



Petition 2014/80 of Maggie Wilkinson

Report of the Social Services Committee

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Petition 2014/80 of Maggie Wilkinson

Recommendation

The Social Services Committee has considered Petition 2014/80 of Maggie Wilkinson and recommends that the House take note of its report.

Petitioner's request

Petition 2014/80 of Maggie Wilkinson requests:

That the House undertake a broad and full inquiry into the practice of “forced adoption” in New Zealand during the 1950s to the 1980s, and that the inquiry include and acknowledge the abuse, pain, and suffering caused by the state-sanctioned practice of forced adoption, and note that 100 people signed an online petition supporting this.

We received evidence from the petition and her supporters. They told us about their experiences of being pressured or forced to adopt out their children. We heard that this pressure could come from a range of people and groups involved in the adoption process, including the church, doctors, families, social workers, and lawyers.

We heard from the petitioner and her supporters that it was common for mothers to be told that adoption was the only option for their child to have a future. We heard that these mothers received little or no legal advice about their rights in the adoption.

The petitioner and her supporters told us about how they felt powerless against the immense pressure to adopt out their children.

Witnesses also told us about the ongoing negative effects of the adoptions on the mothers and the children. These included ongoing grief and loss, physical and mental health issues, and relationship and parenting issues.

We are grateful to Ms Wilkinson and her supporters for telling us about their very difficult personal stories. We acknowledge the pain and suffering that they went through.

Adoption in New Zealand from the 1950s to 1980s

We heard that adoption practice from the 1950s to the 1980s was based on the belief that it was best for a married couple to raise the child. The idea that adopted children should grow up as if they had been born to their adoptive parents was also an influence. This meant that adoptions were generally kept secret from the adopted child. The birth mother often had to sign a declaration that they would not contact their child.

The social stigma against illegitimate pregnancies meant that some were kept secret. Sometimes, pregnant, unmarried women moved to a new town or into residential facilities provided by the church.

Changes in adoption practice since 1980s

The Ministry for Vulnerable Children, Oranga Tamariki told us that, although the Adoption Act 1955 remains the same, adoption practice has changed significantly since the 1980s. Most adoptions in New Zealand are now “open”, and the birth parents have an ongoing relationship with the child and the adoptive parents.

This approach to adoption has been influenced by changes in social values, and, also a better understanding of the psychology of children.

The secrecy of closed adoptions has also been reduced by the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985. This Act allows birth parents and adopted children to access information about each other.

State's involvement in adoptions

The State's involvement in adoptions was usually through its social workers.

The Ministry for Vulnerable Children, Oranga Tamariki gave evidence about the State's role in adoptions. It told us that social workers had very little contact with the birth mother. It said that social workers were mainly involved with the adoptive parents. The main aspects of the social worker's role were to:

- take applications from prospective adoptive parents and assess those applications
- approve placements of children
- report to the court
- monitor and support adoptive placements until the final adoption order.

The petitioner disagreed with the ministry's evidence that social workers had very little to do with birth mothers. She submitted that social workers were required to interview birth mothers as part of the adoption process and produce a document that included information about the birth mother and her circumstances.

Conclusion

We thank the petitioner and her supporters for speaking openly to us about their personal experiences. We acknowledge the pain that these adoptions caused for them and for many other mothers, children, and wider family members.

Most of us do not believe that an inquiry is the best way to deal with this issue. Although we do not agree with many adoption practices from the 1950s to the 1980s, we note that these practices reflected the social values and attitudes of the time. We note that, as attitudes and values have changed, so too have adoption practices.

Some of us consider that an inquiry would clarify what involvement social workers had in adoptions. An inquiry could help to identify other forms of reparation for women who were forced to adopt out their children. It could also help to bring closure for families who were affected by forced adoption.

New Zealand Labour Party minority view

Labour supports the idea of a review into the issue of forced adoption that this petition deals with. We moved a motion at Select Committee for an inquiry to be carried out; however, unfortunately this was voted down by the Government members of the committee. Labour remains committed to the principle of ensuring that those affected by this issue get the chance to have it properly examined by Parliament through an inquiry.

Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand minority view

The Green Party supports the call for a broad and full inquiry, including an apology, into the practice of forced adoption in New Zealand.

We heard evidence from the petitioner, other mothers, and a solicitor who has acted for women who have been subjected to forced adoptions, by State and religious bodies. We were told of coercion from family, State social workers, religious leaders, hospital and institution staff, lawyers, and others. We were told of women who had their babies removed at birth. We saw evidence of women having consented to adoption within ten days of the birth, in contravention of the law. We heard of young women feeling they had no choice, of women and their families wanting to keep their child, being told they couldn't by social workers. Evidence of the secret placement of tamariki Māori with Pākehā families and the interrelationship between this and the abuse of tamariki Māori in State care was also referenced. We were also told that all recent attempts to hold various bodies accountable for these forced adoptions have failed.

The Green Party would like to acknowledge the profound distress expressed by the mothers who presented to us, as a direct result of their experiences and the continuing refusal of anyone to properly listen, apologise, or take responsibility. We can assume from the stories we heard that many of the children impacted by these policies and practices have also experienced profound loss and harm.

The committee asked for information from the ministry on the extent of the problem and what investigations had been done to this point in time. Unfortunately, the evidence we received did not address these specific questions or reference the evidence presented by the petitioners. The petitioners have disputed aspects of the official evidence.

The Green Party believes the seriousness of the concerns, conflicting evidence, and lack of formal avenues for redress or acknowledgement support the need for an inquiry.

The Australian Senate inquiry into forced adoptions was not restricted to State actors and the acknowledgement included a diversity of experiences of forced adoption, from women who were drugged to women who were not informed of available financial support. The stories are very similar to what we heard and much of what happened in Australia would also have been considered to reflect the social values of the time. The Green Party wants the mothers, fathers, and children who are still suffering to be heard and acknowledged. We cannot undo what has been done before but we can stop the denial and silence and support people to move forward. The Green Party views the Government's cursory response to this petition as another callous act of institutional violence against people who have already suffered too much.

Appendix

Committee procedure

Petition 2014/80 of Maggie Wilkinson was presented to the House on 20 September 2016 and was referred to the Social Services Committee. We met between 12 October 2016 and 21 June 2017 to consider the petition. We invited and received written submissions from Maggie Wilkinson and the Ministry for Vulnerable Children, Oranga Tamariki. We heard oral evidence from Maggie Wilkinson and several supporters on 15 March 2017, and from the Ministry for Vulnerable Children, Oranga Tamariki on 25 May 2017.

Committee members

Joanne Hayes (Chairperson)

Darroch Ball

Hon Jacqui Dean

Jan Logie

Jono Naylor

Hon Hekia Parata

Dr Parmjeet Parmar

Carmel Sepuloni

Stuart Smith

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