

ADOPTION CIRCLES

CANADA'S ADOPTION REFORM NEWS QUARTERLY

ISSUE 3 FALL 1991

PRE-ELECTION PROMISES

The New Democratic Party (NDP) victory brings the hope of open adoption records to the adoption reform community. On October 17, 1991 the NDP formed a majority government in British Columbia (BC) with the Liberal Party (LP) as the opposition. The former Social Credit (SC) government held power for all but three years since 1952.

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Re-elected NDP MLA Joan Smallwood claimed "it is the arrogance of the SC administration" that keeps adoption records sealed and secret. "It is the role of government to act as a facilitator, not police it," she said. Smallwood compared the efficiency of the SC government's Active Reunion Registry (Bill 11) to the Family Maintenance Program. The program has over 8,000 people on a 2½ year waiting list. For some adoptees the long wait could mean the life and death of a birth relative.

Smallwood confirmed the NDP position for open adoption records. However, for the NDP, this open door policy can slam shut with the provision of a veto. "We recognize the individual right to veto," Smallwood said. The Social Services Critic was unfamiliar with studies from New Zealand and Australia. Both countries have open records. The studies showed a low percentage of applicants placed a veto. Often when a veto was in place, searchers became more determined to find their relatives. Queensland, the most recent state in Australia to enact access to adoption information, does not have a veto clause. New Zealand and the other states in Australia have a sunset clause, which means all vetoes expire in the year 2000. The veto clause was put in place — not to regulate individuals' rights or access to information — but rather to

give the adoption community a period of adjustment to a new law.

Smallwood recognized the efforts of grass roots organizations in the province. "We will not do it in isolation, but work with the advocacy groups, — the experts," she said. There was no dialogue between the SC government and community groups before introducing Bill 11.

Smallwood admitted the government does not understand the delicacies of search and reunion issues. An example is reunions with minor adoptees, an issue, Smallwood said she had never thought about. The age of majority does not trigger the need to search. Many adoptees and birth relatives seek information while the adoptee is a minor. However, when the adoptee is 19 (in BC), this fact allows many birth relatives to search when they otherwise may have felt restricted. An Active Reunion Registry for minors will provide birth relatives a chance to contact each other. Open adoption records will allow adult adoptees and birth relatives to manage their own searches and reunions.

The NDP commitment to open adoption records will set a precedent for the rest of Canada. However, it is an easy task for the opposition to be critical of the government. Will the NDP be good on promises, particularly those made before an election?

— Editor

ADOPTION CIRCLES

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Missing Pieces Thru Adoption, a non-profit organization, provides regular support meetings for members of the adoption triangle and related people. There are four chapters in the Lower Mainland, British Columbia. *Missing Pieces Thru Adoption* promotes openness and honesty in adoption practice. Membership is \$15 - \$30 (sliding scale) per year and includes a subscription to *Adoption Circles*. Send cheque to: National Office, 12551 - 77B Ave., Surrey, BC, CANADA V3W 8L9. Telephone: (604) 590-1156.

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LETTERS

SOCIAL WORKERS ARE NOT ALL THAT BAD

In "Bill 11: Sanctioned Secrets" (*Adoption Circles*, Summer 1991), the unnamed author commented that:

"Retired social workers are the worst possible candidate for searching and contact. They were trained in an era of closed and secret adoption practice and may bring those biases to the reunion process."

I imagine that we could all agree that the people who do this sensitive and important work must be appropriately qualified by training and experience and hold the proper attitudes towards their work and the people they deal with.

It is unfair to brand all social workers as unsuitable as staff for the registry, whether retired or not. Social workers in adoption services always have to work within the constraints of current law — but this does not mean that they were biased against change. Social workers with extensive experience in adoption were the very people who recommended in 1986 that this Association support changes to the system in existence at the time.

I have no idea whether the Ministry of Social Services and Housing will try to entice social workers out of retirement, or whether they might succeed! The important thing is that the staff of this service be good at the job — some of them might well be social workers.

