

Secretary  
Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas  
Standing Committee on Family and Human Services  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

9 September 2005

Dear Secretary and Committee Members

With regards to the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry, inter-country adoption in Australia could definitely be improved by streamlining the application process across the states and territories. Additionally, adoptive families should not be discriminated against, by being excluded from the benefits and entitlement schemes that biologically created families receive.

Many people participating in this Inquiry will focus on the process of acquiring their family members, but our organisation – the Inter-Country Adoptee Support Network (ICASN) - would like to help you think about what it is actually like for us, coming into an unfamiliar family in a foreign country, and what we live with after the paperwork has been completed.

ICASN was established to provide support to people who have been adopted cross-culturally or who have experience in the transracial aspects of adoption. Our volunteer organisation is mostly made up of the first generation of adult inter-country adoptees - although there is a growing teenage contingent - who are actively trying to build a support base for ourselves, while making a difference for future generations of inter-country adoptees.

ICASN was established in 1999 after inter-country adoptees from across Australia worked with the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) in Bondi (NSW) to produce a book called *The Color of Difference - Journeys in Transracial Adoption*. This ground-breaking book profiled the experiences of approximately 30 inter-country adoptees, highlighting the issues faced by these people while growing up in a country that is different to their country of origin. Towards the end of the project, it was suggested that the adoptees retain the newly established relationships between adoptees, and ICASN was formed. Vietnam born adoptee, Lynelle Beveridge, was the founder of this network and remains actively involved in its coordination and management today from her Sydney base, along with many other volunteer adoptees located across Australia. In summary:

- ICASN is a support network run by inter-country adoptees for inter-country adoptees. There ICASN Board consists of country of origin representatives, state representatives and other specialist representatives (e.g., disability)
- ICASN functions entirely on a volunteer basis, with representatives covering any associated costs to deliver support or education, out of their own pocket.

- ICASN believes in supporting the inter-country adoptee regardless of where they are in the journey of exploring their birth identity, and aims to reduce feelings of aloneness and isolation in the experience of cross-cultural adoption.
- ICASN strives to connect as many inter-country adoptees from as many countries of birth as possible, and to form sub-support groups that allow the sharing of experiences and resources relevant to that country of birth. This is done via email, a web site, an electronic newsletter and face-to-face gatherings in cities across Australia.
- ICASN also seeks to educate the wider community about the issues that inter-country adoptees face by participating in prospective adoptive parent seminars, community group functions, Government events, etc.

ICASN currently has around 150 adoptees, individuals and organisations who are involved in inter-country adoption on its database. The recognition and credibility of this network has been steadily increasing, with the most recent acknowledgement (prior to being asked to be involved in this Inquiry) having been the invitation for ICASN to be represented on the NSW Committee of Adoption and Permanent Care and, similarly in Queensland, the Adoption Legislation Review Consultative Forum invited ICASN members to sit in on their proceedings and to inform the Minister for Child Safety and his staff of their concerns, activities and history.

Adoption-related agencies and community groups across the country regularly request the involvement of ICASN members for educational purposes. They include but are not limited to:

- Department of Community Services (NSW)
- Inter-country Adoptions, Adoptions Unit (Office for Children, Youth and Family Support, ACT)
- Post Adoption Resource Centre (NSW)
- Department of Child Safety and its Inter-country Adoption Unit (QLD)
- Community groups, such as the International Adoptive Families of Queensland (IAFQ), Origins, Jigsaw, Taiwan Support Group
- Australian Society for Inter-country Adopted Children (NSW)
- East Meets West (SA).

### **Why is there a need for ICASN?**

For adoptive parents, adoption meets a need of theirs – most commonly to overcome infertility, to add a child of a specific gender to their family, or to offer a child the love they know they have to share. Simultaneously, adoption seeks to meet a need of the child as well; a need for a permanent family that will love and rear them, and provide the opportunities that growing up in a family might offer.

