

Email sent: 14/2/2008 - Alliance for Apology

Hi all,

KEVIN RUDD: These are uncomfortable things to be brought out into the light. They are not pleasant. They are profoundly disturbing. But we must acknowledge these facts if we are to deal once and for all with the argument that the policy of generic, forced separation was somehow well-motivated, justified by its historical context and, as a result, unworthy of any apology today.
(Lateline 13/02/08)

I have created an email list consisting of all those who expressed an interest in being updated on the mother's book I edited and in my research. If there is anyone who no longer wants to be included pls email me and I will remove you from the list.

The mother's book, titled 'Releasing the Past: Mothers' stories of their stolen babies', is a compilation of mother's stories, paintings and poetry, that is contextualised by a well researched but brief overview of the adoption industry and the forced removal of the newborns of non-Indigenous mothers. The research used in the book is a small sample of what I have gathered so far for my PhD project. The following brief description of the book will appear on the back jacket:

“This book describes what was supposed to happen to unwed mothers when they gave birth and what in fact really happened. It examines the ‘culture’ that pervaded the adoption industry and the justification used by those working within it to separate mothers from their babies. It also reveals how the notion of ‘choice’ for unwed mothers was in reality nothing but an illusion to keep them shamed and silenced. This book is about the struggle of mothers to tell their stories and their fight to gain an Inquiry into the past practices in adoption. But most of all, it is about their undying love for their children and their need to tell them that they did not willingly give them away: they were stolen”.

The book is a not-for-profit publication, with all proceeds going into a Fund that will be set up to assist mothers either with counselling or in other ways if they need support services but cannot afford them. The project was funded by the Dept. of Community Services and will be published and launched by the Social Justice Social Research Centre (SJSR), a research unit within the University of Western Sydney, in April. I have been told by the SJSR that the venue and date will be confirmed by the end of this week. When I have that info I will email everyone.

I was very pleased that on Wednesday, 13 February, our Govt. finally saw fit to apologise to the Stolen Generations for its past policy of forced removals. I must add though that I have had several phone calls from non-Indigenous mothers who also had their babies stolen and felt very hurt and distressed that they had been overlooked in the apology. But were they? And what of white mothers who gave birth to Indigenous children who were forcibly taken? These questions are yet to be answered. I don't know if everyone is aware or not, but representatives of Link-Up - the support group connecting members of Aboriginal families who were taken and adopted - gave evidence at the NSW Upper House Inquiry into Past Adoption Practices (1998-2000). They stated that the Welfare stopped the overt types of removing children from their families in the late 1950s and instead used more covert means. According to Wendy Hermeston the practice of rounding up children in trucks or black moriahs evolved into taking newborn babies from their mothers at the birth, before the mothers were discharged from the hospitals. The hospital became a convenient way of removing babies, quietly and efficiently under cover of its institutional practices. The babies

were taken by the same social workers, doctors and nurses involved in the systematic removal of babies of non-Indigenous mothers.

Ms Hermeston states: ...it graduated over time, the actual forced removal where superintendents, police, or the mission manager went into the missions and removed children, took them when they came from school. That was separate from the means that seemed to come into play over the 1950s and the 1960s.... I guess it is similar to what everybody else has been talking about [at the Inquiry]: welfare workers, doctors, anybody within the system, basically... It is the same. Aboriginal women were dealing with the same workers that non-Aboriginal women were dealing with. ...the ways of removal kind of graduated over time. The covert removal was what we were talking about before [the systematic process of removing babies at the birth], [mothers] not being able to exercise their right to revoke the adoption consent within 30 days, being talked into things, so it became more subtle and pressure was placed on women, you know, the pillow held up before the mother... not being able to see her child...

Ms Hermeston went on to state that she believed the treatment of Indigenous mothers within the maternity hospitals was both unethical and illegal.

A social worker I interviewed for my research stated that she had never got over the guilt of having to 'railroad' a Indigenous mother of 24 into adoption, when she trained at Crown St Women's Hospital. She was told during her training that she had to shame mothers into feeling disoriented to their babies, because it was better for the babies if they were adopted. It was not about what the mothers wanted. It was not whether the mother was Indigenous or not, it was because the mother was unwed. It was the practice in the hospital to systematically remove the babies from single mothers if they were without support.

Prime Minister Rudd repeated in his apology the need for practices such as the forced removal of children from their families never to be repeated again, but if he demarcates the practice by race and does not acknowledge that it also happened to non-Indigenous mothers and if he does not take into consideration the fact that any group that is marginalised and dehumanised can be exploited by those more powerful who need something they have, then the barbaric practices of the past will be repeated. The people who worked within the adoption industry did not remove babies based on race, they took them because there was a demand by infertile couples to be provided with babies. And the removal of the babies was justified because unwed mothers, as a group, were dehumanised and infertile couples, who were in the more powerful position, were deemed more worthy to parent their babies. The system got away with its barbaric practices for decades because it was not subject to any accountability and there was no transparency and the removal of babies satisfied a demand. Mothers had their babies taken by coercive means up until at least 1982 – when the Health Commission sent around a circular informing medical and social work staff that they were breaking the law by not allowing mothers their right to access their infants. And mothers themselves were silenced because those in more powerful positions told us that we should go home and forget about what happened, then when we continued to grieve for our stolen children we were ridiculed and then later dismissed by those in authority who now state: "Oh, white mothers had a choice. They 'chose adoption".