— Stuart Alcock, R.S.W.

Executive Director
British Columbia
Association of Social Workers

THUMBS UP

I appreciate being put on your mailing list and look forward to receiving your newsletter. I agree with your comments regarding adoption and open records.

— Dawn Black
Member of Parliament (NDP)
New Westminster-Burnaby

THUMBS UP

Your newsletter is EXCELLENT! . . . How may I help?

— Kate Burke
President
American Adoption Congress

THUMBS UP

Thank you for the copy of *Adoption Circles*. It looks very attractive . . . I have begun a mail order book business . . .

— Janine Baer
Editor

*Chain of Life: A Feminist Adoption
Reform and Child Welfare Newsletter*

For information write: Chain of Life, P.O. Box 8081, Berkeley, California 94707 USA.

THUMBS UP

I have received the second issue of your newsletter, *Adoption Circles*. You are deserving of congratulations for putting out such a first-rate, professional-looking product. . . .

— William Lewis Gage
Editor

Geborener Deutscher:

A Newsletter for German-Born Adoptees
and Their Birth/Adoptive Families
To receive *Geborener Deutscher* contact
William Gage at 2300 Ocean Ave.,
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11229 USA.

LETTERS

EXTINGUISH THE DINOSAUR

None of my experiences as a mother have been "normal." That's probably why today I take a rather radical view of Victoria's announcement that long-awaited changes are forthcoming to the Adoption Act (*Adoption Amendment Act — Bill 73*).

In my view, it's time the politicians in Victoria stepped into this century. They should discard the existing precepts of adoption as expressed in the Act entirely. Like the dinosaur, the Act belongs to a dark period of history. It's time to abolish the existing principles of adoption, their effects upon our children's rights — and our moral responsibilities to them as their birth mothers and birth fathers.

Today I have a fulfilling friendship with my eldest daughter, surrendered at birth, with whom I reunited in 1985. She's about to have her first child. I'm preparing a wicker bassinet for the occasion that's been used by the "mothers" in my family for generations. I have been a foster parent to a girl who is now 24, and I have a 3-year-old daughter. I am the custodial parent, but she has the right to know both her parents.

When I relinquished my eldest daughter, I swore to myself that one day, some way, we would reunite. After we reunited, I wrote to Victoria asking the provincial government to confirm we

were mother and daughter. When I mailed that letter, I promised myself that, one day, I would see the British Columbia government open the adoption files. Today, however, I expect nothing less than radical reform. What purpose is served by the existing practice of adoption. Why in

"As if . . . born:
Those three little words
form the heart — and the
heartbreak — of the
adoption triangle."

today's socio-cultural and legal milieu do we need an Adoption Act that dictates "for all purposes an adopted child becomes on adoption the child of the adopting parent, and the adopting parent becomes the parent of the child as if the child had been born to that parent."

As if . . . born: Those three little words form the heart — and the heartbreak — of the adoption triangle. That's the crux of it. That's the lie. Those are the words that "transfer" children as if they were matters

of commerce. I do not believe such an act to be in "the best interest of the child."

Half of today's marriages dissolve in the courtroom. Custody agreements and access arrangements between parents are the order of the day. Today, children have multiple "significant others" and extended families. Custodial parents are required to honor the rights of their children to "know" and access non-custodial parents and families. I don't see why the expectations should be any different of adopting parents.

When I decided to place my daughter for adoption, I was told that the adoption contract was non-negotiable. Take it or leave it. Accept "as if born" and a total dissolution of our relationship — or forget adoption. I knew then that any contract entered into under such duress is a farce. I know now that any agreement that transfers "ownership" of a child is NOT in the child's best interests.

It's time for radical reform of adoption. It's time for the words "as if born" be abolished.

