adoption. Cliff Picton reported on this unsolicited “data” in an article in *Australian Social Work*.⁵⁴ They came from all “points of the triangle”, with a small majority from birth mothers. The effect of these letters was to give witness to their grief. Picton reported that “the range of feelings described runs the gamut from curiosity” to “complete and continuing agony and a sense of loss”.⁵⁵ Picton offered no panacea for this misery. Picton hoped that things would improve in the future, “as society adopts a less punitive stance towards ex-nuptial pregnancy, and supportive services are more generously provided”.⁵⁶

The public airing of the secrecy associated with adoption proved fertile ground for the growth of a movement to open birth registers to adoptees seeking to know their parentage. Jigsaw, an activist group representing adoptees and “relinquishing mothers”, was formed in July 1976, and began immediately to push for legislative reform.⁵⁷ A Jigsaw representative on the organising committee for the Second Australian Conference on Adoption (1978) influenced the selection as plenary speaker of John Triseliotis, a Scottish academic whose research demonstrated the beneficial effects of open access to birth records in that country.⁵⁸

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 37. The “phone-in” was presumably that conducted by the Royal Commission on Human Relationships.

⁵² Ibid., p.38

⁵³ Kay Keavney ‘Adoption: What You Think?’, *AWW* 10 March (1976) pp. 11,13.

⁵⁴ Cliff Picton ‘Some Insights Into Adoption: Unintended Consequences of Publicity’, *Australian Social Work* Vol. 30, 1 (1977), pp.25-8. More than half the respondents identified the *Women’s Weekly* as their source of information.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.26.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

⁵⁷ Minutes of the Victorian Standing Committee on Adoption, 10 August 1976, Box 18, series 18/19, Jigsaw Collection 104/41, University of Melbourne Archives.

⁵⁸ John Triseliotis, *In Search of Origins; The Experiences of Adopted People*, (London 1973).

Triseliotis' paper "The Rights of Adoptees, Adoptive Parents and Natural Parents"⁵⁹ was guarded in its advocacy of the rights of "the natural parents" to know their children – these women having been, after all "a party to the decision" to adopt, and thus had signed away any legal rights to their children. But he did recognise that

Giving up a child for adoption is experienced by most natural parents as a very traumatic happening which must leave many of them with deep memories of their associated guilt.

He suggested that the trauma they had suffered might give them some moral right to access records once their children were adults.⁶⁰

Pat Harper from the NCSMC took up the cudgels much more vigorously for "The Rights and Needs of the Natural Mother".⁶¹ While Harper stressed "the right of the natural mother to grieve for her child"⁶², her claim for rights was firmly based on equality, not trauma. She framed her discussion overtly "within the wider context of universally accepted human rights". Citing Principle 6 of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, that "A child of tender years shall not, save in exceptional circumstances, be separated from his mother", she suggested that this statement concerned "not only the needs and rights of the *child*, but also those of the *natural mother*".⁶³ She went on to claim for these mothers all the rights usually granted to mothers in the community, and beyond that, the right they most lacked – the right to name themselves – and this lack was identified as a cause of depression, if not trauma:

The mother who has given up her child for adoption describes herself as the "NATURAL MOTHER", the "mother by nature", of her child – not the "biological" mother with its overtones of a non-caring, mechanical birth process.....the very act of "re-naming" oneself and one's world is a crucial condition for expelling the self-deprecating oppressor "housed" within oneself.⁶⁴

At the Third Adoption Conference (1982), grief and trauma were central to two influential assessments of the wellbeing of "natural mothers". Kate Inglis, a sociologist, welcomed "the tying together of relinquishment and grief" as "a welcome development, reflecting [...]"

⁵⁹ John Triseliotis, 'The rights of adoptees, adoptive parents and natural parents', *Proceedings of Second Australian Conference on Adoption*, (Melbourne, 1978), pp. 28-46.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40-1.

