

The Australian precedent:

Women fighting for an adoption inquiry look across the ocean

[Kathryn Blaze Carlson](#) Mar 16, 2012



Valerie Andrews, the executive director of Origins Canada, is spearheading the push for a Canadian adoption probe.

Photo:
Peter J. Thompson
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For the first time in 50 years, Barbara Maison does not feel “so completely alone” in her grief over being coerced to surrender her son for adoption, and after four decades of shame, Robin Turner only now feels validated and worthy of respect.

Both women recently testified before an Australian Senate committee probing the country’s adoption practices from the 1940s to the 1980s, and both were featured in an explosive report released last month urging the Australian government to apologize to the thousands of women who were coerced by social workers, medical staff and churches into handing over their babies, simply because they were unmarried.

Hundreds of mothers like Ms. Maison and Ms. Turner gave submissions to the Senate committee, and while several lamented how difficult it was to put their accounts on the public record, most said the process was healing — that it has helped them put to bed some of the guilt they felt for surrendering their children all

those years ago, and helped them mend relationships with their families because they no longer feel so ashamed.

The path to what Ms. Maison called a “cathartic” moment was not a clear one. Australian mothers had been fighting for a federal inquiry for more than 15 years — at least since Lily Arthur and Dian Welfare co-founded Origins Australia, an organization supporting people separated by adoption, in 1995.

The pair dug through archives for evidence, launched letter-writing campaigns and met with politicians. They fought tirelessly to persuade the government to acknowledge the suffering of mothers who say the coercion was systemic: From the social workers who never told them about their right to revoke a surrender and who secured their signatures while they were still on powerful medication in the hospital, to the doctors and nurses who tied them to the birthing table and then did not let them see or touch their babies, to the church-run maternity homes, where women were essentially groomed for adoption.

“Dian died doing this work,” said Valerie Andrews, the executive director of Origins Canada, which was founded in 2002 and which she took over in 2007. “She and Lily pressed, and continually pressed, until they finally got an inquiry.”

Ms. Andrews is spearheading the push for a probe in Canada, and looks to the Australian experience for guidance. There, momentum built at the state and church level, until finally the federal government undertook its own inquiry. In 1999 and 2000 respectively, the Tasmanian and New South Wales parliaments conducted inquiries, and in 2010 the government of West Australia outright apologized.

Just last year, Catholic Health Australia, the country’s largest non-government health-care service, apologized, calling the era of forced adoptions a “shameful and regretful time.” In its submission to the inquiry, it admitted that about 150,000 Australian unwed mothers had their babies taken against their will between the 1950s and 1970s, according to an Origins Australia newsletter.

Ms. Arthur said the Senate was ultimately “forced” into launching an inquiry, given the combined pressure of the state inquiries, the growing awareness of the damage done to the women’s mental health, and the surging activism among mothers galvanized by the apologies.

One Australian senator also said social media such as Twitter and Facebook were key in lobbying the support of federal politicians.

“Canadians have the same need to have their story on the record, and to also receive support and acknowledgment,” Ms. Arthur said in an email.

Ms. Andrews estimates upward of 350,000 unmarried Canadian mothers were persuaded, coerced or forced into adoption, basing her calculation on Statistics Canada data on illegitimate births from 1945 to 1973 and the rough rate of adoption among unmarried women at the time.

As with Australia, the quest for a Canadian inquiry is not likely to culminate overnight: So far, Justice Minister Rob Nicholson has said only that adoption is a provincial matter, and Ms. Andrews has yet to find a politician who will champion the cause either in the Senate or the House of Commons.

But ever since the *National Post* on Saturday launched an investigation into coerced adoptions in Canada, Ms. Andrews said the momentum has been growing. Over the past few days, she said she has secured face-to-face meetings with the Salvation Army and the United Church — both of which launched reviews of their maternity homes' practices this week — and her federal MP, Costas Menegakis. She also recently received a call from Ontario's Child Welfare Secretariat and will be meeting with its director next month.

While the Australian movement swelled from the state level to the federal level, Ms. Andrews said Canada now has the "Australian experience to stand on," and said she hopes to bypass the provincial level and go straight to a federal inquiry.

Calling the recent reports in the *National Post* "extremely troubling," Irwin Cotler, the Liberal Justice Critic, said he "has hope that these women will have a chance to tell their stories and that some sort of truth and reconciliation will be reached for all those affected by this unthinkable practice."

Still, he echoed Mr. Nicholson's office and said any inquiry would likely need to be initiated by the provinces.

Adoption does not fall under federal jurisdiction in Australia either, and yet Senator Rachel Siewert, chair of the Community Affairs Committee, tabled a motion urging her government to probe the country's historic adoption practices. Senator Claire Moore, who also sits on the committee, said Parliament had a "role to respond to issues that had such an impact on people across the country."

Ms. Siewert outright recommended that the Canadian government undertake a federal inquiry: "I think the mothers, fathers, adoptees and families affected would get a lot out of it. Their pain, hurt and trauma needs to be acknowledged and addressed."

And the Australian Association of Social Workers — which admitted to the committee that "many women were not given the necessary assistance, and in some cases were deliberately denied access to counselling services prior to giving consent and were not informed of their legal rights" — urged the Canadian Association of Social Workers to co-operate fully with any future federal inquiry here.

The *National Post* contacted several members of the House of Commons Human Resources Committee, as well as the Senate's Social Affairs Committee and the Legal and Constitutional Affairs committee, to see whether they would consider tabling a motion for an inquiry. Two said they were not available for comment, one declined an interview, and one said her committee would not be the one to pursue such a matter.

Despite all this, Baldwin Reichwein, one of three former social workers who this week came forward to corroborate some of the claims put forward by the mothers, said he has "felt some pin pricks" and believes momentum is growing toward a full-blown public airing.

"These things have a habit of needing a lot of time for people to be willing and brave enough to speak out," he said. "I think there's merit for [this history] to come out ... It's time."

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