— Myra Ross
Coquitlam
British Columbia

Send "Letters to the Editor" to *Adoption Circles*, Suite 102, 2045 Franklin Street, Vancouver, British Columbia V5L 1R4 CANADA.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MOTHERS CAN BE A PROBLEM

The former Minister of Social Services and Housing defended the Adoption Amendment Act (Bill 73) in a letter to the *Vancouver Sun*, (August 10, 1991). Critics of Bill 73 assert that the rights birth mothers gained in open and private adoptions will diminish under Bill 73. Jacobsen believes the 10% of birth mothers who do not follow through with the adoption placement are a problem. Jacobsen wants to prevent "disruptions of placements."

BIRTH MOTHER WON

The Canadian Press reported that an Edmonton birth mother's baby was returned to her. The British Columbia court ruled she was under duress when she agreed to place child for adoption.

HELP FOR TEEN MOMS

West Coast ACCESS in Vancouver offers help for teenage mothers. Services include: budgeting, parenting classes, social events and a monthly dinner. Bus fare and lunch are provided. Call Cori

Brown at ACCESS for more information at (604) 254-5457.

BC's NEW ACTIVE ADOPTION REUNION REGISTRY

The Vital Statistics Division of the Ministry of Health announced that amendments to the Adoption Reunion Registry became effective on October 2, 1991. The Greater Vancouver Family Services will operate the new active registry. The active registry will begin in January 1992. Call (604) 875-9434 for details.

IMMACULATE DECEPTION

In this excerpt from an open letter, a Catholic birth mother talks to her priest about the pain of having to give her child up for adoption. The church, as well as the social work profession, counselled women that they will forget their children. Thus was created the immaculate deception — the birth did not occur.

by MARY WOLCH

WE HAVE KNOWN EACH OTHER EIGHT years, but I had never before shared with you that I am a birth mother.

More than a decade after the birth of my child, the pain of this experience erupted as the central event of the past year. I realized it was time to share with those who knew, and those who did not, what it has been like to live with the loss of a child through adoption, and how this event has profoundly impacted my life.

...

I had not shared this experience with you before because I know you are strongly "prolife." Prolife people are the hardest ones to talk to about the birth mother's experience. Their perception of the experience is so disparate from its reality that discussion is difficult if not impossible. . . .

The prolife voices hail the decision to have a child adopted as courageous, unselfish, and loving. The forced nature of the decision — [either adoption or abortion] — in all its fear, despair, and powerlessness — is rarely recognized.

My daughter's birth was the most powerful and joyous event of my life. Within me a war now raged around the adoption decision. I stalled on signing my relinquishment papers and made visits to the Catholic "foundling" home to hold her and feed her. In the end, the struggle to keep my daughter was defeated by my tremendous feelings of shame and powerlessness, by my frozen belief that it was not all right to come home with a baby to my parent's house, and by my religious programming, which said adoption is "the right thing to do."

It could be argued that this view of adoption — as the only choice for a woman shamed by pregnancy outside of marriage — is not the teaching of the church. Still, it was the perception I had formed from reading Catholic publications and writings and sitting in Sunday Mass year after year listening to sermons. In discussing theology with those who have had the opportunity for in-depth study, I have learned that the common understanding of the church's position on adoption is actually tangential to the

essence of church teachings on family life and abortion. While the church teaches that unborn life is of the utmost importance, people in the pews often hear an added message that upholds the "traditional" two-parent family as morally superior and attaches shame to single motherhood as well as abortion. It is their responsibility of those in positions of teaching and preaching to address this issues.

Giving up your child for adoption satisfies the church's injunction against abortion, answers the prayer of the adoptive couple, and, we hope, provides for the child. In the push to do what is "best" for the child, agencies and persons working with birth mothers never address the sexuality and self-esteem issues that got most of these women into this situation in the first place. These groups, despite their intent, are primarily advocates for adoptive parents and babies. The assistance they offer birth mothers is limited to

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POLITICIANS ON OPEN ADOPTION RECORDS

The *Vancouver Status of Women* held an all-candidates meeting on "Who Will Fight for Women's Issues?" (October 9, 1991 at the Vancouver Native Centre). The following is a transcript of the candidates response to a question by a birth mother in the audience.

