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THE ADOPTION MAZE

A new parliamentary inquiry is investigating overseas adoptions and how to assist Australian parents with the demanding approval process.

SUE PRIEST has spent more than a decade at the helm of the **Australians Aiding Children Adoption Agency** in Adelaide which has found homes for 1,125 children from overseas since 1993.

“Australian families have been welcoming children from overseas into their homes since the Vietnam War days,” Ms Priest says.

In March the agency closed its doors for the last time after a state government decision to withdraw its licence. This blow came after many years of assisting hundreds of South Australian and Northern Territory families with the arduous, time consuming and expensive process of overseas adoption.

Ms Priest says her adoption agency prided itself on looking for the best possible family for a child from overseas. These children had no parents, extended family, or even a family in their own country willing or able to care for them.

“Over the last decade there has been a change in the adoptive parent/family profile—from mainly families who already had biological children to the majority of couples considering inter country adoption due to infertility issues,” she says.

The Chairman of the House of Representatives Family and Human Services Committee, Bronwyn Bishop, (Member for Mackellar, NSW), wants her committee’s recently announced inquiry into overseas adoption to examine the changing face of adoption in Australia.

“Adoption in Australia has changed dramatically over the past 30 years, with a huge drop in the number of children being adopted by Australians each year,” Mrs Bishop says.

“In 2003–04 there were 502 adoptions in Australia, compared with 9,798 in 1970–71. Of these, 370 were inter country adoptions, with about one-third from China and decreasing totals from South Korea, Ethiopia, Thailand, the Philippines, India, Colombia and Sri Lanka.”

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Since the early 1990s, Ms Priest has seen first hand the changes to how children are adopted from overseas.

"In 1993, we placed around 25 children, from Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, India and Fiji, with most of the children being over four years of age," she says.

"The general processing time from initial application to placement was between four to five years, and that was without the rigours now in place.

"All states having different adoption acts and regulations causes much confusion."



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"At the time of our closure, we were dealing with 450 applications. In 2004, we placed 72 children with their new families. These children came from China, Korea, Ethiopia, Thailand, India, Taiwan, the Philippines and Lithuania, with most of the children being aged between 12 months and under five years. The timeframe from initial application to placement was most commonly two to three years."

Ms Priest says over the last 13 years there has been a vast array of changes to how the inter country adoption process has been managed.

Today, she says, there is greater emphasis on ensuring that all options have first been looked at within a child's birth country, to maintain the child in either their birth family or their birth culture. The length of time that this process takes usually means that children are more than a year old when offered for adoption.

"This of course leads to discrimination against Australian families who are adopting because they can't access the government's \$3,000 baby bonus," Ms Priest says. "This is

one area that I would like the House of Representatives Family and Human Services Committee to review very carefully."

Ms Priest says overseas countries rightly want to ensure that all due processes and checks have been followed, since most of these children are abandoned.

"It is essential these children can be raised by their adoptive parents with the knowledge that their birth country ensured that they chose the best possible family for them and they grow up feeling cared about by their two worlds," she says.

"It is a myth in our community that there are thousands upon thousands of children overseas in dire need of families. Many of these children in orphanages actually have families who cannot care for them, but who still visit them.

"It would be against all our beliefs for these children to be placed out of their region into a foreign culture when they have family who they will return to as adults."

Another complication is that the most popular countries for overseas adoption, such as Korea, Taiwan and Ethiopia, all require different processes in order for their child to be considered for overseas adoption.

South Korea will only allow a child who has been relinquished to be placed overseas for adoption. For this reason nearly all the children placed from South Korea are around five months old when they leave for Australia.

For Taiwan, while babies are offered to Australian parents at around six weeks old, they do not usually leave Taiwan until they are about eight or 10 months of age. This is because of Taiwan's complicated Family Court process.

Ethiopian children offered to Australian families can vary dramatically in ages, with the youngest being about 26 weeks old. There are also families who adopt older siblings, and these children are usually between four and six years old.

Other popular source countries, including China, Thailand, the Philippines, Lithuania and India, wait a minimum of six months from when the child comes into care, in case they are claimed before authorities start considering any investigation of any future placement. The searching process may well take more than four months to ensure no family can be traced. Following this step, a local placement is first considered and then, and only then, can a child be matched with an overseas family.

Ms Priest says another reason why some children were arriving older than hoped for in Australia was that their orphanages found it hard to let them go.

"We have experienced this first hand, with a child called Min, who had been in an orphanage in Northern Thailand for four years," she says.

"At the age of four and a half years, her details were sent to the Thai department for matching and an Australian couple were chosen because they had the skills the department felt Min needed.

"The parents travelled to collect Min, expecting that she may not have had the benefit of loving care. But what they found was a home that did not like being separated from their children because they were much loved and all the children had a wonderful time together.

"As you could imagine five-year-old Min was at first very angry with these new parents for taking her away from her security. For their first 10 days in Thailand, she made their life hell, smashing lamps, not sleeping, throwing tantrums, all because she wanted to go home to her friends."

Eight years on, however, when Ms Priest saw Min at the closing function for the adoption agency, things had changed dramatically. "Here was a beautiful 13-year-old with a normal loving relationship with her parents, who was getting all A's at school and loving life."

Ms Priest says the differences between state regulations on adoption are one of the biggest frustrations for Australian agencies and parents alike.

"All states having different adoption acts and regulations causes much confusion," she says.

"It also makes it very difficult if you are in the middle of the adoption process in one state then transfer it to another, because approval may not be given under another state's adoption regulations."

Ms Priest recalls one couple who had been approved by South Australia to adopt an Indian toddler, when they were unexpectedly transferred to Western Australia. Unfortunately the WA authorities blocked the adoption because the couple were outside their age criteria.

As part of the terms of reference for its inquiry, the committee will be investigating such inconsistencies in the approval process between interstate agencies. ■

For more information on the House of Representatives Family and Human Services Committee inquiry on overseas adoption visit www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/fhs or email fhs.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4566.