⁶¹ Pat Harper, "Pregnancy and adoption – the rights and needs of the natural mother" *Proceedings of Second Conference*, p.111-119.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.112.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.111 (emphasis in the original).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.118-9.

increasing awareness of previously neglected consequences of adoption”.⁶⁵ Psychologists Margaret van Keppel and Robin Winkler hypothesised that “Relinquishment would seem to be a major trauma for relinquishing mothers with serious effects that may last many years”.⁶⁶ Both papers dwelt on the “guilt” associated with “relinquishment”: Inglis noted that “Depression is common, often exaggerated by unrealistic shame or guilt”⁶⁷. Van Keppell and Winkler declared that

the relinquishing mother feels responsible for the decision she made to relinquish her child [...] loss is therefore experienced as a self-inflicted [...] often accompanied by feelings of shame, guilt and powerlessness.⁶⁸

No representative “natural mothers” spoke from the platform, but they appear to have been active at the workshop on “Parents Who Relinquish”. The recommendations produced by this workshop, and endorsed by Conference, whilst validated by a preliminary recognition of “the ongoing grief of parents relinquishing a child”, laid out a series of practical suggestions to improve their situation: “counselling and support”, but also “the education of the community towards understanding the open expression of grieving is required”; “access to original birth certificates at all times”; and “social action and government assistance” to remove the pressures that compelled parents to relinquish their babies, including lack of income security, housing, and “closed, rigid attitudes towards single motherhood”.⁶⁹

The voice of Pat Harper from the NCSMC can be heard in these practical, equality-based recommendations.⁷⁰ From its foundation in 1969 NCSMC has been dedicated to the removal of discriminatory legislation and the provision of government aid for supporting parents.⁷¹ In 2011 the organisation, now the Council of Single Mothers and their Children, remains dedicated to these aims within what is understood as ‘a *rights* philosophy, not a *welfare* philosophy’.⁷²

⁶⁵ Kate Inglis, ‘The Relinquishment Process and Grieving’, *Proceedings of Third Australian Conference on Adoption*, (Adelaide, 1982), pp.166-173, p. 166.

⁶⁶ Margaret van Keppel and Robin Winkler, “The effect on the mother of relinquishing a child for adoption”, *Proceedings of Third Conference*, pp. 174-83, p.183.

⁶⁷ Inglis, p.169.

⁶⁸ van Keppell and Winkler, p.175.

⁶⁹ ‘Recommendations: Parents Who Relinquish’, *Proceedings of Third Conference*, p.396.

⁷⁰ Harper presented a paper at the conference on ‘Changing Laws for Changing Families: Australia in the 1980s’ but did not speak from the platform in the name of the CSMC. *Proceedings of Third Conference*, p.184-194.

⁷¹ Council of Single Mothers and Their Children,” History”, <http://www.csmc.org.au/?q=history>, Accessed March 5, 2011.

⁷² Ibid.

ARMS – the first activist group specifically representing “relinquishing mothers” – began in South Australia “as a result of an overwhelming response received from a phone-in after the third National Conference on Adoption”.⁷³ Maureen Craig explains the permutations of the name:

[W]e began as the Australian Relinquishing Mothers' Society, but came to believe that the word “relinquishing” did not describe us, suggesting as it does that we had voluntarily come forward and handed over our babies. We now call ourselves the [...] Association Representing Mothers Separated From Their Children by Adoption, which tells it like it is and enables us to keep the ARMS acronym.⁷⁴

At the 20th Anniversary of ARMS in 2002, members remembered that participation in a research project in 1986 which investigated “the pain and grief suffered by natural mothers [...] gave the group a better sense of legitimacy”, and led it to begin lobbying for legislative reform, with some success. In 1998 the South Australian government opened adoption records to “natural mothers”.⁷⁵

Origins, a more recently formed self-help organisation, is also the strongest in terms of membership, with an email network reaching across all the states and strong international contacts. Its website strenuously embraces the trauma paradigm:

Origins Inc. was founded in 1995 by a small group of mothers who, having lost their children to adoption, were being continuously re-traumatised each time so-called experts and health professional minimised and invalidated the severe emotional anguish, trauma, and grief left in the wake of their adoption experience, assuming that we, as mothers, should have accepted the loss of our living babies – as if it were possible to do that.⁷⁶