Birth mother:

There is a silent population of women buried under shame and denial, a result of closed adoption practice. Their silence is so profound that feminists have overlooked this group. Many of these birth mothers are now demanding recognition and rights. The closed adoption system imposed confidentially on birth mothers, as well as many mis-truths. For example, professionals told these women that they will "forget." They didn't. What is your party position on open adoption records so birth mothers and their adult children may know one another?

CAROL GRAN, Social Credit (SC) Minister of Women's Programs and Government Services and Minister responsible for Families:

"The legislation was just changed to an active registry so at present that's what the policy is. I have had lots of women come to me with the story that you just told. They feel a lot better about the active registry than they did the one we had before. But I understand that there still is a request for an open registry. But all I can say to you — because I am a minister in the government — that the policy now is an active registry which is far better than what we have before."

SUSAN FRENCH, Liberal Party (LP) candidate:

"We are committed to an open registry."

DARLENE MARZARI, New Democrat Party (NDP) Women's Critic:

"The New Democrats are concerned about an active registry since the active registry in Ontario has such a backlog. Within a few months it was really hopeless, and a

woman, or a birth mother, or a child — the client — has absolutely no chance for three years of actually seeing or having resolution to getting to see their kid or their parent. We believe and put forward an open registry whereby people can choose to have counselling if they wish but they will have access to their own files."

"I suspect the
active adoption registry
is going to be a
bureaucratic
nightmare."

KIM ANDA JARZEBIAK, Green Party candidate:

"Not only should there be an open registry now for mothers who had given up kids, but our society tends to treat children like they had no brains, like they can't think and are not capable of thinking. Children should be allowed to meet their, or find out who their birth parents are and have access to that information."

At this point the moderator said that Carol Gran (SC) requested a definition of open adoption records.

The birth mother replied:

"When a birthmother, birth father, adult adoptee, sibling or other birth relative can request identifying information for the party they are looking for and conduct a search if they choose. . ."

The moderator interrupted and asked:

"Whether or not the birth relative is willing or wants to be found?"

The birth mother replied:

"We feel we are capable of handling our own affairs without a government mediator . . . [interrupted by moderator]."

Susan French (LP) spoke, but could not be heard. Later, in a taped telephone message, French clarified her position:

"Our position is that we would like to have a registry where parents and children can register and look for each other. We call that open but I understand that is different from an automatic open books system which doesn't protect the individuals from disclosure if they don't wish to."

The next evening, the birth mother asked candidates at a meeting in Vancouver Hastings their position on open adoption records:

NANCY LAU, (LP) candidate:

"I really have to ask you to give me time to talk to certain people, and Susan French, and I will contact you later."

JOY MacPHAIL, (NDP) candidate:

"I know of many women who are in the exact same position as you are. When Bill 11 was introduced, Bill 11 changed the registry from passive to active; our party actually supported that in the legislature because it was one step forward. We didn't think it was enough, but it was better than a passive registry where people had to rely on bureaucrats and the adoptees and parents trying to get together on their own through this passive registry, so we now have an active registry. But I suspect that's going to be a bureaucratic nightmare. We are actually, our party position is that we support open records. Now that means that still — if either party wishes to have counselling and/or mediation in this process and you yourself decides or the child decides — that we should be making public services available for that. But it's up to the two parties to decide that, otherwise it should be a completely open process."

MY REUNION by BEV McKAY

On September 29, 1965 I gave birth to my first born, a daughter six pounds 5½ ounces. For most women, giving birth is a memorable occasion she cherishes forever. For me, that was not the case. I knew I must place my daughter for adoption, since I was an unwed mother and my new born an illegitimate baby. Society dictated the proper protocol was to give her up for adoption. After all society said she would be placed in a loving caring home with two parents that wanted her.

