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**Sowing the seeds for future apologies?
Looking at practices in ICA in light of
Australian government apologies related to
forced child removal**

**Denise Cuthbert (RMIT University) and Patricia
Fronck (Griffith University)**

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'[A]doption has been based on so many lies and myths that society generally has the view that adoption is a service; that there are unwanted children and loving couples save them. That is still the myth adoption is based on and, therefore, adoption is still seen by general society as being something that is a service.

The dark side is not seen; the mother's pain, suffering and the mental health damage has not been exposed and we are hoping from this inquiry that this is going to be exposed. You were also asking about intercountry adoption [...] If you are basing a system on myths and lies, as adoption has been based, that system will extend overseas.'

Christine Cole in evidence to Parliament of New South Wales, Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues, *Interim Report of Inquiry into Adoption Practices. Transcripts of Evidence from 27 August 1998 to 19 October 1998*, Report 17 (Sydney, 1998) pp. 105-06.

Introduction: Australia, child removal and apologies

- Australia leads the world in offering formal apologies to those people who as children were forcibly separated from their families through past government policies and social welfare practices.
- In 2008, Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, apologized on behalf of Australia to the Stolen Generations, Indigenous people who as children endured forced separation from their families and communities and to the families who lost their children
- In 2009, the Forgotten Australians and Lost Innocents, former forced imperial child migrants and institutionalised children received an apology from the Prime Minister for the sufferings, abuse and lifelong harm many have suffered as a result of past policies which removed them from their families, their birth countries and communities
- These confirmatory acts and recognition of past abuses have been deemed essential for processes of reconciliation and healing for persons affected.
- As noted by Cuthbert and Quartly (2012), there is a strong tendency in Australian apologies delivered to date **to draw clear lines between the *past* practices for which apologies are made and present practices**, as if an apology is sufficient to mark a 'new chapter' in history and practice with respect to child removal

The 'pastness' of past practices

There is a problem coming from the universities. There seems to be a mind-set that has got to be at least 30 or 40 years old **that goes back to the bad old days of the stolen generation and back to when adoptions were things that were considered secrets** and the hideous problems that young teenagers had to go through...There were mistakes made, **but we have to move forward. It is not 1975; it is 2005...We have got to be progressive and move forward** (HRSCFHS, 2005, p. 4) (emphasis added).

Quarantining the past from present practice in ICA

Current objections to adoption, such as those raised in submissions by mothers, that are based on practices in the past are held by the authors of the report not to apply to ICA as it is practiced *now*.

The committee lists the ways in which adoption now differs from 'bad old' adoption back then, which include:

- birth mothers receive counseling before they are permitted to put up their child for adoption;
 - there is now a range of financial benefits to support single mothers;
 - being a single parent is no longer stigmatised; and
 - adoption is no longer clouded in secrecy. Depending on the circumstances, a mother who gives up her child can continue to have contact or have contact in later years. (HRSCFHS, *Overseas Adoption*, p. 5).
- Although Bronwyn Bishop et al are forced to concede that some ICAs 'may reflect conditions in Australia one or two generations ago' but finally conclude 'it would not be in the interests of the child to refuse to provide them with a family environment in Australia if they cannot be adopted in their home country.'

What do mothers say?

- The staff [at the unwed mothers' home] were very condescending and very judgmental. They would say, 'Your child will be better off without you. You're doing the right thing. There's a loving family out there.' And I was thinking, 'Well, how come I can't be a loving mother?' (American mother, Fessler, p. 118.)
- So here we were [in Kate Cock's home for Unmarried Mothers in South Australia in 1962]. A bunch of society outcasts, brainwashed into submission and suffering feelings of such low esteem and self worth that I can say it has impacted on every decision I have made in life since. (Australian mother, Cole, p. 81)
- From now onwards, I want to do what my mother tells me to do. It is because I did not listen to my mother that I am deeply troubled now....It is better if I were dead ... Here in India it is not good, it is not chaste if this happens to a girl (Indian mother, cited in Bos, p. 124)

Mothers speak about the shame and pain of their loss

- I was made to believe that I would not make a good mother because I was not married, that my baby and I would be stigmatized by society, and our life together would be extremely difficult with little money and without family support [...] I had shamed my family. My baby's presence would perpetuate that shame. If I gave him away to strangers, then all would be well for him, for me and for the future. (Australian mother, Cole, p. 104)
- I think that on a core level I felt so worthless for giving my baby away. I was so beyond redemption that I just deserved nothing [...] I could not have anything because I really didn't deserve anything, I never had other children. (American mother, Fessler, p. 241)
- I committed such an unforgivable sin against you [...] I reproached myself for being so bad, and cried with my heart aching and tearing apart. I thought about raising you by myself, but it would be hard, especially in Korea, where the Confucian ideas are deeply rooted in society. So I decided to send you to meet good parents who could make you happy. (Korean mother, Dorow, pp. 19-20)

What mothers say on the 'decision' to give up a child for adoption

- Peter, I did love you. I did want you. I did not force you away, you were stolen from me. Fifty years later, I still remember your birthday. I suffer quietly wondering where you are [...] I just want you to know that I did not surrender you willingly, but as a child myself, I had no-one available to help me keep you. (Australia mother in Cole, p. 92).
- I decided that placing you for adoption was better...than suffering from hunger and poverty with me, I thought you would be happy if you met wonderful parents through adoption, I do not regret my decision, I always pray that you will know God's love and be wise. (Korean mother, Dorow, p. 107.)

Concluding points

- Are the principles underpinning 'best practice' in adoption – that is best practice with respect to children, families or origin and adoptive families – dependent on geography?
- Can we persist with one set of practices for Australian born children and families of origin in adoption, and another for those born overseas?
- In the light of apologies made in 2008 and 2009 for the damage caused by removal from family, loss of culture, loss of language, loss of identity, can we persist with practices in ICA which routinely involve all of these things?
- In light of apologies from state and territory governments for ***past forced adoption practices within Australia***, where we are confronted with evidence of similar practices in ICA, what can be done to reform and reframe ICA policy and practice to ensure that these discredited practices are not ongoing?

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