I believe the matter of whether or not Indigenous mothers who went through the same experience as non-Indigenous mothers, whilst subject to the same laws and practices within the hospital were apologised to is a very important political point. Therefore I emailed the Minister for Indigenous Affairs: Jenny Macklin and Link-Up on Monday, 11 February, to gain clarification on this point. I wrote:

"Hi Ms Macklin,

I would like to know whether the apology this Wednesday is inclusive of Indigenous mothers who had their babies forcibly taken from them in hospitals immediately after birth and who were required to sign 'consent to adopt' forms before being allowed to leave hospital? Is the apology inclusive of Indigenous children forcibly taken from their non-Indigenous mothers at birth? Ms Wendy Hermeston, former worker with Link-Up, gave evidence at the NSW Upper

House Inquiry into Past Adoption Practices, described how mothers had pillows or sheets placed in front of them so they could not see their babies at the birth and of the other coercive practices used to deprive these mothers of their babies. And how when some of these mothers tried to revoke their coerced consent within the 30 day period they were told their baby had died, only to have their adult child find them years later.

In 1969 the NSW *Aborigines Act* abolished the Aboriginal Welfare board and repealed the *Aboriginal Protection Acts* and Indigenous mothers were subject to the same relevant Child Welfare Acts as non-Indigenous mothers".

Kind regards
Christine Cole

So far I have not received a response. I did however ring Ms Macklin's office on the 14 February, and was told by the person who was in charge of fielding questions relating to the apology, Mary-Ellen, that:

"Indigenous mothers who had their babies taken from hospitals, after 1969, would be included in the apology".

According to Mary-Ellen mothers having their children taken after 1970 were acknowledged in the *Bringing Them Home Report* and "therefore would be included in the apology". If this is the case then are non-Indigenous mothers who were subject to the same practices as Indigenous mothers also included, if not why? Are Indigenous children born to non-Indigenous mothers included, if not, why?

At the Forum to launch the book there will be the opportunity for mothers to ask politicians these questions. They will also get the chance to speak out about how they have been impacted by the forced removal policies of the past. High profile MPs such as Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard will be invited. I intend to present them or their representatives with a letter demanding that we be given an apology for the past inhumane practices that we were subjected to, some of them being: denying us the right to see our babies at the birth; forbidding us any access to our babies, even after repeated requests; giving us high levels of mind altering barbiturates prior to signing the 'consent to adopt' forms; not allowing us access to any independent legal advice even though many of us were still minors/children in law; using tactics such as hiding babies or moving mothers miles away so they had no physical means of accessing their infants; not allowing mothers to leave the hospital before they signed consents. These practices coalesced into a policy of forced removal of our children which was implemented simply because we were unwed.

During my research I have come across documents which show a eugenic ideology that permeated the 'adoption industry'. It began in the early 1900s, when single mothers were considered 'feeble-minded' and a major cause of 'race degeneration'. It then developed, with the rise of Freudian psychology, into an ideology that assumed that unwed mothers were too neurotic to mother their own children, or even to make the decision themselves to consent to adopt. They had to be guided by a social worker to come to the decision. This ideology provided the justification for the 'well-oiled' system of baby-taking that developed within major maternity hospitals such as Crown St Women's Hospital. The eugenic underpinnings of adoption as practiced in Australia were clearly evidenced by Dr. Lawson who gave a speech at the Queen Victoria Hospital, Melbourne. He stated that obstetricians should not mind the law but should remove the baby of unwed mothers because

"a good environment will make a better job of bad genes than a bad environment will make of good genes... The prospect of the unmarried girl or of her family adequately caring for a child and giving it a normal environment and upbringing is so small that I believe for practical purposes it can be ignored..."

Lawson's speech was subsequently published in the Australian Medical Journal.[i]

The fact that the practices were systematic and the outcome of a policy is borne out by the sworn affidavit provided for a legal case, by Pamela Roberts, head social worker of Crown St, (1964-1976). Roberts outlined the policy which operated in Crown St when an unwed mother was admitted. She explained how an unwed mother had to see a hospital social worker before being admitted to the hospital. This effectively brought all unwed mothers under the control of the social work dept. The social worker would then proceed to mark the file with a code BFA – baby for adoption, whilst the mother was still pregnant, and this code would then guide the maternity staff in the way the unwed mother would be treated when giving labour many months later in the maternity ward. It meant that the mother was separated from her child at the birth, it dictated the drugs mothers were given, and in Crown St it meant removal by ambulance away from the main hospital to an Annex, effectively denying mothers any opportunity to find their babies. It also meant mothers were injected with stilboestrol, a lactating inhibiting drug immediately after the birth, so presuming consent, even though the mother was not subject to any *Adoption Acts* but was the legal guardian of her infant with the same rights as any other mother. Crown St also had the practice of making a notation on the bottom of the mothers' files after their 'consent' to adopt out their child was obtained: Socially Cleared. It was the usual practice if the mother did not have social clearance not to allow her to leave the hospital.

Personally I am very pleased that Indigenous mothers and their families have received an apology. I believe it is now time for non-Indigenous mothers who wish to receive an apology to begin to come together to achieve that aim.

KEVIN RUDD: The hurt, the humiliation, the degradation and the sheer brutality of the act of physically separating a mother from her children is a deep assault on our senses and on our most elemental humanity.

These stories cry out to be heard; they cry out for an apology. Instead, from the Nation's Parliament there has been a stony, stubborn and deafening silence for more than a decade. (Lateline 13/02/08)

For non-Indigenous mothers the deafening silence remains.

Kind regards
Chris

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i[i] DF Lawson, 'The R. H. Fetherston Memorial Lecture: the anxieties of pregnancy',
The Medical Journal Of Australia, vol. II, 1960, pp. 161–166.