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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

COMMITTEES

Community Affairs References Committee

Report

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Speaker Moore, Sen Claire

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Senator MOORE (Queensland) (16:04): Thank you, Mr Deputy President. To the people in the gallery, to the people who are listening to this and to the people who have given us their lives, this is your report. Take it, read it and be proud, because none of this would have happened without each of you who have given us the incredible honour and the responsibility of putting on paper and putting into the community knowledge your histories.

Five years ago in my office in Brisbane, three women came to see me. They brought some pictures and a couple of books that they had written, and they brought their pain and their anger and their disgust, because no-one had believed what had happened to them. I was sitting listening to them at that time and I personally could not believe that in my country, in places that I knew, to people with whom I had worked, the experiences that they told me about had happened. In some ways, I was a bit fortunate because I live in Brisbane, and the first formal acknowledgement of the work that had happened and the horror that had occurred was made by the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital, a hospital I knew well. I think it is important that we recognise here that a number of people over the last five years have begun to formally acknowledge the horrors that occurred in our community.

That is not to say that people did not know beforehand. No-one can pretend that what appears in our report was completely unknown in this country. It was known. Either it was ignored or it was explained away that the way these women were treated was somehow for their good. They were looking to—and I quote this with great emphasis—'the best interests of the child'. When I heard the women who gave evidence to the inquiry, and when I heard particularly the children of those women who gave evidence, I could accept that some people in the past thought that they were acting in the best interests of the child. However, I challenge those people now, wherever they are, whatever their values base was and whatever their explanations were, to ask those children: was it actually in the best interests of the children, who had no choice? Was it actually in the best interests of the mothers, who were in some cases—and I do qualify it by saying 'in some cases'—given no choice? Was it actually in the best interests of the fathers, many of whom could not come to our inquiry because they did not know what had happened?

So often we found out during the process that fathers were dismissed and the knowledge that they were going to be parents was kept from them. In many cases the mothers and fathers were separated, but my particular horror was the fact that in many cases they were threatened with the law of the day so that if the mother gave the name of the father and they were under age their whole freedom, their legal record and their chance to have any future were all threatened. That they would know they were going to have a child was a risk.

What we have been able to do in this place is important, but it is only the first step. Sometimes, in the wonderful job we have in the Senate, we can be part of something that has real potential to change lives and to change our community. I think today is one of those days. We can share in the Senate with the people for whom it is most important an opportunity to take a step forward. We have 20 recommendations. They will go through the processes and go to governments. However, the key aspect is that the history of what happened in our country, what happened to women, what happened to men and what happened to the children—who are now adults but I say at this stage 'the children'—over a long period of time will now be known and acknowledged.

One of the most poignant moments of our whole inquiry was when a woman stood before us and said: 'I just want to make sure that my child knows that I loved him. I want to make sure that he'—she had found out through the system that her child had been born and was a boy—'knows that I did not give him away.' Every family deserves to know their own history.

Different senators will talk about different things and this discussion will go on, but I want to talk about knowing who you are and knowing that you have a birth certificate that indicates who you are. One of our key recommendations in this report is that people be able to seek and have true documents of identification—I almost gave a little clap there as well. I am not negating the role of adoptive parents. I am not negating the role of adoptive families. However, every person in this country has the right to know exactly who their birth parents are. There needs to be a genuine proof of identity for all purposes in our country. One of our key recommendations in 2012 is that that documentation should be available anywhere you live in this country. It should be there so you know who your mother was and who your father was—if that is known. People

know, when original birth certificates are issued, there is no way you can separate a mother from a child. When a woman gives birth anywhere in this country at any time, you can have no mistake about who has given birth to a child. That is something we can certainly achieve in 2012 through the registry process and across the different areas.

I know that people will read this report. Sometimes you write a report in this place and you know it is going to go onto a shelf and someone will look at it in the future or it will be on some kind of record. I have no fear that people will read this report because of all of you—you will make sure that people read the report. What we need to do together, though, is move forward with the recommendations. Senator Siewert has pointed out clearly that we need to ensure there is a national apology to every one of you: the mothers, the fathers, the children, anyone who was adopted and all the people who were caught up in this horror of our history. We now can say that it is a horror of our history and not pretend that it did not happen. We have also said that that kind of knowledge should be entrenched in some way so that people outside the immediate community will know what happened. We are going to rely on everybody to see what is the best way we can do that.

There will be things that need to happen such as trained professional support for all of those who have been damaged by the process. There needs to be an acknowledgement in our history that this happened. There needs to be consideration for what the people who have been hurt need to have in their own lives, and we need to ensure that people can find one another and if we can help in any way.

I put on record as well my acknowledgement of the secretariat. We have a document here that, perhaps for the first time, looks at what happened as the rules were changed in our country about adoption and adoptive processes.

I say to all of you that this has changed so much in my own life. I say to all of you: I am sorry. I am sorry for your hurt; I am sorry for your pain. I have been made stronger by hearing of the lives you have led and I want to work with each of you into the future to make sure that we have effective processes for people who have been so damaged and so hurt for so long.