This principle drives the present campaign for a Federal apology. Origins and more short-term alliances like Mothers of the White Stolen Generation and the Apology Alliance have campaigned directly for either an apology or a national inquiry since at least 1999 and with increased intensity since the apology to the Stolen Generation in 2008. There have been marked tensions (which are beyond the scope of this paper to examine) between groups favouring an immediate apology and those favouring an apology after a national inquiry, of which the Federal government is aware.⁷⁷ Birth mothers have secured major parliamentary

⁷³ ARMS (South Australia), “20th Anniversary - Gay Thompson Address”, <http://users.sa.chariot.net.au/~jamiro/arms/anniversaryspeech3.html>, Accessed March 22 2011.

⁷⁴ ARMS (South Australia), “20th Anniversary - Maureen Craig”, <http://users.sa.chariot.net.au/~jamiro/arms/anniversaryspeech1.html>, Accessed March 22, 2011.

⁷⁵ ARMS “20th Anniversary - Gay Thompson Address”.

⁷⁶ Origins Inc New South Wales, “Our History, Australia”. <http://www.originsnsw.com/> Accessed March 5 2011.

⁷⁷ “The Government’s initial engagement with a number of support groups and affected individuals highlighted that there was no consensus about the way ahead, particularly as the evidence base around issues relating to past

inquiries in two states. In 1999, a Joint Select Committee of the Tasmanian Parliament tabled the report of its inquiry into past adoption practices in that state⁷⁸ and in 2000, the New South Wales Legislative Council published the far more extensive report of its inquiry into adoption practices between 1955 and 1998.⁷⁹ Both reports made note of the testimonies of pain and suffering made by mothers who had lost their children and of the impact these stories had on committee members. The Tasmanian committee reported ‘the determination of Origins and others that their stories be told, the past uncovered and the common threads of grief, loss and also of courage and dignity be placed on the record’:

the formality of the hearing, [...] seemed to help these women who brought with them their sad little bundles of clippings and photocopies of documents gleaned under FOI and their trust that they would be heard with respect.⁸⁰

The chairman’s ‘Foreword’ to the NSW report, *Releasing the Past*, opened with the observation that

This inquiry has given many people, and particularly mothers, an opportunity to write and speak about their experiences of adoption. [...] Their stories were often heart-rending and we value their courage. We hope that the releasing of these stories, together with positive future action, will facilitate the healing of past hurts.⁸¹

This inquiry recommended a parliamentary apology,

a statement of public acknowledgment that past adoption practices were misguided, and that, on occasions unethical or unlawful practices may have occurred causing lasting suffering for many mothers, fathers, adoptees and their families.⁸²

Successive NSW governments have shown no sign of implementing this recommendation.

Releasing the Past also recommended that ‘departments, private agencies, churches, hospitals, professional organisations, and individuals involved in past adoption practices

adoption practices is contested and the public record is scant” (Email communication from Clare Bowman, FaCSHIA to Marian Quartly, 22 March 2011). Addressing the “evidence base” was the rationale behind FaCSHIA commissioning a review of research literature (which predates the current AIFS study), see Daryl Higgins, *Impact of past adoption practices: Summary of key issues from Australian research*. A report to the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, (Melbourne 2010).
http://fahcsia.gov.au/sa/families/pubs/past_adoption/Pages/default.aspx Accessed on 27 March 2011.

⁷⁸ Parliament of Tasmania, Joint Select Committee, *Adoption and Related Services 1950-1988*, (Hobart, 1999).
<http://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/Ctee/reports/adopt.pdf>, Accessed 5 March 2011.

⁷⁹ *Releasing the Past*.

⁸⁰ ‘Executive Summary’ Parliament of Tasmania, *Adoption and Related Services 1950-1988*, p.3.

⁸¹ *Releasing the Past*, p. xii.

