

Are we creating another stolen generation?

Children are dependent and vulnerable and so governments have a responsibility to put in place policies which will protect them from harm. In recent years, Australia has been revisiting past policies and practices around the care of vulnerable and unprotected children. The Australian experience of family separation in the twentieth century can teach the world a great deal.

Under the Child Migrant Scheme, children who had been in care in Britain, after the Second World War, were brought out to Australia to live. Some of those children were placed with families and some were placed in institutions. This occurred because those children had been separated from their parents and were therefore vulnerable and unprotected. The Child Migrant Scheme ended in 1967.

Aboriginal children were removed from their families, especially in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Some were raised in institutions and some in non-Aboriginal foster homes. Those children were vulnerable because they were Aboriginal. This practice continued until approximately 1970, creating what became known as the Stolen Generations.

Children were removed from their families because of child protection issues and cared for in institutions. This occurred because they were considered to be at risk if they remained with their parents. Many of those children were mistreated and unnecessarily separated from family members and are now known as the Forgotten Australians. This practice also ceased towards the end of the twentieth century. We have since created more child-centred options for children at risk and more support for families experiencing difficulties.

The outcome of all of these major family separation experiences has been long term grief and loss. These losses have been acknowledged by Federal Government apologies in the twenty-first century to the British Child Migrants, the Forgotten Australians and to the Stolen Generations. Apologies have been considered to be appropriate, because these practices were considered not to have been in the best interests of the children and families involved. The fact that government apologies have been made is an indication that the values which underpinned the actions of those responsible for these family separations, which occurred in the last century, are not considered to be acceptable today.

Loss and grief are both personal and communal. For each of the children involved in these family separations, many others are also affected. The effects of separation are felt at many levels. These events have had a significant impact on Australia as a nation. The outcomes of these past policies have been documented and made public, leading to the Federal Government apologies, which we have witnessed and welcomed.

Thousands of babies were removed from unsupported, unmarried mothers in Australia during the twentieth century, especially between 1965 and 1975. The vast majority of those children were adopted. Unsupported, unmarried mothers were considered to be incompetent and were rendered powerless owing to their lack of information, community support and resources. Their punishment was to have their children removed from their care. These children are sometimes known as the 'white stolen generation'. When resources in the form of financial support from the Federal Government became available in 1973, the number of adoptions reduced dramatically. As yet, no federal apology has been made to those affected by this policy, although there are plans for an apology from the Western Australian government in a few weeks' time and a federal apology has been discussed.

We know that the outcomes for those affected by this policy have also been long term grief and loss. Much of our knowledge about this grief and loss has come from the agencies which have helped to support those affected. Post-adoption services have existed to provide support and professional counselling in Australia for more than thirty years. Jigsaw in Western Australia was founded in 1978 and has been offering professional counselling since 1996. The Adoption Research and Counselling Service in Western Australia has been providing post-adoption support and counselling since 1984. Vanish in Victoria has been providing post-adoption support since 1989. The Post Adoption Resource Centre in New South Wales has been providing support and counselling since 1991. The Post Adoption Support Service in South Australia has been providing support and counselling since 2006. Post Adoption Support Queensland is now providing support and counselling in Queensland. There are and have been many other adoption support groups which have existed throughout this period. These organisations have made an enormous contribution to the well-being of those affected by adoption separation.

Considering the huge reduction in the number of adoptions taking place over the last thirty years, it is clear that the clientele seeking support from these organisations comes largely from the period when the number of adoptions was much higher. This highlights the long term nature of their grief and loss issues. There is no evidence to suggest that, had these adoptions been managed differently, the long term outcomes would have been any less severe, either for adults who were adopted as children or for their original parents.

Vulnerable children are no longer brought to Australia under the Child Migrant Scheme. Aboriginal children are no longer removed from their families in the way that the Stolen Generations were. Children removed from their families under child protection legislation are now able to be cared for in families under permanent guardianship orders, which allow children to retain their identities and their legal status within their families of origin. Few Australian children are adopted in the twenty-first century, because adoption is widely considered not to be in the best interests of children. When Australian children are considered to be unsafe living with their parents, we care for them, in Australia, as best we can.

Children are dependent and vulnerable, in every country. Children in countries outside of Australia are no less valuable than Australian children. The Australian government has the responsibility of applying the same protections to children in other countries that they do to Australian-born children. If adoption is no longer considered to be in the best interests of Australian children, there is no justification for policies and practices which treat children in other countries with any less care and concern. Less affluent countries are now being deemed incompetent because of their lack of resources, just as Australian single mothers were in the twentieth century and they are punished, as those mothers were, by having their children removed from their care. In the same way that the number of adoptions in Australia reduced markedly after the introduction of the Sole Parent Pension in 1973, it is likely that if affluent countries like Australia provided information, support and resources to less affluent countries, we would see a dramatic reduction in the number of intercountry adoptions. Instead, we are continuing to create an 'intercountry stolen generation'.

Countries which have lost children through intercountry adoption will have to deal with the personal and communal grief which results from this. No doubt, in time to come, they will experience the same sequence of events which we have witnessed in Australia. They will set up support services to assist those who have experienced adoption separation; this is already happening in Korea. They will put a stop to

intercountry adoption; this has already happened in Romania. Eventually, they will recognise the long term impact of the policies and practices which allowed those family separations to occur and they will deliver apologies, as we have done in Australia.

The National Inter Country Adoption Advisory Group, known as NICAAG, of which I am a member, was formed in March, 2008. The role of NICAAG is to provide advice to the Federal Government on intercountry adoption issues. NICAAG was formed as a result of a recommendation contained in the *Standing Committee on Family and Human Services Enquiry Report on Overseas Adoption in Australia* released by the Committee Chair, Bronwyn Bishop, MP, in November 2005. Many members of the adoption community were very disappointed in the enquiry and view Bronwyn Bishop as uninformed, misguided, biased and unwilling to educate herself about the long term issues for family members separated by adoption. The report was seen by many in the adoption community as failing to acknowledge the valuable lessons of the past and potentially damaging to Australia's international reputation. Members of the adoption community were appalled and distressed at some of the final recommendations of the committee.

Because the majority of NICAAG members are adoptive parents, there are concerns in the Australian adoption community that our government is not hearing the views of those who have already experienced adoption separation and have been living with the consequences for many years and those who have been working with them. Forums such as this one can be very valuable in allowing the government to hear a range of views on intercountry adoption.

Many Australians are ashamed and angered that children are being removed from their families, their communities, their heritage, their language and their countries of origin, to be adopted into Australian families. Australian children do not suffer those losses and we have no right to inflict them on children born in other countries. As a caring, responsible nation, we have no justification for facilitating intercountry adoption, as we have a responsibility to learn from the mistakes of the past and not to repeat them. Apologies may appear to be empty and meaningless, if they are not followed by genuine change. In the near future, the Australian Government will doubtless be apologising to those whose lives have been affected by the separations which have occurred through intercountry adoption.

Australia has a global responsibility to acknowledge what we have learned from the sad experiences of the past and to share this knowledge with the world. Instead, we are now guilty of perpetrating, in other countries, *the repetition of our twentieth century mistakes*.

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