My doctor told me if I did not see, hear, or hold my baby the process would be much easier. During delivery, my doctor administered some type of gas to ease my labour, but he neglected to inform me I would be unconscious for the last few moments before birthing. As a result, I did not wake up until after the placenta was removed. I remember clearly asking if I had a boy or girl and whether he/she was healthy because I could not hear any baby sounds nor was the baby present in the room with me. I was also forbidden to have any contact with her while I finished my stay in the hospital. The doctor, nurses, and social worker all assured me I would soon forget and I had a bright future to look forward to.

This traumatic incident in my life depressed me, as well as, it lowered my self image and esteem. No matter how hard I tried to get on with my life, I still could not forget my baby. I found myself thinking of her every day, yet I knew I had signed legal documents that would prevent me from ever knowing her.

I married the birth father, Ron, one year later and it was not long before I was pregnant again. This time I gave birth to a healthy boy, but I still could not forget my first born. Several years later I had two more children, both daughters, yet the memory of my first daughter haunted me. I entered into a state of denial hoping this would help me to forget. I never discussed her birth with anyone for more than 23 years, including my husband, sisters, parents or close friends. I guarded my secret

with a passion.

Ten years after I married Ron, we divorced. I am sure the birth of our first child contributed to our marriage breakdown, since neither one of us had confronted our anger, frustration, hostility, hurt, rejection, and shame we experienced earlier in our relationship.

My divorce, coupled with giving up my first child brought me to a crossroads in my life. I needed to reconcile my past. I finally found forgiveness and inner peace by entering into a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. From that moment on, I knew I would eventually meet my daughter. My newfound knowledge gave me strength, wisdom, and courage to continue to raise my three children

"I entered into a state of denial hoping this would help me to forget."

on my own. I daily thought of my daughter, but I no longer pined over my loss. I cannot express in words the freedom I felt from that time forward. However, nearly two and a half years ago, I felt an urgency to begin a search for my birth daughter. I confided in my close friend, Susan, asking her advice. I registered with *Parent Finders* and the Provincial Reunion Registry. My search took two years to complete.

My reunion with my daughter, whose name is Barbara, occurred under bizarre circumstances. I am presently a full-time SFU student in Business Administration. Needless-to-say I am also poor like most students, yet I miraculously received a financial windfall which allowed me to advertise in the daily newspapers. A childhood playmate of Barbara's who was born the same day, in the same hospital and was also relinquished at birth, saw the ad. He remembered Barbara even though she had moved to Alberta with her parents in

1974. This young man tracked down Barbara's parents who were holidaying in Arizona. They were delighted to hear I desired a reunion with Barbara, so they eagerly revealed her whereabouts. Barbara responded immediately, and indicated she wanted to correspond with me as soon as possible.

Our first communication was by telephone. Finally I could ask her the most important question of all — did she have a good life? It warmed my heart to hear she had caring, loving, and open-minded parents who devoted themselves unselfishly to child rearing three adopted child. Barbara was the middle child. When Barbara asked about her roots, her parents held back no information. She even knew my name. Now that I wanted to reunite with Barbara, her parents encouraged her. I honestly feel I could not of chosen better parents if I had the opportunity to do so myself. As a matter of fact I look forward to thanking them personally for I could not offer Barbara what they offered her at the time of her adoption.

We met for the first time at the Calgary Airport, five days after our first telephone conversation. What a shock to meet a young women face to face who looks just like you and your three other children. I recognized Barbara right away, since her physical stance and facial expressions are similar to mine. We spent the weekend trying to recapture 25½ years. Barbara and I travelled to her home in Red Deer to gather some photos of her youth.

I brought photos of her full brother and two full sisters, my family and her birth father's family. Barbara poured over these photos the entire weekend as she picked out similar physical characteristics. The weekend passed by too quickly, but we decided we would like to continue our relationship. She will visit soon to meet her birth family.

The feelings of joy that I experience during our reunion are undescrivable; my life is now complete. I praise God for arranging our reunion in His time.