⁸² *Ibid.*, Recommendation 16, p. xvi.

should be encouraged to issue a formal apology' – and here the suffering mothers have had more success. Apologies to mothers have come from the Royal Women's Hospital in Brisbane (May 2009), Hornsby Hospital in Sydney (June 2009), and the Sisters of Mercy, Perth (March 2010); these apologies have been made to individual women or support group representatives.⁸³

To date, one State parliament has issued an apology. On 19th October 2010 the Liberal Premier of Western Australia, supported by the Labour opposition, moved

that the Parliament acknowledges that previous Parliaments and governments were directly responsible for the application of some of the processes that impacted upon unmarried mothers of adopted children, and now apologises to the mothers, their children and the families who were adversely affected by these past adoption practices.⁸⁴

Again, parliamentarians cited stories of trauma. The Leader of the Opposition saluted the mothers, many present in the House, who 'have endured such sufferings; you are survivors'.

We recognise that this apology does not repair the trauma and damage done to you so many years ago. Nevertheless, Parliament hopes that in offering formal recognition of your experiences, you may be able to move forward with the healing process.⁸⁵

As noted above, Senator Seiwert brought this apology to the notice of the Australian Senate when she successfully moved in November 2010 for an inquiry into "the role, if any, of the Commonwealth Government, its policies and practices in contributing to forced adoptions".

Guilt and gender in apology politics

Inasmuch as the federal government has apologised to the Stolen Generations, the Forgotten Australians and the Lost Innocents, the apology has been directed primarily at "children". Kevin Rudd noted in the course of his apology of 2009 that he had been privileged "to meet some of these children, most of them now middle-aged". By fixing on the idea that the children were victims of an adult society that failed to care for them and that the children, by

⁸³ Thus the Sisters of Mercy wrote to Judith Hendriksen that 'We deeply and sincerely apologise for our past actions and the trauma it has caused yourself, Anne and your loved ones'. Josh Nyman, "Nuns offer an apology", *Albany Advertiser* 8 April 2010, p. 7. The apology from the Royal Women's Hospital in Brisbane was issued by Prof Ian Jones on 9 June 2009 to representatives of ALAS (Adoption Loss Adult Support): 'we acknowledge the hurt and suffering you have described and sincerely apologise for any ill treatment experienced by you as single women during your pregnancy and confinement at the Royal Women's Hospital.' Available at: <http://www.alasqld.com/>, Accessed 27 March 2011.

⁸⁴ Premier David Barnett, "Removal of Children from Unmarried Mothers – Apology" (*Western Australian Parliamentary Debates*, Assembly, 19 October 2010) <http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/web/newwebparl.nsf/iframewebpages/Hansard+Search>, accessed 5 March 2011.

⁸⁵ Ibid., Mr. E.S. Ripper.

extension, were the ones who deserved an apology, the federal government has faced the question of ongoing adult suffering obliquely. “We come together ... to say to you”, Rudd announced, “that we are sorry”: for “those who were sent to our shores as children without your consent”; “robbed of your families, robbed of your homeland, regarded not as innocent children but regarded instead as a source of child labour ... for the protection of children is the sacred duty of us all”. By couching the apology in these terms, Rudd invokes the Rousseauian idea that children are vulnerable innocents, incapable of wrongdoing unless led astray.⁸⁶ The corollary of Rousseau’s children-as-innocents is the view of adults as rational beings, having gained in their adulthood a capacity for dealing with moral issues. When he reminds the Forgotten Australians that “you were in no way to blame for what happened to you”, Rudd enters a conceptual space where entitlement to apology appears to depend on this kind of “innocence”. In Nobles’ terms, the institutionalised and immigrants are included in ‘national membership’ as innocent children, rather than the adults they have become.

