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A parents perspective after twenty years of involvement with intercountry adopted children.

Submission to: Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas.

By, Dr. Andrew Melville-Smith. B. E. Eng., B. V. Sc.

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1. My experience.

Since my first personal encounter with intercountry adoption in 1982, I have watched the intercountry adoption process in Australia pass into the hands of state government departments. The process has become strangled with red tape and bureaucracy and the cost has needlessly blown out of proportion to work required to complete the job of assessing couples as suitable parents.

Organising adoption of overseas children requires far more than a well paid public servants at the helm. It requires dedication and consistency over a long period of time. It is about building relationships overseas over a long period of time, so that the officials in the relinquishing country trust and are willing to work with the people in Australia. It is also about helping those children, who cannot be adopted, to be looked after in their birth country.

The care of abandoned children in third world countries is incredibly under funded and cannot be compared to the care of children in Australia. There is little or no funding to care for and to move abandoned children forward, so they can be adopted, either locally or overseas. It therefore requires an adoption agency to assist the officials overseas to care for these children and to help move children through the system so they can be adopted both locally and overseas. This is where the government departments fail as they are unable to help the local officials in the relinquishing country care for abandoned children or move the paperwork forward so they can be adopted.

2. South Australia.

The South Australian model prior to the 1st of April 2005 was the most progressive and elegant of all the intercountry adoption processes in Australia. It worked better (1) than the interstate government departments because the private agency, AACAA (2), was comprised of people who were highly dedicated and motivated to find suitable parents for children overseas who were available for intercountry adoption.

The Minister, for Families and Communities in South Australia, Jay Weatherill has said "My overriding obligation is to ensure the proper care and protection of children"(3) and that "intercountry adoption are among the most vulnerable children in the world" (4) and this is the reason he has used to close the private adoption agency, AACAA. What he has failed to realise is that overseas adopted children are amongst the most well cared for children in Australia.

Their parents are well educated, dedicated and financially better off than most people, since these three attributes are necessary to successfully make it through adoption approval system. They are exhaustively screened to ensure they are not paedophiles, criminals or drug addicts. They have to show that they are able to provide for the children and that they have a stable relationship that will ensure the best possible care for the children they are adopting. Adoptive parents have the government seal of approval as parents.

Compare this with the wider community where we have parents who are criminals, are drug addicts, are unable to care for their children, are unable to provide for their children and have abusive relations. Where should our concern be for proper care and protection of children be?

Children who are declared abandoned overseas and made available for adoption and end up being adopted in Australia would have to rate amongst the luckiest children in the world. They are being taken from depravation and squaller where there is no one and no funding to look after them and given parents who will care for them and offer them opportunities they could not have dreamed of in their birth country.

It is often said that we should care for these children in the country of their birth rather than adopt them. However when you adopt from an overseas country, that country becomes part of you and you will be far more likely to assist projects in that country because of your ties to that country. Ignoring the extreme difficulties in getting aid where it is intended in the third world, we are all selfish and whatever we give in aid, will be a mere fraction of the time and money we commit to these children we adopt from overseas and bring up as our own.

So why was a successful private agency, AACAA, closed down in South Australia? For that we have to look to the Ministers department, Adoption and Family Information Service which asks the question: "Why has the policy for intercountry adoptions changed?" The answer they give is: "This brings the intercountry adoption program in line with South Australian Government policies about children and families, and standardises intercountry adoption services with the other states"(5).

Aside from the ideological opposition our state government has to private agencies, my own view on this is that the labour states wanted to get rid of this annoying anomaly in the Australia Intercountry Adoption landscape and have pressured the South Australian government to conform to the system in place in the other bigger states. Also, I feel that that Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas set the deadline for this change to occur.

3. A model for the future.

The most disheartening aspect I find about intercountry adoption in Australia is the way, rising costs and increasing bureaucrat red tape have made the program so elitist. Intercountry adoption should be available to all married couples who, for what reason, wish to adopt children to create a family. To achieve this, we need a mix of private agencies and a government department to oversee the process and provide the official government to government channels for adoption to occur.

3a. Private agencies.

These are the ideal systems to provide information about intercountry adoption to the wider community, to provide a low cost way of initially screening applicants, low cost high quality assessments and facilitation of allocations to approved parents. In the spirit of competition, I would like to see a number of competing agencies offering their services to applicants.

However, to provide truly cost effective assessments of prospective adoptive parents, I believe we should take a leaf from the taxation department and allow the applicants to complete their own assessments. The idea being, that they would purchase a kit from the private agency of their choice. The kits would provide screening questions to eliminate unsuitable applicants and allow the applicants to obtain their police checks, references, projects, life stories etc so that on completion, the agency can check their work. Once the assessment passes the private agency check, it is forwarded to the government department for official checking, approval and forwarding overseas.

Once the file has gone through the official channels, the agency would then assist in the facilitation of an allocation for the approved parents and bringing the child to Australia upon approval of an allocation.

3b. The government department.

It is a sad reflection on Australia that we approach overseas governments as six separate states, all with our own departments and rules and regulations. It is time this country grew up and we placed the official channels in the hands of the federal government so that we can approach overseas countries as a nation rather than a bunch of squabbling states.

My view is that the departments brief should be to approve programs, ensure that the private agencies fulfill their obligations, final checking of files and forwarding them through official channels and approving allocations from overseas countries.

3c. Adoption costs.

There is are a number of ways that Intercountry adoption costs can be minimized to make it more accessible to couples wanting to form a family in this way.

1. Leg work done by private agency.
2. Competition between private agencies.
3. Self assessment.
4. Interountry adoption fees could be made tax deductible.
5. Abolition of government fees.
6. No immigration fees for intercountry adopted children.
7. Baby bonus should be given to couple who adopt a child from overseas.

Appendix

1. 2001/2002 South Australia had three and a half times as many intercountry adoptions per head of population as New South Wales and twice as many per head of population as Victoria or Western Australia. *Children, Youth and Family Services, Intercountry Adoption Services Report October 2004*
2. AACAA = Australians Aiding Childrens Aid Agency.
3. Letter to adoptive parents. 22nd March 2005.
4. Letter to adoptive parents. 15th February 2005.
5. South Asutralian Department, Adoption and Family Information Service question and answer sheet. February 2005.