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‘We were human beings’: UK families seek apology over historic forced adoptions

Last week Liz Harvie spoke in parliament about the painful impact of the policy of taking babies from unmarried mothers

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Liz Harvie was 16 years old when she discovered her name was actually Claire Watts.

Sitting on the sofa of her childhood home, on a tree-lined street in a Birmingham suburb, she had just been given a sheet of paper containing the first chapter of her life.

The document said “Claire”, a “compact baby” with a “pale complexion” and “light auburn hair”, had been born at a Northampton hospital in January 1974 and then put up for adoption.

It also included descriptions of her birth parents: Yvonne, a “neat”, “articulate” and “quite attractive” telephonist who liked swimming, reading and knitting, and Andrew, a “well-built” wireless operator who liked rugby and tropical fish.

“It was mind-blowing,” said Harvie, now 48. “I was reading about a different person born in a different part of the country. Technically, it was me.”

Adopted by a couple who renamed her Elizabeth, Harvie always knew she had come from “another lady’s tummy” and wondered why she had been given away. But, as she would later discover, she had not been abandoned by choice.

Taken from the arms of her sobbing mother at 10 days old, Harvie was one of thousands of victims of forced adoption in the UK.

In the 1950s, 60s and 70s, up to a 250,000 new mothers were coerced into giving up their babies in arrangements facilitated by the church, charities and the government. The young unmarried women were not considered “suitable” parents by society or their families, and their babies were given to married couples who were.

The scandal of forced adoption reached into every corner of the UK, but the stories of the families torn apart have largely gone untold.

Last week in parliament, Harvie, who first met her birth mother when she was 28, gave evidence on behalf of thousands of other adoptees to the Joint Committee on Human Rights, which is investigating the historical abuses.

The hospice volunteer from Surrey described how groups “colluded” to remove children from unmarried mothers and called for an apology. “For many involved in forced adoption the right to family life was simply not honoured,” she told MPs.

Speaking after the session on Wednesday, Harvie, now a mother of two herself, said giving evidence was one of “the most important days” of her life. “To get the chance to stand up in parliament and give evidence was humongous. For too long, it’s been like we’re part of a secret society.”

Brought up by a finance director and magistrate in a typical middle-class home, Harvie had for years been the “perfect” adoptee.

Privately, however, she struggled. At school, she was called a “bastard” by playground bullies and taunted about her mum not being her “real mum”. At home, she had a close relationship with her brother, who was also adopted - but felt she didn’t fit in. “I stuffed things down and appeared to be ‘happy Liz’. But you feel like a stranger in your own skin, in your own family,” she said.



📷 Yvonne and Claire at the hospital before they were separated.

Sixty miles away in Northampton, her birth mother, Yvonne Labrum, was living in torment, thinking about her daughter “every single day”.

Labrum had always dreamed of having a daughter but when she got pregnant at 19, her father “went mad”. The child’s father, Andrew Conant was a childhood sweetheart but they were not married, and their parents disapproved of the match.

“My father said, ‘Right, you’re going to the doctors and having an abortion,’” Labrum, now 68, said. “The doctor said it was too late, so he said, ‘Right, the baby’s going up for adoption, then.’ I never got a say in the matter.”

Moments after giving birth, Labrum’s daughter was taken from her by the midwives. At first, they had congratulated her on her “beautiful baby girl”. But after checking her file, “One of the nurses said, ‘This baby’s flagged for adoption,’ and that was it.”

Labrum, who had given birth without pain relief and needed stitches, was left lying with her legs in stirrups for more than an hour. “I felt like a slab of meat,” she said.

Over the next few days, she was required to look after her daughter at the hospital, surrounded by mothers who were preparing to take their newborns home. On the 10th day, a “stern” social worker visited to take Claire away.

Labrum packed a bag for her daughter before putting her arms out to give her a final cuddle. But the social worker refused to pass her back. “I was standing there in floods of tears,” she said. “It was like having your heart ripped out of your chest.”

In the months that followed, she became “very withdrawn”. “I didn’t want to do anything. All I kept thinking was, ‘Where’s my baby?’” She later married and pursued her career - but she never forgot about Claire.

It was not until 1995 that the mother and daughter reconnected, after they had both registered their details with the Children’s Society, the organisation that had arranged the adoption. They exchanged letters and pictures for seven years before agreeing to meet in person.

They were desperate to see each other in real life but Harvie was “frightened”. “You have to be ready for something like that,” she said.

When they did eventually meet in 2002, at a hotel in Woodstock, Oxfordshire, they “cried and hugged and didn’t want to let go”, she said. They have since made up for lost time, learning each other’s life stories. They have lots in common: small hands, the same eyes, a silly sense of humour. Harvie also reconnected with her birth father, who trained in aromatherapy like her. She discovered she has five half siblings, including sisters she had always longed for.



📷 Yvonne and Liz at Liz’s 40th birthday party. Photograph: handout

Theirs is a happy ending, but it has not been easy. They both still live with the trauma of the past.

For Harvie, giving birth to her daughters was particularly tough. She had an emergency C-section for her eldest. “It sounds silly, but the thing I most wanted was to see my baby come out,” she said. “My brain needed to see that baby was mine.”

Labrum still feels that she was robbed of motherhood. She had wanted more children but never fell pregnant again, despite three courses of IVF. “My chance of being a mum was ripped away from me,” she said.

The mother and daughter have called on the government to issue an official apology on behalf of the institutions and individuals that treated them so badly. They also called for specialist support for victims of the scandal, who have so far received none, and easier access to counselling services for adult adoptees.

Other countries where forced adoption took place, including Canada and Australia, have already apologised.

For Labrum, an official apology would mean the recognition that the adoptions “shouldn’t have happened”, and that she - as a young, unmarried mother - was not to blame.

“It won’t repair all the harm, but it would help,” she said. “We weren’t naughty girls who did something wrong. We were human beings.”