Scholars have been little concerned with the place of gender within the politics of apology. You-me Park’s study of the official apologies offered to former “comfort women” prostituted to the Japanese Army during the Second World War is a welcome exception to this neglect.⁸⁷ Her analysis reveals parallels with the Australian story. Park demonstrates the centrality of the contested innocence of Korean “comfort women” to claims and counter-claims. The Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone argued that ‘they were actually all prostitutes’ and therefore not deserving of an apology.⁸⁸ When after international pressure, the Japanese government finally offered an apology to these women, the terms in which this was accepted by the Korean government – on behalf of the ‘comfort women’ – made it clear that women’s citizenship was different from and lesser than men’s.⁸⁹

If trauma without guilt is the prerequisite for a national apology, the implications for Australian birth mothers seeking an apology come into view. They are clearly not innocents in Rousseau’s sense – even though some of them had barely left their own childhoods behind when their children were taken from them. As noted above, at the Third Adoption conference, when such things were spoken of publicly for the first time, participants were told that the private grief of a ‘relinquishing’ mother was one where *shame* and *guilt* were bound together painfully. Mothers signed the papers, the “concrete and legal evidence” that they agreed to the adoption. We now have a more nuanced understanding of how those signatures were sometimes obtained. We know that such signatures were not always voluntary, and that consent was a relative term, given the other options available to a young, often single, woman in the 1940s, 1950s or 1960s. Nonetheless, the point is that birth mothers

⁸⁶ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile; or, On Education* (1762), trans. Allan Bloom. New York, 1979.

⁸⁷ You-me Park “Comforting the Nation: ‘Comfort Women’, the Politics of Apology and the Working of Gender”, *Interventions* Vol. 2,2 (2001) pp.199-211.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.204.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.207.

often had to suffer the shame and guilt of this ‘relinquishment’ in private, where “to do it well” meant to do it “quietly” and where there was nobody to bear witness to an ongoing suffering and grief in which the birth mothers themselves had created and participated.⁹⁰

There are the further complicating issues of illicit sexuality and the premium on the adoptable infants which resulted from illicit unions. Arguably, more than mere semantics are at work in the popular tags given to mark the three groups of adults – the Stolen Generations, the Lost Innocents and the Forgotten Australians –to whom apologies have now been given. The emotive terms “innocents”, “lost”, “stolen” and “forgotten” create the political and popular discursive space in which apology is possible. The moral and emotional economy generated by this terminology is distinguished from that generated by the painful social memories of the “girls who went away” as characterised by Ann Fessler⁹¹: the girls who were our sisters, our friends, our daughters, and gave birth in shame and silence to infants who were then placed in “loving” homes. The babies taken from these mothers were not lost or forgotten but served as valuable commodities, adopted by childless couples of good standing. In what terms might an apology to the birth mothers be cast such that is not also construed as criticism of adoptive parents – those respectable, middle class White Australians?

As Rebecca Albury has persuasively argued in her article about abortion debates and sexual shame in Australia, private shame often has a public parallel.⁹² For birth mothers in the second half of the twentieth century, private shame was compounded by a public shaming of their illicit sexuality – or their apparent failure to control their sexuality and contain their reproductivity within the sanctioned confines of marriage and, consequently, to exercise adequate moral restraint.

Conclusion

Currently, the both the Australian Senate and the Australian Institute of Family Studies⁹³ continue investigations into past adoption practices, with the latter initiated by the Federal government in response to the calls for an apology for mothers. Birth mothers represent a challenge to the national project of reconciliation with respect to Australian’s past policy and practice in the welfare and placement of children. Made other by their transgression of the sexual mores of Australian society and antagonistically positioned against adoptive families, these women are not easily or readily included within the discursive space of national apology. An apology for their sufferings by the Federal government, if it comes at all, will need to be formulated in terms very different from the apologies already made.

⁹⁰ Inglis, *ibid.*, p. 168.

⁹¹ Ann Fessler, *The girls who went away: The hidden history of women who surrendered children for adoption in the decades before Roe v. Wade*, (New York, 2006).

⁹² Rebecca Albury, “Too many, too late and the adoption alternative: Shame and recent abortion debates”, Public Policy Network Summer Conference 2007, Adelaide, 1–2 February 2007, p. 8.

⁹³ The Senate inquiry will report in April 2011; the Australian Institute of Family Studies is due to report in June 2012.