IMMACULATE DECEPTION

continued from page 4

gestational support. Birth mothers leave this experience and these "resources" more damaged than when they arrived — more shame-filled, more devastated, and more needy. They have incurred a life-long and terrible wound to the psyche, the loss of their child. It is a loss most cannot even speak about. It is at this point that adoption resources, adoptive parents, and the community abandon the birth mother. When one lives in a state of pain, isolation, and abandonment, it is not especially unusual to win up pregnant again. This was my experience.

Six months after I had lost my baby-forever, I was pregnant again. My life after losing my daughter was an emotional and spiritual devastation no one prepared me for. I had heard about the emotional and spiritual trauma of abortion for years. Not once in all that time had *anyone*, including those who "counselled" me, said this happened to birth mothers as well. Somehow, the decision to choose life was supposed to eliminate this consequence. Facing this decision again, I still believed there was no support for my child and me *together*. Just six months into the devastating aftermath of adoption, I knew I could never choose adoption again. I chose to have an abortion at eight weeks. . . . The abortion forced me finally to get honest about my behavior. I had to accept that I was not a celibate person and that "pretend" celibacy is not a contraceptive. . . .

As a birth mother, I know how it feels to sit in the pew and have the loss of a child completely ignored. The church grieves the aborted unborn and abandons the silently weeping women in its midst. Innocence is held in greater esteem than life. The experiences of miscarriage, abortion and adoption are ignored. And the decision and feelings of women are condemned.

"I had to accept
that I was not a celibate
person and that
'pretend' celibacy
is not a
contraceptive."

When prolife people say to birth mothers, "Be glad you didn't have an abortion, because that's really hell," most never speak from actual experience. Pain is pain. I'm not "glad" I had an abortion, yet for me the pain of an abortion did not touch the pain of adoption. However, the women I know who have had devastating loss experiences around an abortion are few compared with the birth mothers. . . . Both adoption and abortion are forced choices. Both are unnatural separations of a mother and a child. Both are experiences of loss. Adoption, however, is never finished.

There are many devastating loss experiences around childbearing: abortion is only one. Adoption, stillbirth, miscarriage, infertility are others. . . . The church has failed to address the needs of these people. We are banned even from speaking, and thus we are made outcasts of our community.

Mary Jean Wolch is a registered nurse living in Seattle and active in a birth parents' support group. On the eve of Mother's Day this year, her group held its second annual public event to acknowledge birth mothers. This excerpt is printed with permission from "An Open Letter To A Diocesan Priest," CON-SCIENCE, A Newsjournal of Prochoice Catholic Opinion, May/June, 1991.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

MISSING PIECES THRU ADOPTION BOARD 1991/92

The following members were elected to the 1991/92 board:

Kathryn Vea, Vice President: Kathryn is a birth mother and founder of the Langley chapter. She is the owner of a home-based business.

Susan Davenport, Communications Officer: Susan is a birth mother who is as a community social service worker.

Greg Proirer, Secretary: Greg is an adoptee and has been involved in community groups.

Sue Blanck, Director-at-Large: Sue was appointed as an advisor. She is an adoptee and birth mother and a representative of *Parent Finders*.

NEW CHAPTER

Langley, BC has a new chapter of *Missing Pieces Thru Adoption*. The coordinator is Kathryn Vea. The chapter meets the 4th Wednesday every month at the Langley Library. Call the information line for details: (604) 530-3085.

VANCOUVER CHAPTER ON FIRE

The Vancouver chapter of *Missing Pieces Thru Adoption* was located at the South Vancouver Family Place. In September the building was destroyed in a fire.

UNITED NATIVE NATIONS: NEW HOST

Liz Hall of the *United Native Nations* is hosting the Vancouver chapter of *Missing Pieces Thru Adoption*. The meeting will be held the first Tuesday of every month. For information contact Millie Strom at (604) 255-0255 or Liz Hall at the UNN (604) 879-2420.