The parents' need is met once the child is placed in their arms. Whether their long term hopes and aspirations as parents and for their family are met, depends on their parenting capacity, their understanding of the child who is so genetically different to

them, their willingness to actively share in the child's journey, and their capacity to address and cope with the emotional impact that growing up adopted can have on some adoptees. For us – the adoptee - the need for a permanent family can be met; however, whether our need for love, understanding, reassurance and support is satisfied, is also utterly reliant on the capacities of the parents.

Because of this, inter-country adoption should always include a comprehensive level of preparation, education, assessment and post-placement support for the adoptive parents and family members. Additionally, there should be a structured range of elective support services in the post-adoption period, not only for the parents and families, but for us – the inter-country adoptees.

Having lived the inter-country adoption experience, we can attest that adoption can be a good thing, but it is not a simple matter, nor a one that ends when the paperwork is signed. Adoption is a lifelong journey, and while most adoptees go on to become proud and productive adult Australians, and examples of successful multiculturalism, there is currently no formal system to support us or help us navigate our way through the issues or confusion that can arise as a result. Of the elective services that do exist, unfortunately too few offer the expertise or understanding required to adequately address adoption-specific issues.

Many inter-country adoptees seek to understand our histories and to access as much information about our beginnings as we can. For the older generation of adopted children, such as the Vietnam War orphans, many have grown up without knowing our original names, biological parents' names, place or time of birth, whether we have biological siblings, and the details surrounding our migration. For these adoptees, such questions remain forever unanswerable; a situation sometimes likened to that of the Stolen Generation. To cope with a life story that contains so many enormous gaps, many adoptees seek connections with people who have had a similar experience. ICASN was founded for this precise purpose; however, as a volunteer based organisation, its longevity relies solely on the passion of the individuals involved (which, naturally, sees people come and go) and, unfortunately, the willingness of those individuals to absorb the expenses involved in providing the support and education services.

ICASN puts inter-country adoptees in contact with each other, which helps us gain a sense of 'normality' and belonging that we may never have received during our developmental years. Many inter-country adoptees live with an emotional incongruence, where physically we look like we belong to our birth culture, yet on the inside, we feel like we belong to our adopted culture. The confusion arises when people judge or treat us based purely on our physicality; it can be quite alarming for some inter-country adoptees to be on the receiving end of racism, especially if we have grown up feeling like a white Australian. As part of the education and preparation process for adoptive parents, the skills to acknowledge and deal with racism, and the imparting of those skills to ensure the adoptee can develop a confident and cultural identity, must be addressed in depth.

The value that ICASN brings to the inter-country adoption community in Australia is currently unrivalled. This is demonstrated in its growing recognition by the professional organisations that work in the field and by the growing number of people

becoming involved in the network. As previously mentioned, however, ICASN is a voluntary organisation that continues to exist purely as a result of the commitment of certain individuals around the country.

ICASN believe that the Australian Government can better assist Australians who are adopting or who have adopted children from overseas, by ensuring consistent and comprehensive preparation, assessment, education and support services are in place for these families. But, fundamentally, support for the inter-country adoptees after the adoption has taken place, needs improving.

ICASN believe the Australian Government could:

1. Promote ICASN through inclusion on web sites or other post-adoption resources (e.g., brochures, fliers, etc).
2. Involve key ICASN representatives to work with Government organisations in existing pre-adoption procedures and emerging post-adoption services that may be developed (e.g., workshops, social worker training, etc).
3. Invite ICASN volunteers to contribute by assuming expert and advisory roles where adoption policies and services are being developed.
4. Provide adequate stipends or consultancy fees for adult adoptees who work with the government on post-adoption or adoption education projects, seminars etc.
5. Consider that each state contract an inter-country, post-adoption expert to work at least one day per week on providing information on resources available to help adoptees in their journey.
6. Consult ICASN regarding any issues pertaining to development of inter-country adoption policies, processes or professionals services.
7. Establish resources and support services to help inter-country adoptees search for their birth history.
8. Develop new, and/or increase the support for existing programs that assist inter-country adoptees to return to their birth country.

Submitted by:  
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